all the colors

by thoseguitarists

Summary

He says, “Let’s get out of this town,” and Harry opens his mouth to speak, to decline the offer, but he finds that he can’t tell someone with sparkling eyes like Niall no.

(Or, wherein it’s 1975 and Harry talks out of his ass a bit too much one night, Niall takes his words to heart, and a few weeks later they’re packing up, sneaking out, hitting the highway in the heat and enjoying their last summer of being kids, of having no responsibilities before college starts in the fall all in favor of going out with a bang at a Stones concert in Atlanta, but along the way Harry learns that happiness isn’t measured in time but instead the people you spend that time with, and there’s nobody in the world Harry would rather have at his side than his messy best friend whose eyes shine brighter than all the colors in the world.)
Read the tags!
“Hey. Wake up.” There’s a slap to his shoulder, a hit to his cheek, a thump to his ear, and it’s too early to be awake, too early to even think about being awake or being alive or being the responsible adult he’s assumed to be now that he’s graduated high school. The real world isn’t supposed to start till September, dammit, and he only got out of school two weeks ago, fucking hell. He needs a bit more downtime than fourteen days. “Get the fuck up, lard ass. We’ve got shit to do, and sleepin’ definitely ain’t one of ‘em, man.”

He blinks once, twice, three times, struggling to keep his heavy eyes open; it’s blurry and dark, and the only light in the room is from the blue pre-dawn sun shining through the navy curtains of his tiny window in the center of his wall, illuminating Niall’s barely-there body with a darkness around the edges that gives Harry a start he would rather not tend to at the moment.

Besides, he’s just woken up, and Niall’s his best friend, yes, but he isn’t the first thing Harry reckoned to see when he laid down to sleep last night — or, more appropriately, this morning.

“What the hell, man?” Harry grumbles, rolls over and grabs at the corners of the blankets, jerking the thickness up and over his head to block out the light, to block out Niall’s wide eyes. It’s hot in the house, and the humidity is like an extra layer of skin sticking to Harry’s flesh, but he doesn’t care, really; he’s naked, for one, and it’s hard to sleep without total blackness, for another, and he really just wants Niall to leave him so he can enjoy his sleep, which is something he’s not been able to do for months. “Why are you waking me up at the ass crack of dawn? And how’d you get into my room? I know I locked the door last night after I came in. What the hell’s going on? What do you want?”

Bloody fuck.

This summer is supposed to be about resting, about catching up on all the things he neglected when he was in school, about living his life as best as he can till all his former classmates take off for far-off university in the fall and he’s left here alone, studying at the community college with an intended major in general studies because he’s too indecisive to choose just what he wants to be when he “grows up” — not fucking around with Niall barely a week and a half after they got their diploma and were kicked out into the world expecting to know what to do.

Ha.

It’s funny because they don’t know what they’re supposed to do. At all. And nobody seems to want to help them, either, but that’s okay. Harry’s always tended to be the one to bite the hand that feeds him most of the time and Niall’s the person who soothes the wounds of the person hurt.

Niall laughs, throws his head back and guffaws, and it’s a loud noise that has Harry groaning, that has Harry grabbing at whatever is within reach and slinging it at Niall’s head because it’s early and his mum is sleeping and she’ll no doubt whip both of their asses if she’s awakened on her day off after a rigorous shift at the hospital.

“Shit, damn, Niall — shut the fuck up!” Harry hisses, scrambles about on his messy bed till he’s up
and able to blearily see Niall a bit better, though Niall’s still a bit smeared around the edges with sloppy sleep. “You’re gonna wake my mum up, idiot!”

Harry reaches over, flicks on his bedside lamp; the room is bathed in light then, dim and dank but decent enough to make out detailed shapes, and he sees that Niall’s wearing ripped blue jeans and a light lavender button down that’s not snapped together in the slightest, showing off his tan chest and the tufts of hair he’s got growing between his nipples. He also sees that his room is in need of a thorough cleaning, too — there’s clothes spread about, shoes and underwear and paper plates and dirty glasses and plastic baggies from good times behind the bleachers at school he forgot to throw out, and there’s a weird sort of moldy stench in the air, as well, but he’s not had time to clean anything what with work and Niall and work and applying for a measly baseball scholarship to the community college and Niall and work and fucking Niall.

Besides, it’s not like Niall’s room is clean, either. He’s just as much of a pig as Harry; the only difference is that Niall’s mum doesn’t give a damn as long as Niall’s breathing at the end of the day, for the most part. Maura hardly ever raises her voice at Niall.

Greg, though? That’s one hell of another story.

“You’re a dick.” Harry stands on his knees, crosses his arms over his chest; he’s not wearing clothes, hates the way underwear feels on his body when he’s sleeping — he gets too heated between the covers, anyway — but the sheets are wrapped around his groin and his half-hard dick can’t be seen unless Niall is particularly looking for that bit of anatomy.

Besides, it’s not like Niall’s never seen him bare. They went to public school in America together, played football during the fall and basketball in the winter and baseball in the spring and swam in the summer — of course they’ve seen one another’s frontals, one another’s backsides on quite a few occasions. It’s not that big of a deal. A dick is a dick, and a mouth feels the same on yours no matter what they’re hiding in their pants, you know. “You are a proper fucking dick.”

(It’s also not that big of a deal that they’ve compared themselves a few times, either; as it happens, Harry’s considerably thicker and Niall’s just a bit longer, if that matters at all, and Harry gets off from the wetness of oversensitivity at the slit in the tip and Niall likes fondling with his balls to come in squirts that make his tummy sticky, by the way, and maybe it’s kind of weird that they know how to get one another off without ever having actually brought each other to orgasm before, but oh well. It’s 1975, and the world is definitely becoming more open after the wondrous Woodstock festival and everything that resulted in the tumult, lividly groovy 60s, and Harry’s quite glad for that, too. Love is love, in his opinion, and it’s the only thing that won’t ever change because it’s the best thing to have happened to the world.)

“You are a ray of sunshine in the morning, man, ya know?”

Harry rolls his eyes, flips Niall the middle finger and holds the sheets around his waist as he moves off the side of the bed and stands. “Shut it,” he grunts, kicks at a few of the dirty jeans littered on the green carpet and bends to grab the one pair that doesn’t seem to be as stiff as the others. There’s a smudge of dirt on the left thigh, but Harry’s fairly sure it’s a stain he got while wrestling with Gemma on the front lawn some months ago. “And tell me what you’re here for. We don’t need to go into work till noon, jackass. I was going to drive myself, too.”

He was planning on sleeping in till eleven-thirty, too, because partying the night before a Monday morning shift really isn’t the smartest idea he’s had. He’s just happy his mum left the door unlocked so he didn’t have to climb up the roof like — like that one time he and Niall weren’t home at curfew and Anne got sick of waiting and she literally locked them out.
Harry made it up to her, though, by cooking her breakfast in bed — without Niall’s help because he’s the shittiest chef Harry’s ever had the bad fortune of meeting; those years of forced home economics didn’t pay off no matter how much the principal hoped them to.

(Oh, well. Niall tried his best, and that’s more than Harry can say for his begrudging participation in woodshop class. The amount of times he wanted to destroy Louis and Liam’s projects because they were just so good, according to their advisor, is as uncountable now as it was before.)

He still received a proper scalding from her, though, but the pancakes and sausage and fresh-squeezed orange juice in bed definitely lessened the severity of his punishment, that’s for sure, and he was able to go out the next weekend and get shitfaced again.

“I can go.”

Harry gives Niall a bleary-eyed look. “What? You can go where?”

Niall rolls his eyes, moves to sit on the bed — it’s a waterbed, by the way, a hand-me-down from one of his raunchy neighbors that he’s tried for years to get rid of because of the dried juices he can practically feel on it no matter how many sheets he’s got stretched atop it — as Harry attempts to successfully tug on his jeans without giving Niall a flash of his bare ass.

He fails. He always fails, but at least his ass is cute. A bit hairy because grooming takes too much of his time, in his opinion, and he quite likes the abrasive feel of silky skin and soft hair. But it’s still a satisfactory handful that’s easy to grab when he’s fucking deep and hard, if a bit coarse.

“’Member last week, when you were going on and on and on ‘bout that concert in Atlanta in a few weeks?”

“The Stones? July thirtieth?” Harry clarifies because, quite frankly, he talks a lot about concerts he knows he’s never going to be able to afford what with his pitiful job at the record store and the lack of desire to attend a prestigious university to further his education like his mother wants. He’s entirely too lucky to have enrolled at the community college in time, to be honest, and it’s really only because he’s the fastest base runner in the county and his coach was on his ass about filling out the forms.

“Yeah. Yeah, I remember.”

Vaguely. He’s fairly sure he was starry-eyed and full-bellied from cleaning out Liam’s pantry when he was “going on and on and on ‘bout that concert in Atlanta in a few weeks”, according to Niall.

“And you said how you’d like to drive ‘round the country a bit to see things, too, right? ‘Cause you want to see a little bit of the world before college starts in the fall, and I listen to you ever time you ramble on even though you prob’ly don’t realize it.” He stops, grins, and Harry’s heart does a weird little stutter because he listens to Niall, too, and it’s all nonsense most of the time but they’re best friends and Harry loves Niall as much as he loves Gemma and whatever Niall says is important. “I can go. I can go with you, Harry.”

Harry blinks slowly, leisurely. “Okay — okay, but what about my mum, Niall?” He sighs, rubs his face. “I can’t leave without telling her; she’ll hunt me down and won’t stop till she’s found me, and you’ll prob’ly get it half as bad as me, too.”

“Tell her.” Niall shrugs, dismissing the idea that leaving without telling Anne would cause quite a few problems with a roll of his shoulders. “Wake her up and tell her you and I are going on a road trip to a concert and we won’t be back till the end of July.”

Harry scoffs. “Wake her up? Yeah, right.” He scratches his lower tummy, moderately impressed by
the little tuft of hair he’s got trailing from his bellybutton toward his groin. Nice. “She had a sixteen hour shift yesterday ’cause her replacement bailed, and I’m not going to be the one to wake that woman up. If you’re ready to die, go ahead. I’ll be sure to come to your funeral, but that’s what it is — your funeral.”

“Just… just write her a note, H.”

Write her a note explaining to her why he wasn’t here when she woke up, why he isn’t going to be there when she laid back down to sleep?

Hmm. That could work. Maybe. It’s kind of far-fetched, big time, but Gemma up and left without a word at all to attend Woodstock six years ago after she was specifically told she was not allowed to attend, and at least Harry would be giving his mum a heads up as to what he’ll be doing, when he’ll be back, and it isn’t like she forbid him from enjoying the last summer before the real world starts.

Yeah. Yeah, a note could work. She’ll probably still throttle Harry for days, but a note would adequately suffice till he was back to answer to the consequences.

However, there’s still a few loose ends that need to be cleared up before Harry whole-heartedly commits to this abrupt, hasty idea — and that’s all it is, you know: an idea. He isn’t sure if what’s going to come out of this harebrained scheme is good or bad.

“Right, right, but — but Ni, I don’t have any money and I damn sure don’t have a car, either,” Harry reminds Niall, reminds himself as he tucks himself into his jeans and pulls up the zip, buttoning the snap. He borrows his mum’s car most of the time, and she’s even a bit skeptical whenever she hands him the keys, and most of the money he gets from the shop is put in the bank for college in the fall.

“And I was talking out of my ass, anyway. I was high and hammered. Besides, we’re in fuckin’ California, Ni. I got a B in geography, but I know Atlanta and LA are far, far away from each other. I’m not walking.”

Niall snorts, reaches for the single pillow on Harry’s bed and picks it up, hugs it to his chest as Harry swims through the clutter toward his closet, grabbing at a faded yellow floral-print button down that he hasn’t seen in months, can’t even remember how he acquired the thing. It’s probably Gemma’s, anyway; she’s always coming over and leaving her patterned shirts around for him to pick up before their mother comes in, and then ducking off back to UCLA only to come back with an entire carload only to start it all over again.

“H, man, relax,” Niall says, flopping back on the bed and gurgling a laugh when it moves beneath him. “Greg gave me his blessing to use that stupid van of his as long as I take care of it, and mum can’t say anything about me going since she’s visiting with family in Ireland till the end of next month.”

Harry narrows his eyes. “Next month’s July, Ni,” he says, slow and careful; he thinks so, at least. “It’s still June.”

June twenty-ninth, that is, but still.

“We’ll be back before she lands, and if we’re not it’ll be okay.” Niall grins, and he’s still the mischievous boy from their younger years, running around town in nothing but their underwear with sticks that were pretend swords. “Promise.”

“You little shit.” Harry shakes his head, slips his arms through the shirt and folds up the sleeves to his elbows. “That’s a great plan, but Ni, where are we gonna get the money for gas and food and board? Sleeping in the van is cool till I wanna shower and I get a crick in my back that you can’t bend out.”
Niall grins, gives Harry another award-winning smile that makes his skin crawl with apprehensive excitement. “‘Member freshman year when mum and I were on our way to pick Greg up from the airport and we were slammed by a semi on the freeway?” he asks, and Harry nods, slants his head as his brain runs away for a moment.

He and Niall have known each other for years, since they were six-years-old and knee high to a grasshopper with a penchant for sleeping in the floor even though a perfectly good bed was right beside them, and that’s still one of the single most frightening days Harry’s ever had to endure.

His mother’s a nurse, and when he got the call from her that Niall and Maura were being admitted, he ran the whole way, barefoot and half-naked because he was trespassing in the neighbor’s pool for a swim, and had to have his feet fixed up while holding Niall’s hand in the bed right next to him.

“Yeah. I remember.”

Niall’s grin grows, if possible, and his teeth are oddly white in the dimness. “I’m eighteen now, and I can get the money from the settlement. Mum wants to keep most of it in savings for college in the fall, but she’s allowed me to have some of it.”

“How much?”

If this is going to work — if Harry and Niall are going to drive across the country for a fucking concert and sightsee while they’re at it, they can’t half-ass the trip like they’ve done everything else; running on fumes is not acceptable, and Harry really isn’t in the mood to be the inspiration for the next true-story-turned-low-budget-horror-film. He rather likes food, too, for the most part, and a large portion of a road trip is eating to your heart’s desire.

Niall smirks, rolls over onto his side and gives Harry a tantalizing wink as Harry shrugs the shirt on properly, fitting it along his shoulders comfortably — it’s definitely Gemma’s shirt — and adjusting the collar and tucking it halfheartedly into the waistband of his jeans to make himself look presentable.

As presentable as possible, that is.

“Ten grand. I get to keep ten grand, H, and she said I can do whatever with it I want, and I want to spend it having the best summer I can with you.”

And — and, “Holy fuckin’ shit, are you serious?”

Niall nods, says, “Let’s get out of this town,” and Harry opens his mouth to speak, to decline the offer, but he finds that he can’t tell somebody with sparkling eyes like Niall no.
Harry left a note for his mum to find tapped on the door of the refrigerator after clearing out his load of clothes in the drier (Harry thinks they’re the only ones clean, anyway, and he didn’t have time to do a load or two), explaining to her what’s happening, why it’s happening, and she’s probably going to be pissed and throw all his things out onto the front lawn to set on fire but LA’s under a burn ban, for one, and he did apologize more than once, for another, and he’s got their home phone number memorized and written down in the single notebook he brought along, as well, and Gemma’s done worse than this, what with skipping freshman orientation at UCLA and catching a ride with Greg up to New York for Woodstock when she was specifically told she could not go.

Besides, he’s eighteen and out of high school — he can very well do whatever he wants, fuck you very much.

(Not that he’d ever tell his mum that, though. Can you imagine the look on your mother’s face when you tell her ‘fuck off’? Yeah, he doesn’t want to get his ass whipped again by her; she’s already had to deal with his rebellious attitude for eighteen years on top of Gemma’s recklessly indecisive ambitions — she deserves a four and a half week break from her nonsense to gather herself, doesn’t she? More than that, probably, but he has to come back at some point.)

“It smells like pot and sex in here,” Harry muses, tosses his head back against the seat as he kicks his boots off and brings his feet up to rest them on the scarred, tan glove compartment. “Doesn’t Greg ever clean this thing? Or at least put some air fresheners in here?” Harry screws his face up, plugs his nose. “My goodness.”

“Are you kidding me?” Niall throws him a look; it’s still early in the morning with the sun just barely rising up over the horizon, but there’s already an abundance of folks on the freeway speeding to work, and Harry likes how he and Niall can go slow, slow, slow without worrying about clocking in on time at the record store. Sure, they’ve probably lost their job with this spur of the moment road trip, but that’s okay; a job is something that’ll bounce back, but happiness doesn’t inflate as easily as it deflates, and Harry prefers being half full opposed to half empty. “Greg pays me fifty bucks to clean this monster every month — and I get to keep whatever I find inside, too.”

Harry scoffs. “You don’t do a very good job at it, Ni,” Harry comments, turns his head and meets Niall’s eyes with a sleepy smirk. “What’s for breakfast, by the way? You’ve dragged me out of my bed at the ass crack of dawn, and I expect to be fed before my stomach eats my other organs.”

“Look in the backseat.” Niall tosses his head back, motions at the cluttered back of the van; there’s two seats next to the doors with an aisle that leads to a bench that Greg put in a few years after he bought this thing new off the lot in ’69 for his illegal romp to New York for Woodstock featuring Gemma and a few other people that Harry has very vaguely been acquainted with.

It’s taken one hell of a beating — the sand-colored leather upholstery is stained with a multitude of unknown substances (Harry refuses to acknowledge the fact that he, Niall, Louis, and Liam, as well as a few others, have had their fair share of fun times in the back) and there’s several scars scratched into the doors; the ceiling is streaked with burns from Louis’s cigarettes and Liam ripped up the
carpeting after he jizzed all over and didn’t have the money to shampoo it clean.

But there’s a lot of memories stored inside the metal walls of this van — some good, some bad, some funny, some sad, some angry, some happy, but all of them are little bits of time Harry will hold on to forever. No matter how many years pass, no matter how many miles away they are, this van is Harry’s home away from home — this van is where Harry goes with Niall (and sometimes Louis and Liam, too, when they aren’t goofing off and getting arrested for ignorant actions like spray painting dicks on the concrete between the schools, but Harry and Niall did go pick them up from the station after they were bailed out) when home doesn’t feel like a home anymore.

It’s Greg’s van, yeah, but — but it’s Harry’s and it’s Niall’s, too, and Greg knows that, knows how sacred this vehicle is to his brother and his friends.

And it’s weird, you know, being so, so attached to a van, of all things, but Harry’s never considered himself normal, per se, and Niall is legendarily loud without being loud, really, and the vehicle fits the two of them, the four of them, better than anything else in the whole world.

They can’t very well move in to a house together, the four of them, and hope to see next week’s sunrise over the city limits of LA — Louis and Harry fight a lot, and Niall eats too much food and Liam tends to leave his trousers slung around everywhere, and all four of them tend to sleep in the same bed, for the most part, and… and it would be the best, but it would be the worst, too, and Harry’s got more to worry about than dreaming of moving in together with his best friends, with his brothers.

“What’ve you got hidden in there?” Harry asks, narrows his eyes; Niall’s shining with the sun before them, and he looks more like a golden angel than a sunburned teenager with pretty teeth and a freckled nose. “It had better not be something illegal.”

“’Ah, well.” Niall laughs. “There’s a few things in my bag I’m sure you’ll love.”

Harry eyes furrow even more, and he gives Niall a skeptical look. “I can’t eat a brownie at six in the morning, Ni,” he says, huffs, crosses his arms over his chest; he’s undone the top few buttons of his shirt because of the viscid humidity outside and his necklace is the only cold item in the van. “Mum’s sure to be going mad right about now, and I don’t want to give her a call high off my ass to let her know I’m still alive, you know.”

“I know.” Niall grins, gives Harry a wicked wink that makes his tummy roll with uncertain butterflies that are just beginning to learn to fly on shaky, fluttery wings. “And that’s why I snatched the leftover ribs out of the fridge. Greg made ’em a few days ago, and we’ve been eating on them since then. I thought you’d like some meat to get your day started. There’s some water somewhere, too.”

“Fuck off, Ni,” Harry grunts, but he’s rather quick to hop out of the seat and snatch Niall’s bag, flipping over the leather flap and digging through the wrinkled clothes stuffed inside till he finds a plastic baggie full of barbequed ribs.

They’re cold to the touch and tender enough that his fingernails leave imprints in the meat, but his stomach is growling and Greg’s always been one hell of a cook through all the years Harry’s been around even though Niall is complete shit. He snatches two bottled waters from the floorboard, checks to see if the seal’s been broken before handing one to Niall and keeping the other for himself, bringing his legs up in the seat and crossing them, hooking his ankles to form a weird sort of holder.

Niall smiles, uncaps the water and takes a drink; he’s rolled the sleeves up of his purple shirt to his elbows and buttoned it to his chest, leaving a few sticky inches bare and shining in the early-morning
sun to the east, to Harry’s right.

“We need to come up with a solid game plan, H,” he says, flicks the blinker and moves to the right, allowing a wild driver to pass before a wreck is caused, unnecessarily clogging the freeway. “We can’t go off half-cocked with no outline of what we’re to do now that we’ve gone ‘way from home. I’ve only been out of California twice, and both of those were for baseball tournaments that your ass dragged me to ‘cause you wanted a cheerleader in the bleachers. I get lost on the way to the shop half the time, and I’ve been going there for years.”

Harry purses his lips, undoes the plastic baggie — he’s had tons of practice with it through the last four years, you know; he’s never been the biggest partier (Louis holds that title, and there’s even a trophy claiming it above the mantle in his room that Harry and Niall and Liam had made for him for the hell of it, which was one time Harry didn’t dick around in woodshop) but he likes to have fun, likes to get high and hammered till he sees sparkling stars sometimes — and fingers inside till he can grab a cold, slimy rib that smells just as good as he knows them to taste.

Greg’s cooking can rival his mum’s, not that he’d ever tell her that. That’s another thing on the list of things he’ll never say aloud to his mum.

“That’s sorta what we’re doing right now,” he muses, whispers, taking a big bite of the meat; the rib is good and tender and slow-cooked, and it’s cold, yes, but Harry has no qualms about it considering he and Niall lived off of leftover pizza all through finals last month. “I mean, I brought one pair of shoes and you forgot a toothbrush and we’re going to be sharing three pairs of jeans between the two of us for four and half weeks unless you stop somewhere and pick us up more. We’re kinda winging it already, goin’ away from home half-cocked and not telling our mums and all.”

They’ve still not bought the tickets, either; however, Harry knows there’ll be enough time for them to purchase a few when they arrive in Atlanta as long as they keep making good time, and he isn’t worried about that, per se, because there’s always vendors outside of the show selling a few, too, and he doesn’t mind paying a little extra.

His mother, though? Yeah, he’s just a little bit worried about her, just a little bit scared of her. And maybe Gemma, too, but his sister is sure to stand by him in this wild bout of insanity because she’s done the exact same thing more times than him, and she’s a spokesperson for living life to the fullest till you’re too full to live, really.

And they’re siblings, too, after all — sometimes Harry’s a dick and Gemma can be a little fucker when she wants to be, yeah, especially when she leave the showerhead on after rinsing off and takes Harry’s food out of the refrigerator, but they’re brother and sister and they’ve got one another’s backs, for the most part. Messing with Harry means you’re messing with Gemma. That’s how it’s been since they were little, and that’s how it’s always going to be, too, no matter how much time passes.

But Niall and Greg? Yeah, that’s a whole ‘nother story right there that Harry would rather not divulge at the moment. It’s not his secret to tell, anyway, and he respects Niall’s guarded nature because Niall accepts Harry’s vivid personality.

They work together well. Kind of.

“Guess I’ll just have to use yours till we can find me one, yeah?”

Harry wrinkles his nose, swallows the bit of meat he’s chewed so he can speak. “Don’t be stupid,” he says, scoffs — Niall has no idea what personal space is, and the fact that they’ve managed to stay friends through the years while being polar opposites is a miracle in itself, really. They just fit so well,
and Harry’s still kind of floored at how wonderful they make each feel. “There’s a handy little store at the corner of Addison and Church on the exit ramp a mile ahead; stop there and we’ll pick you up one ‘cause I gotta piss anyway and I’m craving a Pepsi and a bag of chips and there’s no way in hell I’m sharing a toothbrush with you.”

“Already? You gotta piss already?”

Really? That’s all Niall heard? Really?

“I’ve got a little bladder. I can’t help it.”

Niall grunts, takes one hand off the wheel to tug at the necklace around his neck, fixing the dazzling jewel at the bottom so it isn’t tangling with his chest hair. That’s a messy memory Harry would rather not recall at the moment; just know that detangling a sharp butterfly from a patch of chest hair before the semi-finals isn’t the best way to run out onto the court.

“No, you just drink too much,” he replies, and Harry opts to take another bite of the rib because Niall’s not wrong, to be honest, but he isn’t going to admit that. It’s a pride thing, anyway. “I mean, how am I going to rob a bank with you? We’ll be running inside, totin’ our twelves and tellin’ people to get down, and you’ll ask for a timeout so you can take a potty break and leave me with a mess to clean up. Honest, H, you need to get that shit under control before we have to drop out of school and become assassins or something. My sidekick can’t piss every thirty seconds when we’re after a target. The Avengers work well together ‘cause they can hold their piss in during wild times.”

Harry giggles, wipes his mouth on the back of his hand; Niall’s an overly dramatic animal of an eighteen-year-old young man with a loud mouth and a big heart and a charismatic personality and a geeky obsession with all things Marvel that Harry fuels adoringly, and he’s absolutely one of Harry’s most favorite people in the world because of his inexplicable courage to be nobody but himself. Niall is Harry’s superhero, kind of. They’ve been through enough stuff together that they are bound more by their experiences, by their shared ideals and processes and reactions than anything else.

“Don’t laugh at me!” Niall exclaims, takes his eyes off the road and meets Harry’s quiet gaze; he’s too busy eating Greg’s yummy cooking to form a rebuttal of any kind at the moment, and he isn’t going to dignify Niall’s ego with a smart retort. “I’m being completely serious here, Harry. How are we going to enjoy an hours-long concert with you havin’ to piss every nine minutes?”

“Why nine?” Harry ask around a mouth full, sipping at his water to wash it down. “Why such a weird number? Why not, like, fifteen? Or twenty, maybe. ‘Cause that’s more appropriate, you know. Closer to thirty, if you want to be a badass, but I can prob’ly hold out for forty-five if I really have to. And I’ve held it for an hour and a half once when we had to take Gemma to university and traffic was a bitch and we were at a standstill for a while.”

“Harry.”

Harry hums, raises his brow and offers Niall a bite of the food, which he declines with a shake of his head, saying, “Mate, we left your house seventeen minutes ago, and you literally peed after you wrote Anne the note. In fact, you asked the monitor to use the restroom seven times during last year’s exams and almost voided your test! Just suck it up and admit to it.”

“Oh, fuck off and stop at that corner mart, will ya? I’m sick of arguing with you.” Harry says, grumbles, rolls his eyes and crumbles the empty plastic baggie up, shoving it in the cup holder. His tummy is full and Niall can’t bring him down just yet.
“You’re acting like a little kid.”

“Fuck off, man.”

Niall snorts a laugh. “Real mature, H — I can bloody feel the adult leaking off of you, and it fucking stinks.”

“I’m not dignifying that with a reply.” Harry retorts, and he’s stoic and fairly emotionless, for the most part, but on the inside he’s laughing, and Niall’s one of the few people in the entire world that can get him going. “I gotta piss and you need a toothbrush, and we can figure out what to do from there.”

“Yeah?” Niall reaches one hand off the wheel, grabs Harry’s knee and squeezes, and in that simple touch Harry can feel, can hear everything Niall’s not telling him.

It’s going to be okay. They’ve gone off half-cocked, with a shit load of a money and barely any clothes and no verbal consent from the adults that are supposed to be taking care of them, and it’s going to be okay. They’ve got each other, and it’s going to be okay because it’s always been okay before and this isn’t really any different.

But it is. It’s very different, very vast in anything they’ve ever done before.

It’s still going to be okay, though. Niall thinks so, at least, and Harry will follow Niall till neither of them can walk anymore.

He sighs, tips his head back against the window and crosses his arms; he and Niall meet gazes, and Harry’s always loved the way the sun sparkles off of Niall’s blue bonnet eyes, really, and he’s told everybody but Niall. There aren’t enough words in every the language in the world to describe all the colors in Niall’s eyes whenever he looks at Harry.

And that’s one of Harry’s most favorite things.

“Maybe grab a map or two, see if there’s any places we want to stop and check out along the way,” Harry suggests, and it doesn’t seem to be useless of them to at least invest in buying a map or two; Harry didn’t fail geography, no, but that’s definitely not his best subject, either, and he’d rather not get lost. “Sound like a plan?”

Niall nods. “Sounds like our only plan, H,” he says, kind of subdued and morbid, but there’s a grin on his face and Harry knows he’s going to have the time of his life with his best friend right beside him the whole way to Atlanta.

And whatever happens afterward — well, it just happens, doesn’t it?
surrender

your mommy's all right
your daddy's all right
they just seem a little weird

― Cheap Trick, ‘Surrender’

“Nevada’s not as… colorful as I would’ve guessed it to be,” Niall says, muses offhandedly as he slows the van to a gentle trot; the lanes are a bit narrow, are a bit small, and it’s late enough at night that a vehicle barreling down the highway of a sleepy town would warrant more than a little suspicion, and Harry’s elated that they’ve not intercepted a police cruiser yet considering Niall’s been breaking the speed limit for a hundred or so miles. “I mean, I know we’re not in Vegas, but we’re close, and I would have thought — Vegas is like the American version of Paris, you know? At least, that’s what I thought when I was watching… whatever it was I was watching on TV a few months back. Some documentary about something or ‘nother. But still — there’s no fucking lights and I’m pissed off ‘cause this is false advertisement and I can’t see a damn thing.”

Harry yawns, blearily blinks his eyes and turns from the cool window he’s been leaning on, facing Niall as he idles through town, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel in time to the music on the radio that’s softly, softly playing.

“You tired, Ni?” he asks, slow and drawn out; another yawn hits his system, and this one is even longer than the first, and he knows he’ll be crawling in the back and sprawling out for a nap if Niall doesn’t decide to stop in the next ten minutes.

“What makes you think that?”

Harry smiles, fondly and faintly, and reaches out, tickling what little bit of Niall’s collarbone he can reach with fingers that are a little bit too rough from hours of placing records. “‘Cause you ramble when you’re hungry and sleepy, and we just ate a place out of apple pie not even an hour ago,” Harry elaborates, and his tummy is still warm, still full of the burgers he and Niall scarfed down at the late-night diner they were able to find in the middle of nowhere.

“What’s your point?” Niall asks, a bit clipped, and he rambles when he’s hungry and sleepy, yeah, but he’s also increasingly apt to become irritated, too, and Harry would rather not deal with Niall’s moods when he’s close to passing out himself.

“My point is that if you don’t find a motel for us to crash in soon, I’m going to take the wheel and park us in an empty lot so we can at least get in a few hours of sleep before we hit the road again tomorrow,” he replies, and it isn’t a suggestion, really, because the aggressiveness behind his words is kind but firm, nice but stern, and Niall will lose whatever fight he tries to start. “You’ve been drivin’ since we left LA this morning, and I know you love cruising through town at midnight, but the fact is that we aren’t in California anymore and we need to sleep a hell of a lot before we take another crack at this trip tomorrow.”

Niall sighs, gives Harry a belatedly exhausted look; it’s dark in the van, dark outside, but Harry can just barely make out the pretty lavender-colored bags beneath Niall’s out that match his shirt, and Harry isn’t going to settle for anything less than twelve hours because they both need it.

“Is that what you think?” Niall asks, and he isn’t fighting, no, but he’s being a little ass and Harry pinches his ear, brings out a yelp of half horror, half anger, and it makes him laugh even though
Niall’s frowning like a scalded child.

“That’s what I know,” Harry grunts, running a hand through his greasy hair. He’s in need of at least twelve hours of sleep and a hot, hot shower, too. “I also know that there was a motel ‘bout five miles back with vacancies and clean bathrooms, and I’d rather try my chances at a roadside place than actually on the side of the road, you know.”

Niall hums, gives Harry an exhausted, lopsided grin. “I think a roadside campout sounds pretty damn cool right about now,” he says, blinks his heavy-lidded eyes, and Harry’s stomach stirs roughly at Niall’s cute, innocently seductive action. “Talk about one hell of a story.”

“C’mon, baby,” Harry says, sighs, reaches out and sifts his fingers through Niall’s hair; it’s a bit greasy, a bit long, and the brown is almost completely overtaking the bleach-blond Niall experimented with over Christmas break. Harry quite likes Niall brunet, really, but he’ll support Niall should he bleach it again even though he would rather Niall leave it alone. “You know you want to stop just as much as I do.”

“You’ll call your mum if we go check it out?”

Shit, damn, hell, fuck — he forgot about his mum. She’s going to absolutely throw a fit.

“If they have a phone, yeah.” Harry nods, blinks again, and his lids are getting a little bit heavier each time. “Deal?”

Niall nods, yawns, and it wasn’t very hard convincing him to stop, really. Harry reckoned there would be more of a fight — then again, he reasons, the trip to Atlanta has only just began, literally, and he knows he and Niall are going to have their fair share of disagreements and disputes along the way because that’s how it’s always been, how it’ll always be.

It’s only a matter of time, really, but right now Harry would rather focus on the way the colors of the dash make Niall shine like an innocent cherub, would rather focus on the way Niall is leaning into his touch like it’s home, would rather focus on the way Niall’s smile is like a tender kiss to the lips than plot on how he’s going to win the numerous amount of arguments that’s sure to rear their ugly heads in the next few days.

“I swear, son, as soon as I see you again I am going to whip your ass like you’ve never been whipped before.”

Harry winces, shuts his eyes and leans against the side of the seedy yellow motel he and Niall opted to stay in for the night; it’s late, close to midnight Harry thinks, and he’s been putting off ringing his mum for hours even though they’ve been checked in since nine, even though they stopped at plenty corner stores with phones to grab a snack after they devoured a bag of brownies, and now that he’s dialed her number and caught her before she crashes, he really wishes he would’ve taken Niall’s advice and just dealt with it all in a handwritten letter that could be mailed and arrived soon without the messiness of a conversation miles away from one another.

“Mum, I’m okay. I promise I’m okay. I promise that I’m going to be okay.”

“I know you’re okay, Harry — I didn’t raise a little bitch,” Anne says into the receiver with an exhaled breath, and Harry’s kind of miffed, kind of taken aback by his mother’s tone. Of course, he shouldn’t be, really — his mum is the most precious woman in the world, besides his sister, and he takes after her more than he does his father, that’s for sure. “I just want you to know that when you
get home you aren’t going to be okay. In fact, you’ll probably not be able to sit down for the rest of the summer when I get through with you.”

Bloody fuck, holy shit. Gemma never got in this much trouble, and she skipped out to go to Woodstock with Greg, for fuck’s sake.

“Mum,” he says, whines, kicks his booted foot against a tiny pebble on the walk outside of the motel, and he doesn’t rightly care if he’s disturbing the couple in the room — they’ve been fucking each other’s brains out since he and Niall arrived, and they don’t have the common sense to make sure the blinds are drawn completely. Harry’s seen enough ass and tits to suffice him for a while. “Please don’t be mad at me.”

“Mad at you? Mad at you? Harry Styles, I am not mad at you — I am bloody fucking furious with you! I don’t think this level of anger has ever been reached before, son!”

Harry blanches, leans against the hotel wall and puts his head in his free hand; the wind is crisp around him, blowing at the sides of his unbuttoned shirt, and late-June in southeast Nevada is a bit milder than he thought it would be. The fuzzy television in the hotel room Niall’s in is predicting a bit of rainfall early tomorrow afternoon, but at least everything is semi-okay now. A bit windy and kind of overcast, in a way, but definitely better than rain. He and Niall should be out of Nevada and cruising through Arizona by the time the rain arrives, anyway, if all goes as planned, though there’s no definite answer on how long they’ll be able to stay ahead of it.

“Mum, I left a note.”

Anne snorts, and Harry sighs, shuts his eyes; he’s in a hole, and each word he speaks is another dig of the shovel that’s burying him deeper. “You left a note, Harry — a note,” she says, emphasizes, and when she puts it that way it sounds like a bad thing, kind of, but it seemed like a good idea at the time. He was sorely wrong, but it’s the thought that counts. Maybe. “A note is not going to stand in for the fact that you left this home while under my supervision without telling me to hitch across the country for a concert.”

“It’s… It’s the Rolling Stones, Mum.” And he loves them — loves, loves, loves, loves them; ever since his sister introduced him to them, he’s been the reserved sort of fan that saves up a bit of money here and there to collect the records and cassettes (and the few posters he was able to find in the back of the shop on a particularly slow day).

And it isn’t like his mum doesn’t understand his love, his passion, because she’s quite the devoted fan of Elvis, going to his concerts here and there through the years. She can relate to his love for the Stones because she feels the same way for Elvis, no doubt.

And Gemma? Hell, she’s the music junkie of the family.

“I don’t give a fuck if it’s Elvis, Harry.” Case in point. “You should’ve told me before packing your bags and hopping in with Niall and taking off half-cocked to see a concert. I’m your mother — I worry about you, and you’re putting too much unnecessary stress on me at the moment, baby.”

Harry pinches the bridge of his nose, opens his eyes and stares out at the horizon. It’s dark outside, but everything’s dimly lit by the orange-pink-yellow sign out front; the flickering vacancy sign casts shadows across the nearly-empty parking lot, and it’s quite easy for Harry to count the shooting stars in this backwater town with a cloud-streaked sky.

“I’m sorry,” he says, and he’s sincerely apologizing — he’s sorry for being difficult, sorry for being immature, sorry for being ignorant. Ever since his parents split, it’s been his mother fending for him;
she’s supported all his activities, cheered on the sidelines and carpooled with the team even when they were stinky and sweaty and sour from hours and hours and hours of practice. She’s done so much for him and never asked for anything in return, and she deserves a hell of a lot more than that house sandwiched between an aging bunny and notorious smokers — she deserves the world, and he wants to give it to her completely, and he will, one of these days, when he’s not an eighteen-year-old bum. “I really am sorry, Mummy.”

She sighs, and he knows she’s shaking her head, knows she’s staggering into the living room with a bag of cookies in her hands to end a tiring day at the hospital. “I would’ve let you go if you’d have asked, Harry,” she says, soft and easy, and his mother is a tiger prowling lowly in the faded brown-green switchgrass of the wild. “However, you do have a job, and I would have made you deal with that accordingly besides bailing on your shift. Niall, as well; Maura asked me to keep an eye on that boy because we all know Greg can’t be bothered half the time to make sure Niall’s still breathing.”

Oh.

Oh, fuck, his job.

“Um, Mum?”

“Yeah, sweetie?”

Harry laughs, humorless and dry, scratching at his temple. “Do Ni and I still have a job?” he asks, timid and shy; it’s probably a lost cause, anyway, because their boss is sort of a dick, you know, and he’s been breathing down both Harry and Niall’s necks ever since they began working.

“Oh, hell no,” she says, scoffs, and there’s a bit of humor in her words that lessens Harry’s abruptly raging anxiety. “Steve phoned, went off on me about how I fucked up raising Gemma and brought up the fact that I screwed up with you, too, and went on about how I was a horrible mother.”

Harry snarls, and his fists clench a bit too tight around the blue phone he’s got pressed to his ear. “That fucker.”

“But,” Anne continues, drawing out the word, and Harry knows his mother is tough, knows his mother is fierce, knows his mother can — quite literally — take proper care of herself, but he wants to be the shining prince to her radiant queen. “I told him he best not speak about either of children in that way again, and should he continue to, I would personally make a stop by his store and let his lovely little daughter know that her boyfriend is having an affair with her father.”

“Mum!” Harry gasps, snorts; he and Niall have known for a while that Steve and Meadow’s boyfriend, Angel, have been fucking around behind her back, but Harry had no idea that his mother of all people was aware of it, and it was a silent agreement among all the workers to keep their noses out of that mess.

And — and yeah, it doesn’t really bother any of them that two men are fucking, either; times are changing, and Harry likes to think that Woodstock was the breeding ground for an entire army of liberated young adults to decide what to do with the world given to him. That’s what Gemma said, at least, and he has no reason to not believe her.

But Anne? Oh, she’ll tell. She’s fucking fearless — Steve better watch out.

“What?” she asks, clearly befuddled, with a mouth full of whatever cookie she’s eating tonight, and he loves her more than the dim stars above. “What?”

“You can’t blackmail a person just ’cause he likes dick better than pussy!”
“Harry, I don’t care what a person prefers in the bedroom, behind closed doors, because it’s none of my business — if you’re a good person, you’re a good person, but if you’re a bad person, then you’re a bad person, too. Steve is not a good person, and I am not going to fight fair when he insults my children and tells me how much of a failure the two of you are because of my horrible raising.”

She stops for a moment, catches her breath, and Harry is so, so, so incredibly lucky and blessed to have a mother like her, really — if he had to choose, were given the choice to pick from an entire lot of women, it would be her every single time.

“You and Gemma are absolutely incredible, baby, and I understand that you two have made mistakes, but neither of you are in prison or addicted to drugs or running wild through the city. As far as I’m concerned, you and Gem turned out all right in the situations you two were raised in, and I’m proud that I got to see both of you through high school and on to college.”

Harry bites his lip, tries to hold in the grin that’s threatening to stretch across his face and split his cheeks in half. “I love you, Mum,” he says, whispers, and he doesn’t tell her enough, really, how much she means to him; in the back of his mind, he decides that, every day, she’ll be reminded by him just how much of an angel she is. “I love you loads.”

“I love you, too, baby,” she says, coos, and this confrontation went a hell of a lot better than Harry thought it would, really, but he knows he’s in for it when he returns home. “By the way, Harry, how many times have I told you to not leave food in your room? These brownies are entirely too good to not be shared, honey.”

Harry’s eyes widen; oh, fuck. “Mum, you’re eating the brownies you found in my room?” he asks, squeaks, and this isn’t good, this isn’t good, this isn’t good. They were in his room for a reason, fuck’s sake; she’s going to slaughter him, going to rip him up in itty bitty pieces and probably take back all the encouraging things she’s said to him.

“Well, yeah.”

“Mum…?” he begins, trails off, gathers his breath; either way, should he admit the truth or allow her to discover it herself after she eats her weight in food, he’s in deep. “Mum, those aren’t normal brownies. There’s — um, there’s pot in them, Mum.”

It’s silent for a moment, dead slow and achingly quiet, and Harry’s bursting with a million and one apologies that are ready to fall off of his tongue, but before he can utter the first sorry in a round of many, his mum is talking and she’s taking him by complete surprise.

“Oh, baby, don’t think so little of me. I know there’s marijuana in them, and I know Niall bakes them up, too. He’s got the best recipe in L.A., I’d say.”

Oh my God.

“I’ll have to have him write it down for me sometime,” she continues, and Harry’s jaw is still on the ground and he isn’t sure how he’s going to pick it back up after this abrupt realization. “Tell him I said this is the best batch I’ve had yet.”

Holy shit, his mum can hang.
dream weaver

*i have just closed my eyes again
climbed aboard the dream weaver train
driver take away my worries of today
and leave tomorrow behind

— Gary Wright, ‘Dream Weaver’

“Why the fuck didn’t you tell me my mum eats your brownies, Niall?”

Niall startles a bit at Harry’s loud, harsh voice; he looks up from whatever it is he’s drinking in his red cup, raises his brows and gives Harry a befuddled, twisted glance of pure stupefaction as he resituates himself in the hot tub. “What are you talkin’ about?” he asks, blinks his eyes, and he looks so sparkly-gazed and innocent that Harry kind of wants to take his question back, kind of wants to ignore the fact that his mother smokes reefer.

But he can’t. He can’t, and Harry knows if their roles were reversed, Niall would be on his ass just as much as he’s on Niall’s back, too.

Well, maybe. Maybe — maybe, because Niall’s mother is easygoing, because Niall’s mother is predictable, because Niall’s mother is set in her beliefs and ideals, because Niall’s mother is simple to please, because Niall’s mother is everything that Harry’s isn’t.

And that isn’t a bad thing, you know. Maura still cares for Niall, still babies and worries and swears and slaves and protects and dotes over Niall just as much as Anne does Harry; however, she’s taught Niall from a young age that it’s generally better to rely on nobody but yourself in a world full of people who will only let you down if you allow them to get too close to your body, to your mind, to your heart, to your soul.

Maura thinks it’s better to be alone than with someone who isn’t really there.

Greg’s like that, kinda. He’s got strangers and he’s got acquaintances and he’s got friends and he’s got best friends and he’s got family, but in that large group he only has a select few he trusts completely with his whole life, with his whole world (Harry knows because Niall told him so when they were younger; also, Greg isn’t quiet about his affection for Harry, either, and while Harry isn’t as close to Greg as he is Niall, Harry still regards Greg as a sort of cooler older cousin who dropped out of college to live his life the way he wanted, and it’s easy for the two of them to talk to one another, for the most part).

Niall, though? He isn’t Maura, and he isn’t Greg, either. He’s his own person, and Harry adores him, oddities and all.

Harry sighs, kicks his boots off and fiddles with his belt, undoing the buckle and shucking his jeans off, slinging them from his legs and throwing them to the side atop his shoes. He’s left half-naked, in his dark red briefs and yellow shirt, which he shrugs off his shoulders and tosses onto the pile of his jeans and boots; he sits down, puts his legs in the warm water of the hot tub and sinks inside, opposite Niall. The water is hot, hot, hot, washing over his body and easing the chills on his skin as the strain leaves his body, leaves his heart and soul, and he lets out a stressed breath he had no idea he was holding.

It feels good to relax, feels good to lay back and allow the jets that are hitting the bottom of his spine
to soothe out a few of the knots in his body. He and Niall have had a long day traveling, and while he loves seeing new things opposed to LA’s total familiarity — the suburbs, the people, the buildings, the streets — he doesn’t enjoy the discomfort of longs hours on the road.

“Mum let it out of the bag that she ate some of the brownies you made me,” Harry explains, widens his legs and adjusts his back so he’s comfortably pressed against the side of the tub. “She said she’s cleaned my room and found some I guess I left in there by accident.”

And he’d rather not count how many times he’s left bags full of pot brownies in his room through the last four years. He just can’t help it, okay?

“I haven’t given any to her,” Niall replies, shakes his head, but there’s a simultaneously confused and entertained grin on his face that makes Harry roll his eyes and snort. “Greg may have —” he starts, stops himself to belch, and it’s a loud burp that bubbles in the air, that makes Harry let out a yell of disgust, before continuing, “— Greg may have given her some. He knows where I keep ‘em.”

Harry sighs, plugs his nose just in case the smell of Niall’s burp comes into his space; Harry wonders what’s in that red up of Niall’s to make him belch so awfully. “If it’s Greg, I’ll fucking kick his ass,” Harry says, swears, and there’s truth behind the threat but there’s also a bit of comical storytelling; Harry isn’t going to fight Greg over giving his mother some pot-infused brownies when she’s a mature, consenting adult. If Anne isn’t going to make a big deal out of it, then Harry isn’t, either.

“How’d the phone call go?” Niall asks, passes Harry a red cup; sometimes Harry wishes he didn’t have a mother breathing down his neck, didn’t have a sister outlining his path of rebelliousness while also worrying too much for her health. Sometimes he wishes his family was like Niall’s: there, but checked-out and missing although they would come to attack and defend in a second if it were needed. Niall’s turned out all right from it, and Harry’s not jealous, no. He just… wants a change. A small one. “Or… did it not go at all?”

Harry looks inside, sees that the cup Niall gave him is carbonated and bubbly, kind of like Pepsi, and when he takes a drink he confirms his suspicions. “Oh, she’s pissed to the moon and back,” Harry replies, sets his cup on the side of the tub and shuts his eyes, sinking low till the water laps at the lobes of his ears and leaning his head back. “She’s gonna skin me alive when I get home. We also lost our job, too.”

“Was only a matter of time on that last one, H.”

“Yeah.” Harry nods, lolls his head to the side and opens his eyes, meeting Niall’s blue, blue gaze. “Steve mouthed off about me, and Mum jumped down his throat and brought up Meadow and Angel.”

Niall coughs, blinks several times to return his eyes back to their proper size, though Harry was able to get in a few chuckles before he collected his calm. “That’s not very good at all. Steve didn’t hide it from us, but if Anne knows, Meadow may. And — um, like, just throwing this out there ‘cause I’ve thought a bit about it, but, like, what if… what if Steve and Meadow share Angel, you know? I’ve seen Angel cozy up with Steve in front of Meadow and her not say a thing ’bout it, H. Doesn’t that kinda make you think?”

“It makes me not want to think, if we’re being honest.” Harry shivers, tries to erase the vulgar images that appear in his mind at Niall’s lecherous — though probably true, you know — suggestion. His boss sharing his daughter’s boyfriend? It’s a bit wild, a bit unorthodox, but it’s none of their business and Harry would rather stay out of it. “I mean, what people do behind closed doors is their business, ya know, and love is love in my opinion — girl and girl or boy and boy; it’s whatever ‘cause there’s not much of a difference, Ni — but I’d… I’d rather not think about my boss and his daughter sharing
a guy. That makes my head hurt.”

Niall giggles, grins so, so large that Harry almost believes his cheeks are going to rip in half if he doesn’t level down quickly, and Harry’s in no mood to search out the nearest hospital in a town, in a state he’s never been in before.

“I mean, I’m just pointing out the facts, you know?” He shrugs, takes a sip of his drink and meets Harry’s eyes with his own. “And — somebody’s got to say it or it’ll never get said.”

“And you’re volunteering for that position, eh?”

“Gladly.” Niall grins, halfway shuts his eyes; he tilts his head to the side, reaches his foot out and toes along Harry’s bare leg beneath the water till their ankles knock together, offhandedly rough, and Niall’s smiling and Harry’s shivering and it’s hot in the tub, hot outside, hot inside, and he shouldn’t have gooseflesh along his body, shouldn’t have a tremble in his breath as he sucks in air around the lump Niall’s touch has created in his throat. It’s never been like this before; the suddenness of it all takes him off guard just as much as the fact that it’s happening. “I’ll gladly take up that position, H.”

“You’re quite the person, aren’t you?” Harry asks, slants his head to meet Niall’s eyes; his heart is kind of thumping, kind of skipping, and it’s weird, really — he’s felt this before, in a way, when he became attached to a few girls back in school (he’s still friends with Kendall and Nadine, but Taylor is another story and he would rather not remember all the times she sliced her name into the leather seats of his borrowed ’67 Impala that he spent weeks mowing lawns to pay back his mother, and even though he’s confronted and apologized to her, multiple times, about the breakup — even though it was her decision to split — he’s still weary of her when he sees her randomly around town, and he’s more than a little bit elated to know that she’s attending university in New York City) but it was never this sudden, never this abrupt, never this out-of-the-world and strikingly vivid with all the colors of the universe.

Niall is his friend, his best bloody friend in the whole bloody world, and his heart shouldn’t do that flutter-stutter, inflamed and erratic thing when he’s with Niall.

Or should it?

It shouldn’t. Harry shakes his head; it shouldn’t — of course it shouldn’t. They are friends, nothing more than two people in a platonic relationship — brothers, in the gentlest and honest of senses. Of course it shouldn’t.

“That I am, H.” Niall nods, agrees, and suddenly the air around Harry is tight, is tense, and all he can think about is the way Niall’s bony toes are picking at the skin of his calf beneath the hot, hot, hot water they’re lounging in. “That I am.”

“Niall —”

“You can’t expect me to not treat it as my business when they make it my business by eye-fucking each other in front of me like a three-way pair of horny frat kids,” Niall interrupts, shrugs his shoulders; the movement causes the water to ripple around his bare torso just a little bit, and Harry doesn’t think he licked his lips to get rid of the dryness but he might have.

“I’m gonna hit the hay, try to catch as much sleep as I can before we take off tomorrow,” Niall announces, cuts Harry off rather sharply; he pulls his foot back, stands up on wobbly knees that drip with water and shine in the dim, neon lights around them. Yum. “It’s been quite the day, don’t you think? I think I’ve deserved at least twelve hours of sleep.” He looks over his shoulder, meets Harry’s eyes, and Harry isn’t looking at the muscles popping on Niall’s shoulders, isn’t looking at
the tightness of Niall’s back, isn’t looking at the tautness of Niall’s pert bum, isn’t looking at the water dripping off Niall’s lengthy legs, isn’t looking at the thick bulge at the point of Niall’s groin. “I’ll meet you in the room?”

Fuck.

But — but fuck with a smiley face beside it, maybe, because Harry’s kind of enjoying this particular fuck a little bit more than he probably should.

Harry nods, strained and tight in all the wrong places, in all the right places. “Yeah,” he says, croaks, and Niall flashes him a grin, and then he’s out of the tub, grabbing his fluffy towel and jogging toward the wrought-iron gates surrounding the pool, and Harry’s left to his own lecherous, lascivious devices as he ponders just why in the fuck his best friend gave him a stiffy.

- 

Niall doesn’t meet him in the room, per se, because he’s already knocked out, spread-eagle and burrowed beneath the pillows of his bed, half-dressed in nothing but a pair of Harry’s boxer shorts and drooling on the white pillowcase, which makes it easy for Harry to sneak through the place toward the bathroom, where he leaves the door cracked and undresses before hopping into the hottest shower he’s probably ever taken.

And he may or may not lather his whole body in fruit-scented soap that the motel supplied, may or may not pay special attention to his sensitive half-hard cock that’s been aching since Niall’s cute little smile from earlier in the van, may or may not fondle his heavy balls with fingers that shake just as much as he is shuddering, may or may not brace one arm against the tiled wall while the other works his prick into the sticky oversensitivity that makes him come undone in squirts of grainy cream that mixes together with the water twirling down the drain and leaves him feeling content in an odd, shivering and riveting sort of way.

And — and it just feels too good to imagine Niall on his knees, really. It just feels too good to imagine Niall smiling that crooked smile of his, just feels too good to imagine Niall stripping himself bare, just feels too good to imagine Niall fighting to keep his hands off of his prick, just feels too good to imagine Niall kneeling before him, to imagine one of Niall’s hands on his hip while the other is wrapping tight around Harry’s base, just feels too good to imagine Niall’s bulging eyes bloodshot and leaking just as much as Harry’s prick is on Niall’s tongue, just feels too good to imagine Niall swallowing around the tip as it brushes against the back of his throat pleadingly, just feels too good to imagine Niall hollowing his cheeks and taking it all as Harry fucks his mouth deep and careful, soft and slow, thorough and complete till they’re both a pliant mess of sticky cum and languid smiles of affection, of adoration, of attraction.

His orgasm hits hard, hits completely out of nowhere and makes him see stars that look like a rainbow of gleaming fireworks in the night sky, like an explosive combination of all the best feel-good emotions on this side of the galaxy, and all the colors flashing across his lids are the same hues that are reflected in Niall’s smile, in Niall’s voice, in Niall’s touch, in Niall’s scent, in Niall’s eyes.

When he finishes, he rinses off quickly; the water is a bit chilly, and he’s delicately hyper-aware and too sensitive to take much of the cold before he’s in total sobs, really, and in need of brushing his teeth, too, because his cum isn’t nearly as tasty as he thought it would be. He has no earthly idea how people swallow, and he’ll be sure to stop the next person who goes down on him because that’s a mess he would rather nobody eat.

He towels off in a hurry, blindly searches for a pair of boxers — they’re probably Niall’s, honestly, because they’re a bit too short for Harry’s longer legs, but he doesn’t care because he’s climatically
sated and too tired to flick on the lights that Niall must’ve shut off somewhere in between the beginning of his rather long shower and now — and when he crawls into bed with Niall, he makes damn sure that their bodies are well enough apart that they don’t share one another’s heat, that they don’t share one another’s humid space.

Because that’s too much — it’s so much, it’s too much. Harry’s already susceptible, already reactively receptive to the point where the slightest touch, the slightest brush of bare skin on bare skin will have him absolutely sobbing with some sort of viscid emotion that he can’t wrap his mind around, and he doesn’t think he can handle much more of Niall’s sudden beauty, of Niall’s sudden glorious light, of Niall’s sudden gratifying luminosity.

He reckons he’ll just stay on his own side of the bed for the time being, till this haughty attraction subsides into nothing more than a fading dream with wrinkled edges and sticky hands and numb tongues and too many colors to count, to understand, to explain.

He doesn’t want to count the colors, doesn’t want to understand the abrupt frenzy to do it all, doesn’t want to explain the craziness of untamed need. All he wants to do is go to sleep, is dream and dream and dream of all the dirty and nasty and sticky things he wants Niall to do to him, of all the filthy and lecherous and yummy things he wants to do to Niall.

And it works for him, too — until Niall rolls over, that is, and shoves his nose in Harry’s hair and wraps his lips around Harry’s ear in a slobbery grumble of a sleepy confession of, “Nighty night, H; s’eeep well,” that warms Harry’s heart to the point that he is burning up and presses his morning wood against Harry’s bare thigh and ruts unconsciously at the contact he’s found in his dreamy doziness of clingy affection, and then Harry’s nursing another hard-on that lasts long into the wee hours of morning and refuses to let him rest without dreaming of Niall’s mouth all over his hot, sweating body, and it’s really the only relief in the heat of the night he gets.
you took the words right out of my mouth

Meatloaf, ‘You Took the Words Right Out Of My Mouth’

Harry’s driving this time, weaving in and out through tiny, tiny towns in southeast Nevada because Niall asked him if he was okay with driving when they woke up at the ass crack of dawn a few hours ago, because he can’t tell Niall no, it seems, which isn’t a big deal — well, it didn’t used to be a big deal, but now it’s large as fuck, deeper than the Grand Canyon and longer than the Nile, and Harry can’t tell you why he all of a sudden has to tear his eyes from Niall’s pansy pink lips that are a bit stained from the cherry Kool-Aid the clerk at the desk offered them, can’t tell you why he all of a sudden has to grip the steering wheel tight enough to keep his fingers off of Niall’s bare knees when the sun shining through the window glitters off them goldenly, can’t tell you why he all of a sudden has to adjust himself accordingly so his half-hard prick doesn’t scratch tantalizingly, hotly against the zip of his jeans as he imagines Niall’s bright blue eyes red-rimmed with green satisfaction at getting his face fucked good.

Or, really, they’re Niall’s jeans he’s got on, and Niall’s wearing a pair of Harry’s paint-splattered cutoffs he used in art class that are a bit too long for his legs, and they’re rolled up a tad, folded right below his yummy thighs that look so good, and Harry never knew a knee could be so fucking attractive, could be so fucking seductive to the point that he’s actually considering pulling over really quickly to rub one out so he doesn’t end up with perpetual blue balls that’ll follow him into the next century.

And Niall’s sleeping, for fuck’s sake — the dude is knocked out, literally, legs sprawled and arms crossed and head back against the window and mouth wide open as he snores and eyes glued shut from sleep at the corners and drool drying on his bottom lip, down his chin, along the column of his neck like a bead of sweat Harry would love to drink up, would love to lick away.

Dammit.

Harry sucks in a ragged breath, takes one hand off the wheel to grab hold of his dick, to squeeze a bit of easy release from his hardening prick; he sighs, loosens his body, and watches as the speedometer falls down to the legalized limit, thankful that there’s no smokies around town, hidden in all the corners, at the moment.

Because that would be great, you know, getting pulled over in the middle of nowhere, in some backwater town in southeast Nevada that’s too small, too poor, too thin with an uncompressed population to have even a single stoplight.

He’s being sarcastic, by the way. Getting pulled over at the moment, with a raging boner, definitely would not be great at all.

However, it’d make one hell of a story when they got back — if they got back, that is, but Harry’s pretty sure they will even if they are a bit late — and Harry isn’t even sure if he’s packed his license to identify himself, either.

Really, though, getting stopped is the least of his worries at the moment; the thought that’s at the
forefront of his mind, at the tip of his tongue and tingling on his fingers, tumbling tightly in his heart, is why — just fucking why — he tugged one out last night in the shower thinking of his best friend on his knees, thinking of his best friend with his mouth open wide, thinking of his best friend swallowing around his dick, thinking of his best friend gagging around his cock as he’s taken deeper and deeper and deeper, thinking of his best friend eating all his cum as if it’s the best tasting delicacy on the planet.

And, oh dear, Niall would treat Harry’s cum like it’s the best tasting delicacy on the planet, yes he would, like it’s sweet and scrumptious and too soft on his tongue to ever give it up — and Harry knows this because he’s seen Niall between a girl’s legs, seen Niall bury himself inside the warmth of two thighs, seen Niall eat a girl out as if both of their lives depended on it, from ass to clit and back again, again, again, over and over and over and not leaving one single area untouched.

Niall looks so fucking good doing it, too, so tight and taunt and tense as his muscles strain to accommodate her pleasure before his own (even though he’ll be the first to tell you that just seeing her like that, wrecked and wrangled, is giving him all the pleasure he needs).

Half the time he’s on his knees and she’s laid out bare before him on a bed, spread out wide before him on a sofa so he can grind against the plushness till she’s ready to take him, and one of his hands are on her lips, nuzzling into her musky pubic hair and pushing her apart so he can lick, nibble, suck, bite, moan into her while the other busies itself with touching her all over, all over, all over, and Harry knows from experience that pussy doesn’t taste the best — however, it’s not supposed to taste like a vanilla and chocolate swirl, for fuck’s sake, and anybody who thinks that is setting unrealistic expectations that cannot be met, and cum isn’t that great, either, and really, while he’s at it, screwed anybody who brings up a girl’s weight, a girl’s thickness as if it has anything to do with their participation in bed, with Harry’s libido, because it doesn’t, because he loves tiny girls and he loves big girls, too, and likes biting into the meat of their thighs, likes blowing kisses between the fluff of their tits, like leaving marks that they’ll still be finding days after, fuck — but Niall acts as if it’s the best meal he’s ever had, as if the last meal he’s ever going to get.

And he savors it.

(Hell, Niall’s the reason, more or less, Harry knows what to do with his hands, knows what the difference is between sucking and licking. Everything that he knows, he’s learned from Niall, and — and it’s just now hitting him, wow, how intimate, how filthy that is.)

The other half of the time, when he’s not kneeling and when Harry’s in the room to watch — he and Niall have pulled together on quite a few occasions, and there’s really nothing to be ashamed of, in Harry’s opinion, because a body is a body, is a vessel, and they’re all beautiful to have been sculpted so uniquely, so daringly, women and men both — he’s on his back, hoisting the girl up, up, up and over his awaiting mouth, his eager tongue, and he lets her think she’s in control, lets her think she’s calling the shots, but it’s him who’s using his grip on her hips to move her on his mouth, to push her to ride his face roughly, to guide her to fuck his tongue till she’s sobbing with an orgasm that’s wet as the sea and Niall’s having to change the sheets with a smug smile on his face and a wink in Harry’s direction as he drives his own bird to utter ecstasy, to total satisfaction.

Niall feasts — Niall feasts because he doesn’t half-ass anything he does, and it’s the hottest, sexiest, dirtiest thing Harry’s ever been given the good privilege of seeing, of witnessing.

He’s quite the voyeur. He never knew that about himself. Hmm.

And now he’s hard. Hard, like — like, there’s a bit of precum leaking from the tip, a steady little stream as he can’t remove the images from his mind, and he can feel it stick his jeans, can feel it dry against his skin and rub, scratch, stimulate him inappropriately, and he’s going to come in his pants,
going to come without touch if he keeps it up, if he allows his mind to travel down the dangerous path his heart, his dick, has laid out.

Yeah. Yeah, he’s that hard.

He can’t do that. Not with Niall beside him — even with Niall beside him, he can’t do it. Not again, when all his rational thoughts are obscured with Niall’s hands and Niall’s hair and Niall’s lips and Niall’s noises and Niall’s body.

He needs to figure out why he’s feeling so wanton, why he’s feeling so wild, why he’s feeling so wetly reckless; Niall is Niall, and he’s attractive, beautiful, cute, riveting — but he’s Niall, and he and Harry have been friends for years, years, and there’s no reason for Harry to all of a sudden have the need to just jump Niall’s bones, to just step inside his skin, to just match all the colors of their hearts together to create one big safe haven of trust, of acceptance, of support.

Oh, dear, he’s got it. He’s already got it so bad.

And he doesn’t even know what it is that he’s got.

He sighs, drops his head back against the rest; it’s still cool enough at eight in the morning to have the windows up in the van, but Harry is hot, is burning, is simmering in his own sinful want and devilish need to touch, to be touched, but he can suffer for a while as long as Niall dreams happy, happy dreams.

There’s cars passing him by, sandy meadows streaking together on either side of him, music playing softly from the mixtape Gemma made that Harry shoved inside earlier, and all he can think about is Niall’s funny snores, is Niall’s cute twitches, is Niall’s parted lips, is Niall’s tired noises as he moves, as he finds comfort in a fucking window that’s allowing the sun to shine through brightly, brilliantly, and Harry wants to block out the light so Niall can rest longer, can sleep longer, but he can’t and it’s not his job to do that, anyway.

Bad, bad, bad, bad, bad.

He’s got it bad — so bad he can’t even fathom the deepness of this abrupt pit of darkness he is rushing in to, diving in to, head first and with the biggest, giddiest grin on his face.

It’s dangerously riveting in all the wrong ways that feel so, so good.

Good, good, good, good, good.

Oh, God, it feels so good.

And why stop it, you know? Why stop something that feels so good in a world full of black, in a world full of white, in a world full of gray? Why avoid the one person who makes everything so colorful?

“Mornin’.” Niall moves, sits up a bit, and his voice is hoarse, gruff, and the sleepy, slobbery smile he gives Harry melts his heart, and the hard-on he had a moment again has now vanished, has now turned into a heart-on because — because Niall turns him on physically, yes, but Niall also stimulates him emotionally, and that’s just as good, just as amazing. “How long ‘ave we been on the road?”

Harry swallows, eases his foot onto the gas a little heavier; there’s no way in hell he’s going to let this rig fall below sixty-five on the Interstate. “Almost two hours, I think,” he answers, turns to give Niall a look, a calculating look — Niall’s been coy, been sly, been humble, as if he knows something
Harry doesn’t, and while this isn’t the first time this has happened, it’s the first time Harry’s feeling prickly anxiety because of it with the need to just know. “It’s been quiet out. And nice, too. Today’s gonna be a good day.”

He just — he just wants to stop the van in the middle of the highway if he has to, wants to grab Niall by the collar and jerk him into the backseat, wants to strip the both of their bodies bare so they can begin to shed the layers and layer and layers of their hearts and souls and minds and dreams, wants to know what’s going on in Niall’s mind because maybe, just maybe, that’ll give Harry answers as to why he’s craving Niall so vividly, so viciously, so vicariously, so vivaciously.

So fucking colorfully.

“Hop off on the next exit, H,” Niall suggests, but it’s more of an order, of a demand, really, and Niall’s not meeting Harry’s eyes and that’s okay, that’s okay. Something’s off, and Harry has no trouble with turning around right now and driving back to LA, the concert be damned. He isn’t going to have fun if Niall doesn’t, and really, this is all Niall’s doing, anyway. “I’m hungry.”

“Is it legal to eat and drive?” Harry asks around a fry, wiping the greasy stuff on his pant leg before grabbing his burger off the console between the two of them. “I mean, like, they’ve not made a law out of it yet, have they? I’m not gonna kiss my life goodbye to rot in a cell ‘cause I couldn’t keep a piece of meat outta my mouth, am I?”

Niall giggles — giggles, and that’s just a messy turn on all in itself, really, and Harry’s definitely going to blame the swerving van on his barely-there ability to eat and drive at the same time, yes he his, and not the fact that Niall looks so cuddly, looks so at peace being whipped by the wind from the window as he scarfs down his second burger of the morning, and there’s a stray bit of ketchup on his lip and a stain of mustard on his white shirt and he’s still the prettiest thing ever.

Gotta love McDonalds, yeah?

“It’s only illegal if you get caught, H,” Niall replies, words slurred and heavy from the excess food in his mouth — gluttony isn’t a fairly attractive trait, and it’s a good thing Harry knows Niall didn’t eat yesterday save for a few leftover ribs Harry didn’t devour or he would’ve been worried by Niall’s insatiable hunger. “’aven’t we been over this before?”

He gives Harry a look — a look — and in Niall’s eyes, Harry can see all the memories of their life together, can see all the good and all the bad and all the happy and all the sad and all the crazy and all the tame and all the insensitive and all the care, can see all the colors, oh my gosh, the colors in Niall’s eyes are there and they are Harry’s everything.

Harry swallows a bit of the burger he’s attempting to eat the wrong way, choke on the chunk; his eyes water and he sets it down, grabs his Coke and gulps, gulps, gulps till he can breathe, till he can think straight.

Semi-straight.

Which is straight enough, for the most part.

“We may have been over this before,” Harry begins, a bit thick as he swallows slowly, shallowly, “but what you remember I apparently do not.”

“’Cause you refuse to, ’cause you like blocking out all the messes we got up to,” Niall points out with a wink, finishing off his burger and beginning on his fries. “Besides, it was that time Lou talked
us all into breaking in the stadium to piss on the fifty yard line after coach tried to make us sign those contracts the summer of our senior year.”

Harry’s mind jumpstarts then, and he recalls that memory a bit too brightly; it was only a year ago, after all, but so much has happened. “Lou’s reason was that it’s only illegal if we get caught, wasn’t it?” he asks, and Niall nods, munching on a handful of fries. “And that is exactly why we got caught.”

“Made a marvelous story, though, didn’t it?” Niall grins, and Harry’s heart is swarming with affection, my goodness, because it did. He and Niall bunked together at Louis’s house that weekend, in the attic — which is the only room in the house that isn’t occupied by Louis’s big family, really, and Harry and Niall more or less took it over when they were fourteen — and waited out the temper from both of their mothers. “And while we’re on the subject of getting caught — did you toss off last night in the shower?”

Harry’s body turns cold, turns the palest shade of frozen blue, and he can’t find the words to say because Niall seems to have them all.

“Um… you heard?”

“How could I not?” Niall counters, laughs, and Harry’s red now — like apples, like roses, like the blood that’s rushing to his cock at the thought of Niall hearing, at the thought of Niall slinking into the bathroom and joining him. Oh, God. “You were goin’ off like a siren, man. Like a porno, you know, all extreme pleasure and that. You’d think that’s the first time you’ve ever tugged one out.”

Harry frowns. “I get off at least once a day, thank you very much,” he sneers, and Niall knows this, really, because the two of them have wanked off together on a few occasions, Harry on one end of the couch with Niall on the other, but still — still. “And ’sides, it’s hardly any of your business if I masturbate, don’t you think?”

“Reckon it’s my business when it’s my name you’re screaming.”

Red. Harry’s red.

Harry’s mind is quiet but his heart isn’t, and he’s always listened more to his gut than anything else, really. “You heard me,” he says, and it’s a statement, not a question; Niall’s already given Harry all he needs to know. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh, don’t be sorry at all,” Niall replies, cackles, and he’s — he’s laughing, laughing at Harry, as if this is some sort of joke, as if this is some sort of game. It isn’t. “I’m quite honored to be privy to the knowledge that my best friend fucked his hand last night while taking a shower to the thought of me.” His laughter calms, but his chuckles are barely contained and Harry’s red is burning, simmering into black. “Thought showers were supposed to wash away the day’s troubles and sins, not add to ‘em?”

“It’s not funny.” It’s a whisper, a hard-edged grunt, and Harry throws the rest of his food out the window — even the birds deserve to eat, too — and grips the steering wheel with two hands. His knuckles are white. “It’s not funny at all.”

And Harry leaves it at that. His mind is reeling, his heart is hurting, his gut is churning, his soul is reeling, and he leaves it at that — because Niall laughed, because Niall joked, because Niall made fun of a matter that is not hilarious at all.

His emotions, his thoughts, his dreams, his cares — does none of that matter to Niall?
Niall shifts uncomfortably, wads his trash up and stuffs it into the sack at his feet, adjusting himself against the window; the atmosphere is tight, is heavy, is darker than it’s ever been between the two of them, and Harry doesn’t like it, doesn’t like it at all, and there’s nothing he can say to make anything better.

“I didn’t—”

“Shut up,” Harry snarls, reaffirms his grip; the sun is shining bright through the windshield, and he fiddles about with the mess in the middle of the van, grabs a pair of shades and hides his eyes from the light, from the tension. “ Doesn’t matter, so just shut up about it.”

Niall gulps, turns away. “Okay.”
rock'n me

i went from phoenix, arizona
all the way to tacoma
northern california where the girls are warm
so i could be with my sweet baby

— Steve Millar Band, ‘Rock’n Me’

“Let’s go see the Grand Canyon before we get into New Mexico, Harry.”

It’s been a few hours since he and Niall last spoke, give or take a couple of minutes; it’s been tense, been tight, been troubling, but slowly the exhaustion and embarrassment has subsided, and Harry can breathe around the lump in his throat now, can think around the block in his mind.

It still doesn’t feel the same, though, like it did before, and it’s the nostalgia of it all, really, that makes Harry feel pink all over — if he could have only controlled his emotions, his need for a release, all would still be okay.

But he couldn’t. He couldn’t, and now he has to deal with this kind-of fallout.

“That’s a few hundred miles in the other direction, Ni,” Harry replies, points out. They crossed into Arizona about half an hour ago — Harry had to stop for a moment to walk the stillness out of his legs, to relieve his bowels of the McDonalds burgers and fries he devoured, and Niall did, too, and food has never gone through either of them that fast, oh dear — and have been going southeast since, opting to use winding roads through tiny, tiny towns instead of the raging bypasses and big highways because they want to skirt along the bottom part of both New Mexico and Texas. Why, Harry isn’t sure, but Niall wants to see the ocean in Texas and he’ll follow Niall anywhere. “I mean, I’d love to see it, yeah, but… that’s a bit far out of our way, don’t you think?”

And it is. It is.

But Harry will turn around, will drive in the wrong direction till the end of time, till the end of the line if Niall asks him to.

“It’s only the thirtieth of June, Harry,” Niall reminds Harry, and Harry’s never been the best at math, per se, but even he knows that there’s plenty of time for them to make a small detour a few hundred miles up north to check out one of the greatest attractions the colorful United States has to offer to the world — more than plenty of time, really; they could probably camp out at a resort or something for a few weeks and still make it to Atlanta on time for the concert. “We’ve got time.”

“We do.”

“If you want to drive up there, that is,” Niall says, and he’s timid, tentative, and the both of them have had a few hours to think about the earlier exchanges they shared, yes, but Harry is not sorry for the malice in his voice when he halted Niall’s words, is not sorry for the way he responded to Niall’s jokes, and he isn’t going to apologize for it, isn’t going to pretend to be guilty over it. Never. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

But I want to, and I want you to want to, too.

Harry sighs. “Look, it isn’t like I’m paying for this trip we’re taking,” he reasons, more for himself than Niall; after all, Niall’s inconspicuous wad of cash shoved in a dirty sock and hidden in the
glovebox is their sole source of sustenance on this half-assed ride across the country, and wherever Niall wants to go, Harry reckons he ought to just *suck it up, buttercup*, and get over it. Wherever Niall wants to go, Harry will follow. “If you want to go to the Canyon, we can go to the Canyon. The whole point in this trip is to see the things we won’t have time for when school starts in the fall, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Niall nods, licks his lips, and the flicker of his tongue has Harry gritting his teeth, has Harry clenching his fists, has Harry adjusting to keep the friction of his pants against his groin to a minimum, to the smallest of the small. There’s only so much he can take. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“So, to the Grand Canyon?”

Niall nods again, brings his feet up in the seat, settles against the headrest, and the smile on his face — it reminds Harry of that one Christmas years ago when he built a castle out of toothpicks and wrote a distasteful poem with awful grammar to go along with the work of art for Niall, and Niall just grinned from ear to ear with a dazzle in the corner of his eyes as he pulled out Harry’s handmade, hand painted birdhouse.

It’s the same one. *It’s the same one.*

Everything’s going to be okay. Yeah — yeah, everything’s going to be just fine.

- 

“I stepped on a snake.”

“What?” Harry furrows his brows, turns to look at Niall; the sun is on its indolent way to set in the west, up above and slightly to his left, kind of obscured by fluffy clouds that are similar to fresh marshmallows right out of the package, and it shines just right, just enough to illuminate Niall in a pretty gleam of light, and he looks like a wayward angel, like a celestial being whose path has been tangled in the webs of time for years because of all the people he has enchanted with nothing more than a look of vital love. “What’d you say?”

“I stepped on a snake,” Niall repeats, walking hurriedly toward Harry on wobbling legs, on shaking knees, and he looks kind of like the ten-year-old kid he used to be, the one Harry coaxed into jumping off the diving board on the first day of summer with the promise of buying a hotdog if he could do a backflip without losing his shorts in front of Peggie Ann and Chelsea. “I stepped on a fuckin’ snake, man.”

That ten-year-old kid did it, too, and Harry was out five hotdogs — condiments and all. Niall almost ate the public pool out of pickle relish that year; Harry will never, ever forget it — especially when Gemma was coerced into being the lifeguard for the month of July and she was able to get both Harry and Niall in for free.

They had too much fun that summer.

“Well, what kind of snake was it?” Harry asks, obscuring his laughter with a cough, with a sneeze as he kicks at a loose bit of dirt gathered next to the trash can he’s stood by.

“I don’t know,” Niall replies, rushed and thick; his hand grips Harry’s shoulders, squeezes with the same strength Harry used to fist his cock last night — *don’t think about that don’t think about that don’t think about that don’t think about that* — and Niall’s afraid of snakes. Holy shit, Niall’s afraid of snakes, and Harry forgot. “It was a fuckin’ snake, man. I caught its tail, and it took a strike at my
foot before it slithered away.”

And how could Harry forget that Niall has a fear of snakes especially when he, Louis, Liam, and Greg spent money on a pet garter to slip in to bed with him a few years ago during Christmas break? Oh, boy, that’s one night Harry will never forget no matter how much time passes, no matter how fuzzy the edges of Harry’s memory become — Greg tripped over Niall’s Gibson that was laid out on the floor, which caused a string of events that included Harry pissing himself with laughter, Maura phoning the police in the middle of the night, Anne administering CPR on Gemma from giggling so hard, Greg getting a broken and awfully-bloodied nose when Niall threw a lamp at him that knocked Harry to the floor as well, Liam falling over the balcony in an attempt to avoid the wrath that was Niall Horan because he “had nothing to do with this, don’t throw that trophy at me” and landing on the trampoline below and nearly ripping the stitching, and Louis literally clogging the toilet up so horribly it overflowed in his haste to hide from Maura and Anne’s wrath since he was the mastermind of it all.

All of that resulted in them losing the snake, too.

Her name is Sally, by the way. She likes long, strolling slithers in the attic and laying in the ceiling tiles, catching mice and other small, edible things, and sometimes, in the winter when she’s too heavy from the rodents she’s devoured, she’ll fall through and land somewhere in the house, which causes a chaotic chain of events that Harry always, always, gets dragged in to no matter where he is.

“For somebody deathly afraid of any kind of snake, you didn’t make so much as a squeak of noise at stepping on one.” Harry raises a brow, gives Niall a questioning look as he steps close, as he knocks their shoulders together in a brotherly bit of jovial teasing. “What gives?”

“There was a cute girl in front of me at the restroom,” Niall replies, shrugs. “Braids like chocolate, thighs that could squeeze my head so good while I’m between her legs, smile that was sticky from a red snow cone she gave the little kid she was with. I can’t let her see me scream. I have a reputation to uphold.”

Harry rolls his eyes, but — but that kind of stings, oh dear God that stings. And it’s got no reason to sting because Niall isn’t his, isn’t his, no he is not, and he has no claim over Niall even if Niall were his, you know? Harry isn’t possessive, isn’t jealous, has never been in a relationship, platonic or romantic or somewhere in between, where he gobbled up complete control of the other person; he doesn’t like the pretense that you are a weird kind of person of authority over another when two people in a relationship — or three or four or five or however many is in a single relation; he’s not judging, but he reckons a bed that’ll fit five grown adults comfortably is outrageously high — unless you are an adult and the other half is your child, is somebody you’ve cut to model after yourself.

But it stings — it stings because Niall made fun of Harry for tugging one out at the thought of him, and yeah, maybe it would be sort of comical if it were a different situation, but it isn’t, dammit, and Niall should not be catching a few laughs at the expense of Harry’s fragile, sensitive ego.

Harry would never, never ever do that to Niall.

He can’t say that, though. Harry can’t say what’s on his mind — not right now, not tonight, not tomorrow. He and Niall are only just now able to look one another in the eyes after their dispute in the vehicle; Harry doesn’t want to mess that up, reckons it’s best to keep his mouth closed till it all blows over.

And it will. Blow over, that is.

(Harry just wonders if there’s going to be any actual blowing as the thing blows over.)
“Oh, man, just wait till I tell her the story of you shitting your pants when Sally fell through the ceiling in the kitchen and landed in your plate of spaghetti that one time Greg brought us all over to cook,” Harry replies, smirking. “That’ll definitely knock her idea of you down a few pegs since you ain’t gonna tell her the truth.”

It stings — it stings, it burns, it simmers, it blisters, and Harry’s thinking about blowjobs, thinking about Niall down on his knees with pretty carpet burns on his naked skin and a fucked-pink mouth that’s smiling so gloriously beautifully, oh God oh God oh God, but he’s still Niall’s friend, still Niall’s best friend first and foremost, and this thing that’s happening deep in his gut, that’s swimming deep in his heart, that’s dancing deep in his soul, that’s warring deep in his mind can’t come between their bond, can’t come between the memories and the promises and the mysterious and the swears they’ve created with one another through the sticky years they’ve been two halves of the same troublemaking whole.

Nothing can. And if Niall wants to joke, then Harry’s going to joke with him because they’re friends above all else.

_Brothers._

And brothers don’t think about fucking each other.

Well, most of them don’t, Harry reckons, and for those who do — well, you do you, really, and live your life the way you want it to be lived; kudos for keeping it real, for sure, but that’s not for everyone.

“She’s so much fun convincing both Anne and Maura that Niall was feeling the very messy aftereffects of one too many burritos from Taco Bell after a particularly rowdy football scrimmage the day before in the town over and not something else. Harry thought Louis was going to cry with having to hold it all in. And Liam — poor Liam. They’ve corrupted him horribly, but he’s taking the stake and running with it like he was mad to be a king in ripped up jeans.

Niall scoffs. “You pissed your pants the first time Lou brought over a bag for you to try.”

Harry blanches. “That was my first time, and we were fifteen-year-old kids,” he says, squeals, and his voice sounds a bit too pitched high for his liking. “And my mum was downstairs and I thought she was going to come up and call the cops on me or somethin’! It was like she was watching over my shoulder the whole time!”


“We fit quite well together, don’t we?”

Niall rolls his eyes, snorts out a noise that sounds sort of like a laugh, but Harry isn’t going to chance
the probability. “Oh, fuck off and watch the sky for a moment, pissy pants.” Niall slaps him upside
the head, upsetting the fedora he borrowed — stole, but it’s not like he’s never had anything taken
from him — from Gemma. “This is the nicest view I’ve had in a while, and I don’t want your mouth
to ruin it.”

Harry grunts. “Fine, shithed.”

Niall’s right, though — this view, this saturated, dripping testament to natural and untouched beauty?
It’s nice. Very nice. There’s so much space, so much color, so much earth and water and air and
detachment just stretching, just breaking and bending and behaving and being in its own way, in
the way it wants, so loose and free and liberated, so redeeming and riveting and releasing, so bright and
brilliant and brazenly dazzling in a sense Harry’s never witnessed before; there’s a cluster of people
all around, snapping photos and popping gum and screaming for total obedience of the little ones
parading around with cheap memorabilia from the gift shop they passed by, and it just kind of fades
away for a moment, essentially leaving nobody, nothing, in the world but Harry and Niall, side by
side, touching, grazing, caressing, glimpsing how it could be, how it should be, and the fire in the pit
of Harry’s stomach matches the red of the clay beneath their feet, matches the whipping heat of the
wind at their backs as it scorches a tattooed slew of promises that run deeper, darker than a simple
display of reverence on skin.

He reckons he can stand right here with Niall at his side till the sun blinks out and falls away.

Forever doesn’t last, *damnit*, and the sun didn’t blink out, didn’t fall away in a volley of screaming
color, but Niall got hungry, got tired, got iffy about all the apparent snakes slithering about, and after
a debate — an argument; it was a heated, heavy argument no matter what Niall insists on calling it
that resulted in Harry having to pull over on the side of the ride and get out of the van to take a walk
for a few minutes to clear his head of Niall’s total ignorance — the both of them decided to catch a
bite at a local burger joint with a neon sign that stood out among the rest of the restaurants on the
street (Harry can feel the heart attack crippling him already, but that barbeque quarter pounder was
too damn good, and Niall seemed to really enjoy the four little — big — steak burgers he ordered,
too, with a side of Texas fries drizzled in melted cheese and spicy chili and warm jalapeños) and
-crash in a motel with great rates, great parking, great rooms.

However, the only problem with the great rates, great parking, great rooms is that — well, it’s that
the only available rooms left only have one bed, which is why they’re hardly ever booked unless it’s
by kinky couples or horny kids or cheating spouses or whatever else, and Harry was too full, too
heavy on his feet to think about loading up and driving somewhere else and Niall agreed with him on
that part, too.

Niall paid, and they grabbed their stuff out of the van, tugged it up the stairs — “the fuckin’ stairs,
man!” — and hauled it in their one-bed room where they stripped, waving off much needed showers
for the impending morning that’ll roll around in a few hours, and fell into bed in nothing but their
drawers, ruffling the duvet with their twisting legs till it fell over the side and gave way to silky-soft,
moon-like cool sheets that dragged against Harry’s skin so delicately, so deliciously that he was lured
into a bout of sleep just as the watery sun as it slinked to rest for the night.

But he wakes up a few hours later, irritated and wet and draped in a sweaty sheets that melt his skin
against Niall’s; the lights from outside are shining in through the pearl-like curtains neither of them
pulled in their haste to sleep, and Harry groans, rips off the blankets and juggles to his feet and strides
forward, closes the shades till only a bit of luminosity is able to slip through.

He turns around, yawns hugely, gruffly, and rubs the hard palm of his hand over his face, clearing
his eyes, and he heads to the bed, but stops in his tracks when he sees Niall on his tummy, bathed in natural and artificial light; his hair is messy, sticking up in brown-tipped blond spikes, and his shoulders are dimpled and his arms are underneath the pillow (he stole from Harry, little shit) and his back is arched and his legs are spread and his feet are tipped off the edge and his skin looks like a fresh canvas ready to be worked over by the paint that is Harry’s lips, by the charcoal that is Harry’s fingertips.

Oh, God.
night moves

we weren’t in love, oh no, far from it
we weren’t searchin’ for some pie in the sky summit
we were just young and restless and bored

— Bob Seger, ‘Night Moves’

He’s hard.

Again.

Fuck.

He’s hard again — hard, like, rock hard and stone stiff and hurting from the need to get off, and his mind is conjuring up images of Niall as bare and as naked as he was the day he was born, of Niall on his knees, of Niall on his tummy, of Niall with his legs spread and ass up and hole wet in preparation for Harry, oh God, and it isn’t like Harry’s abstinent, isn’t like Harry’s been going through a dry bout, isn’t like Harry’s sworn off sex till he meets the person he’s going to settle down with.

His refractory period is only a few moments, yes — something that startled him as well as the girl he lost his virginity to, as well, and he’s just decided it’s because he’s so readily attracted to people of all shapes, of all colors, of all sizes, and he falls in a deep infatuation everyday with somebody new on top of all the others he was already crushing on — and he tugs one out at least once a day (sometimes twice, and three and four and five and six times, too, because he gets going like no other and orgasms are an easy way to clear his mind and relax his body) and this shouldn’t be happening.

This shouldn’t be happening, this shouldn’t be happening, this shouldn’t be happening.

Niall is his friend, his best friend — hell, the two of them were able to score the same classes with each other the last two years of high school because “they’re a packaged deal, closer than brothers and thicker than thieves,” and people found it easier to deal with the two of them at the same time instead of the both of them separately.

Niall is his best friend, and this shouldn’t he happening.

It is, though. Fuck if it isn’t — it is, and Harry doesn’t think he’s got enough strength, enough will inside of him to stop it.

He doesn’t even think he wants to stop it, either. He’s felt this way before — so heated, so heady, so amazed and enthralled and astonished and riveted and aroused and out of control — but it’s never been so strong, never been so very much there and persistent and all-consuming in a sense that it’s all he can taste, all he can feel, all he can touch, all he can see.

It’s everything. What he’s feeling right now, who he’s feeling it for — it’s everything. That’s the only way it can be adequately explained.

But maybe it’s because he’s easily stimulated, easily turned on; he doesn’t need visuals, doesn’t need movies because he can think of a gentle slope of a shoulder, can think of a hard line of clavicle barely hidden but a pretty colored shirt, can think of a dimpled spine and be half-hard and itching, craving for touch, for hands and fingers and wet, wet, wet slick that leaks from his tip, that spreads along his length, that soils the sheets he’s sprawled out on.
(He’s discovered that it’s loads easier washing a towel instead of his sheets over and over and over, and he now spreads one out beneath him when he’s ready to come, when he’s ready to arch into his palm as his oversensitivity causes little squirts, little pulses that are bracketed with clutched gasps and splintered moans that reverberate wildly off the walls that are clouded with yellow light, with blue light, with no light.)

(He reckons his mother appreciates his chivalry, as well; who said it was dead?)

Ha. *Fuck.*

It’s not funny, though. He’s not entirely sure why he’s finding humor in this situation, but not laughing seems to take some of the color out of life and he doesn’t know what he would do if everything were slathered in drab blacks and whites and grays.

“Shit,” he says, curses; he rubs one hand over his face to clear the thick sleep out of his eyes — he’s wide awake now, raging hard and ready to roll — and there’s definitely no chance of him getting anymore rest till he takes care of his… problem. “Shit. Shit, fuck, *shit.*”

If he can, that is. This problem stems from Harry’s restless, relentless inability to not find Niall attractive, to not think of Niall with wet lips and red eyes and uncontrollable spasms, and that’s got him going crazy.

He wants to ravish Niall in the most thorough, innocent sense — Harry wants to touch every single part of Niall’s body to hear the noises he would make, wants to kiss Niall’s mouth till neither of them can get the taste of each other off of their tongues, wants to put his chest next to Niall’s and fall asleep to the repetition of the steady thud-thud-thud that proves to Harry that Niall’s just as alive as he is.

Is it a problem, though? Being attracted to a person of your own gender — being attracted to anybody of any gender is beautiful, is perfection in a world full of messy misconceptions of excellence. It’s one of the few things in life that you can’t choose, that you can’t control; like your family, like your body, finding someone attractive and wanting to pursue a relationship with them — whether they be black, white, red, brown; whether they be gay, straight, lesbian, bisexual; whether they be Christian, Catholic, Muslim, atheist — is a *beautiful thing.*

Harry believes in God; not traditionally, no — he’s taken things from Christianity and Jewism and Buddhism and others, too, to define his personal religion, and while he’s nondenominational he identifies as a Christian the most to ease the thought of others’ offending him should they say or do something that goes against his beliefs (he’s a nice, civil person like that, and it’s hard to offend him because he respects others’ opinions as long as they acknowledge his) — but he believes, and that’s enough for him. He believes in God, believes God gives you the choice to be successful, to be happy, to be healthy, to be kind, and that free will is inspirationally uplifting when you’re down, when you’re out, but not having to choose, not having to make a decision sometimes feels better than having the ability to choose.

Not having a choice, surrendering the weight of decision to somebody else, to something else? That’s wonderful, too.

Submitting, yielding, allowing the powers of somebody other than him to dictate what he does feels good, too.

(In a roundabout way, he’s just realized he’s a part-time submissive. Part-time because he likes to be dominant, too. Whoa.)
He groans, shuts his eyes; he brings his hands up, fists the hilt of his frustrated dick and squeezes, squeezes, squeezes; he sees stars behind his lids, and they’re all the colors that are in Niall’s voice, that are in Niall’s smiles, that are in Niall’s way of being, and he grunts as he flexes his fingers, pressing just enough to ease some of the burning ache that’s lighting his body on fire.

“Oh my God.”

He opens his eyes, stares at Niall’s plump rear, imagines how enticing it would be to kiss his way across both cheeks before he nuzzles into the tiny, tiny hole that he can’t wait to be inside of, holy shit, and runs — runs like he did around the bases when Louis would hit a dinger to get all the boys over the plate, runs like he did when Liam would throw a Hail Mary at the end of a particularly rigorous meet that would tie the game for a bout of OT that they always came out victorious in, runs like he did when Niall would get a steal that resulted in a two on one play that could be converted into three points if they needed the field goal to pull ahead — to the bathroom, shouldering past the half-closed door till his bare feet are on the cold tile and he’s leaning against the walls and his underwear is in a ball at his ankles and he’s got a hand full of saliva ready to tug, ready to pull, ready to rub till he’s crying with oversensitivity and messing the sandy-colored floor with his cum.

The first touch is at the base, and it makes his legs shiver, shudder, and he’s slamming his free hand out and smacking the wall to hold himself steady as he tugs upward, spreading his spit along his length till his skin is wet enough for sensual friction that doesn’t drag uncomfortably.

Once he’s at the tip, he moves the pad of his thumb into the slit, hissing a hot breath through his clenched teeth; he drags his blunt fingernails along the vein on the underside of his cock, digging in with just enough pressure to make vivid stars burst around him in a volley that puts even the brightest, biggest fireworks to shame.

“Oh — oh my… my goodness,” he whimpers, humming as he follows along the vein, over and over and over till there’s a dollop of creamy precum at the tip, a stark whitish contrast to the angry redness of his prick; he brings his hand up to the head, dips into the slit — sweet heavens, it’s never felt this good before and it’s nearly driving him up the walls — and smears the grainy stuff along his shaft, leaving it sticky and wet, wet, wet. “Holy shit.”

He shuts his eyes tight, tips his head back; he’s hot, and the tense air in the bathroom feels good on his heated skin, and he grins, smirks at the differences in sensation, at the burning and the cooling. He licks the sweat off his upper lip, and it’s just as variegated as the pleasure, too, salt and sweet mixing into something so yummy, yummy, yummy that has him exploding on the inside wondrously.

Pulling the foreskin back and pressing his finger more firmly into the leaking slit at the top, he drags his palm up and down, up and down, up and down as much as he can while sensitizing the tip till it’s a painful sort of pleasure that sends knife-like shivers along his spine; his body lurches forward, knocks into the wall with a loud bang that stings the quiet air with muffled electricity, and his knees threaten to give out, and the noise that’s ripped from his throat is contorted and choked off, bleeding into the walls and echoing around the bathroom like a chant, like a mantra that’s palpable and makes his skin stutter with heavy gooseflesh that softens and wrecks his system all the more.

Oh yes oh yes oh yes oh yes oh yes oh yes.

His mind is a mess, full of colors and easy apparitions of flavorful sensation; he feels the air on his body, feels the heat of his blood, feels the strained breath in his lungs, feels the chill of the tile under his feet, feels the rush of please please please please on his tongue as it thickens and slurs his starched words, his wailing noises.

He’s susceptible to everything — everything, and nothing all at once, and —
“Harry?”

― and Niall’s found him out, holy shit.

Holy fucking shit.

“Niall?” Harry’s voice is a high-pitched screech that burns his ears; he stumbles backward, trips over the tangle of his boxers at his feet, and falls, slamming his rear on the toilet (he’s entirely too happy to recall, at the last minute, that he put the lid down before he tucked himself in bed because he’s not too keen on splashing into the cold water). “Niall, what are you doing?”

Niall yawns, brings both hands up to rub at his eyes; his fists are balled and his face is red, blotched here and there with different colored little marks from sleep, and he looks more cute, more adorable, more cuddly than sexy, than fuckable, than sensual, and Harry’s emotions are all over the place and they’re screaming for him to do something, do something, do something.

But he doesn’t know what to do — doesn’t even know if he should know what to do. He’s jerking off for the second time because of his best friend in the same amount of days, and… and he doesn’t know what to do because he’s never been in a situation like this before.

It’s that simple, even though it’s the most complicated web of colorful deceit he’s ever seen.

“You were being loud,” Niall answers, whispers, and it clicks in Harry’s mind then, and he turns pink with a blush that floods over his entire body; on a whim, he attempts to be modest, turning his legs to the side and hiding his crying cock from Niall’s unashamed gaze. “And sayin’ my name again, too.”

Oh.

Harry gulps, blinks; the rush of mortification that drives through his body nearly outweighs the arousal for the young man standing in front of him. “Niall, I —” he begins, slacks off once he realizes he has no idea where to go with it. An apology wouldn’t change anything, and Harry’s not sure if he wants to say sorry because he isn’t sorry, per se, for wanking off to his best friend. He’s only sorry because he got caught, and Gemma always told him it’s better to ask forgiveness than permission. “I —”

“Don’t stop,” Niall interrupts, and his words are garbled with sleep, thick and heavy and turbid, and Harry’s hard-on rages with the need to get Niall’s innocent mouth around the head, suckling and slurping all of Harry gives him. “Keep on goin’.”

Harry blinks again, subdued and stubborn. “What?”

“Keep going, H. Don’t stop ‘cause I’ve come in to watch — you and I have pulled together enough, and I’m not seeing anything I haven’t before.” Niall’s lips quirk up in a tired smirk as he crosses his arms over his chest, leans his shoulder against the doorframe as if he’s trying to get comfortable for the show he’s asking Harry to put on. “Do it the way I like it.”

The strain in Harry’s thighs loosen, and his legs fall apart slightly; the room is noticeably hotter than it was a moment ago, and Harry blames Niall’s tender smile for it. “How — how you like it?” he stutters, repeats, tries to understand just what is going on.

This situation is madness. He’s jerking off to Niall (again) and Niall’s caught him in the act (again) and now Niall’s asks Harry to… to continue to tug one out right in front of him.

What the fuck?
“Yeah. Do it how you know I like it.” Niall nods firmly, once, and Harry feels the level of total expectation weighing on his shoulders, but his cock has never been this hard, never been this wet, and it’s all Niall. “Squeeze the base, rub your balls, use your precum as lube to jerk off. Do it how I like it.”

Oh, Harry is red, burning hotter than the sun, than the surface of Venus. “Niall —”

“C’mon, H,” Niall prompts, pouts — and then he’s laughing, and it’s a gentle chuckle of release; it cuts through the tension, mends all the snapped pieces in Harry’s mind and heart and body, and Harry’s captivated, enamored by Niall’s ability to make everything immensely better than it was before. “Do it. Do it for me, please. I wanna see how long you can hold off with me watching.”

Harry nods — oh my gosh oh my gosh oh my gosh — and spins on the toilet seat, facing Niall head on; his legs are sprawled, knees knocking to the side, and Niall’s got total sight of everything, everything, he wants Harry to do.

“I’ll do it.” Harry nods again, proving to himself just as much as Niall what he’s about to do. “For you.”

Niall smiles, and it’s such a pretty smile, oh my God, and Harry’s shocked. His right hand grips the base of his cock tight and he digs his nails in the vein just enough to bring a cautious hiss from his lips; his left hand cups and fondles his balls, rolling them around in his palm and he shuts his eyes, tips his head back as he pulls upward slowly, slowly.

“Open your eyes,” Niall orders, a bit breathless; Harry does, slants his head to the side so he can see Niall, and Niall’s cheeks are red with something other than sleep and his eyes are bright blue beneath the dull lights, and Jesus wept, he isn’t going to last as long as he wants if he keeps meeting Niall’s worshipping, wallowing gaze. “Want you to watch me while I watch you.”

Harry careens into another fucking dimension at Niall’s panting request, scoffing exasperatedly. “Oh my God.”

“Not God, just me.” Niall giggles — fucking giggles — and Harry snorts a laugh, rolls his eyes, and the smirk that’s tilting his lips as he increases the pressure on his length, on his balls matches the swarming endorphins in his system. “You aren’t going to last long, are you?”

Harry shakes his head. “No,” he replies, whimpers; precum is dribbling steadily out of the tip now, and it’s enough slick for him to speed up as he continues to cradle his balls gently, tenderly. “But keep talking to me — please keep talkin’ to me.”

“You’re so pretty like this.” Harry grunts, jerks down, digs his blunt nails into his testicles for a bit of pleasure-pain that sets him on orange fire. “So spread out, so ready to come that your body is shakin’ with it.” Harry cries out, bucks his hips and arches his back. “I bet you taste so good, too, and I know, I know, you’ve ate your cum before and I know it got you hard enough to go again.” Harry murmurs something under his breath, a chant: Niall, Niall, Niall, NiallNiallNiallNiallNiallNiallNiall. “And when you come, I want to lick if off your hands ‘cause you love to share with me.”

And Harry comes at that, in consecutive squirts, one two three, that he catches in the palm of his hand; his body feels as if it’s been ruptured, and he’s bleeding out color, bleeding out pleasure and Niall’s the only one capable of putting him back together after he’s so completely, so wetly fallen apart.

Niall walks forward, kneels in front of Harry; he grabs Harry’s hand, the one with the spunk, and brings it to his lips. He opens his mouth, sucks on the palm of Harry’s hand like he’s a newborn
pursuing around for a mother’s breast, and Harry’s never seen anything so stimulating, so intoxicatingly erotic and beautiful that he’s speechless.

“Yummy,” Niall says, blinks upward and gives Harry a timid grin that deflects harshly with the dirty words he said no more than a few moments ago.

Good Lord, Niall’s going to be the actual death of Harry.

“Niall…” Harry breathes, trails off as he slowly blinks, as he slowly comes down from a sensitive high he’s never been on before. Everything’s so colorful and he can feel it all, can see it all.

“Just be quiet, H. It’s okay.” Niall stands, reaches for the towel rack over the back of Harry’s head and takes the cloth off; he turns to the tub, fiddles with the knobs, and wets a corner of the fabric before returning to Harry’s side, on his knees. He cleans Harry’s thighs and tummy first, caring and easy, and then moves to Harry’s hand, wiping off all the jizz he didn’t get with his tongue. “You good?”

Harry nods, reaches out and slips his fingers into Niall’s, clinging just as tight to Niall as Niall is to him, like the roots of two towering pines that have woven together over time. “’M perfect,” he says, smiles, and he’s sleepy, so soft and tired and sleepy. “Want me to do something for you?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Niall answers, and Harry isn’t going to, not right now, because Niall told him not to and Niall’s always, always right. “Stand up for me, yeah?”

Harry does so, taking his fingers from Niall’s and using Niall’s shoulders to balance himself as Niall moves himself on his knees, as Niall fixes his boxers and tugs them back up Harry’s wobbly legs, situating them comfortably; he leans in, presses his lips to the skin right above Harry’s bellybutton and stands afterward, and that part of his body has never been so sensitive before and he is reeling from it, wiping Harry’s wild hair out of his eyes before putting a kiss to Harry’s forehead.

“Niall?” Harry blinks. “Everythin’ okay?”

“Let’s go back to bed, Harry.”
bad moon rising

i hear hurricanes a blowing
i know the end is coming soon
i fear the rivers overflowing
i hear the voice of rage and ruin

— Creedence Clearwater Revival, ‘Bad Moon Rising’

When Harry wakes up the next morning, it’s slow and languid, indolent and easy and gentle, so gentle and lengthy and all-consuming in the best of ways; his eyes flutter once, twice, three times, and then his body curves, stretches on the cool sheets wrapped around his legs and lets out a mewl of pleasure as his muscles and nerves migrate and explode in a colorful volley of sensation over and over and over.

Perfect.

He sighs, makes a contented noise in the back of his throat; his tongue is thick and he knows, he knows, his breath is awful, is raunchy and smelly, and he feels a bit of drool dried and caked to the side of his face and his eyes are heavy with dried wetness (he’s not sure if it’s tears or allergies, and he doesn’t particularly care, either), but he’s warm and the tiny clock on the bedside table says it’s early still and he’s got no reason to worry about the ugliness of waking up when he feels so, so good.

And then the lecherous events of last night hits him, all of them, and he freezes, completely stills in a position that is far from the comfort he was feeling no more than a second ago. His eyes are wide open and he’s aware of everything — everything: the sheets against his half-naked body, the dim blue-gray light of dawn shining through the ruffled curtains as the world awakens outside of the motel room, the incessant tick-tick-tick of the tiny clock on the bedside table, the mounting heat of a person at his back.

Niall.

Oh, Niall.

In a fit of barely controlled hysteria that reminds him of a field of wildflowers in the summer sun, Harry turns, flips himself crazily like a fish out of water till he’s on his other side, facing Niall; his eyes are wide and the room is dull and dim, and Harry can see everything in the darkness — he can see Niall’s messy hair, he can see Niall’s blotchy face, he can see Niall’s creased skin where he’s been laying, he can see Niall’s crinkled forehead, he can see Niall’s crescent-shaped lashes, he can see Niall’s freckled nose, he can see Niall’s rosy cheeks, he can see Niall’s puffy lips, he can see Niall’s dimpled chin, he can see Niall’s broad shoulders, he can see Niall’s patchy chest hair, he can see Niall’s lean abdomen, he can see Niall’s bulging groin, he can see Niall’s thick thighs, he can see Niall’s long legs, he can see Niall’s socked feet.

And he’s beautiful. Niall — he’s beautiful, a true work of art in the most humbling sort of way. And it’s not in a conventional, traditional way, either — Niall isn’t the tallest, isn’t the biggest, isn’t the toughest, isn’t the broadest, isn’t the tightest; his muscles aren’t larger than life and his hair is greasy more than not and his chest fur is oddly patchy and his eyes are big and his nose is bigger and his mouth is little and his toes are shaped weirdly and he walks like a duck and his hands are clumsy and his hips are thick with a few extra layers of flesh and his shoulders have freckles and his teeth are kind of crooked and his tan is definitely uneven and his sense of style is out of this world, so much so
that sometimes even Harry’s confused and baffled by Niall’s frivolous tendency to be himself and nobody else.

But he’s beautiful, so beautiful. He’s beautiful because his voice cracks in the middle of a sentence when he’s angry, because his kindness to help others never fails to overwhelm the lackluster reputation he’s had since the start of high school, because his eyes grow larger than normal when he’s watching colorful fireworks streak across the dark sky, because his hand holds tight to those who need his strength more than he does, because he’s too proud to accept the help that he doesn’t think he deserves, because his curiosity for the small things outweighs that of the bigger, because his appreciation of the little man has never once faded in all the years he’s been struggling to step out of his brother’s shadow, because he can hold a grudge with an unflinching glint of stubbornness in his grins for as long as he deems necessary, because he took the blame for a nasty incident involving marijuana and the preacher’s daughter in the teacher’s restroom so Louis didn’t get expelled after having been warned multiple times, because he visits kids in the hospital even after he reached the minimum hours of community service required to be an officer of NHS, because he’s afraid of snakes and bugs and shady cats, because his smile makes other people smile, because he screams when he’s happy and whispers when he’s mad and cries when he’s upset and hugs when he’s joyous and rages when he’s determined and sleeps when he’s empty and smiles when he’s looking at Harry, when Harry’s looking at him.

Niall is beautiful because he’s Niall, and that’s it, that’s all it ever was. He’s got the heart of a lion, the soul of a warrior, the ideals of a king, the spirit of a fighter. It’s that simple.

“Niall?” he tries, calls, whispers in the quiet of the night; the fingers of his left hand reaches out, pushes through the brown hair that’s flopped into Niall’s face, and the tresses are soft, so soft, and Harry licks his lips so he can smile in the darkness. “You’re perfect.”

In every way, in every sense of the word.

“Don’t ever change unless it’s what you want to do.” Harry leans in, puts his mouth to Niall’s somewhat sweaty forehead, tender and timid; he decides in that moment that if he and Niall are to ever lock lips, are to ever tangle tongues in the delicious dance of fervid attraction and affection and arousal, he wants Niall to be completely, wholly awake. “You’re the last person in the whole wide world who isn’t afraid of how bright they shine in the dark. Please don’t ever be scared of the person you are.”

And yeah, maybe this is a mess, the biggest mess — maybe pining after somebody is one of the stupidest, most painful ideas a person could have in all their life. But it’s Niall, and it’s his colors, his brightness, and there’s no one in the world Harry would rather hurt over than his best friend. Niall’s the only one worth it all.

Harry’s body softens as he rolls over, aches as he settles into his previous position, and he arches a bit, moving till his back is flush with Niall’s front, till their sweaty skin is touching and touching and touching, and it’s a warmth, a heat at the top and bottom of his spine that spreads and billows like the furtive tendrils of a blazing wildfire in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of somewhere, and he’s taken away by his memories as he recalls last night’s events in vivid detail that are tinged in flames and blazes of glory of the hottest kind.

Niall was so demanding, so dominant; his orders were firm and stern, his gaze was reverent and expectant and relentless, and Harry was all too happy, all too enthralled to follow every single word that fell from Niall’s wet lips, that fell from Niall’s dirty mouth because he’s a good boy, because he wants to make Niall as happy as he makes Harry.

Oh, God.
And Niall was so gentle, so tender, so sweet — he cleaned Harry’s mess (with his mouth, for fuck’s sake, and Harry’s not entirely in the right position to be stalled out over the things Niall’s tongue can do, but he’s seen Niall in action and is only just now realizing how monumentally dazzling it would be to have Niall’s lips between his thighs in one way or another) and fixed Harry’s clothes and kissed Harry’s forehead and tugged Harry back to bed again, and the two of them lay side by side, on their backs, above the downy sheets, barely touching as sleep took them under quickly, swiftly.

Harry didn’t dream, not once, but Niall kept his pinkie finger locked with Harry’s for the longest time, and that’s sort of a dream come true.

And it’s that that thought, so pure and innocent and raw and intensely good, that soothes Harry back to sleep, back to basking in the abstract reality instead of starry-eyed dreams, where there’s colors and wide smiles and pretty blue eyes brighter than the sky lying in wait to be found on the biggest cloud in the world.

“Hey, H. It’s time to get up.”

There’s a hand on Harry’s bare shoulder, big and calloused, and it’s a touch that lulls Harry pleasantly along the clouds he’s floating on; he doesn’t budge, doesn’t move, doesn’t make a noise as he’s pulled from the bleary in-between of sleep and awake.

“We have to check out by noon and it’s almost eleven,” the voice — Niall, of course it’s Niall; Harry reckons he would know the way Niall sounds even after he’s been six feet under for decades — speaks again, and it’s a bit louder than the time before, prompting an annoyed groan from Harry as his eyes flutter once, twice, three times before settling for a half-there stare. “You can take a shower while I pack up everything, and then I’ll hop in for a quick wash and we’ll check out and be on our way, m’kay? We’ll even stop at Taco Bell to get you a taco for breakfast.”

Harry makes a choked noise and buries his face halfheartedly into the wrinkled pillow he’s got bunched up between his arms; the steady light streaming through the curtains now is bright, is brilliant, and it’s a bit too loud for him to handle at this very moment.

“Can’t we just stay another day, Ni?” he asks, kind of whines, and wraps himself in the sheets, tight tight tight, and rolls over, away from the blistering light shining through the curtains and tucking his face beneath his pillow, hiding away from the world around him. “We ain’t got no place to be for a while, an’ this bed feels way too good to ever leave.”

“Well, you’re going to leave it ‘cause I had to,” Niall replies, moves up and off the bed; the weight of his body is gone, and Harry feels kind of cold without Niall’s warmth at his side, but he keeps his thoughts to himself for fear that it will break his and Niall’s talkative camaraderie they didn’t get to relish yesterday because of nasty misunderstandings. “We’ve got a whole list of things to see before we head into Atlanta. There’s a few rivers in Oklahoma I want to float, and that’ll take the better part of a week if we hit it right. You and I have more things to do than just hike ‘cross country.”

Harry refuses to think, refuses to linger on the thought that last night’s extracurricular activities has changed anything between the two of them. He’s too happy, too light, too airy, and he isn’t going to let anything bring him down from the natural high he’s found himself on.

Besides, Niall’s acting as if everything is okay, as if everything is all right, and Harry isn’t going to make a fuss when none is needed.

It’s silent a moment, and Harry lets out a soft breath that puffs against the pillow, shutting his eyes
tiredly — but then there’s two hands grabbing his ankles under the sheet he’s intertwined in, and they’re jerking him from the bed, and he doesn’t have enough reaction time to think properly, to grab on to something to keep him still before he’s off the mattress and in the floor, laid out on his side with a smarting rear and carpet burns on his knees that sting just as harsh as his angry, hurt pride.

“Niall, what the fuck?” he yells, rolls over onto his tummy. “You asshole!”

“I did say you were going to leave the bed,” Niall retorts, and his words are broken by chuckles that ring out softly in the atmosphere, like the gentle waves of a song in the background of an intimate moment and Harry’s kind of fascinated by the sound in so many ways that he can’t understand, that he doesn’t want to understand. “I didn’t say it was going to be by your hands, though.”

Harry grunts, rolls over till he’s sat on his bum and he can see Niall properly; he’s dressed, Niall is, in a pair of jeans that match the whitish blue of the sky just before a total sunset and a black flannel that’s unbuttoned with the sleeves folded up to his elbows, and the stitching is pale purple and he kind of looks like the way a midnight rider should.

He looks good. Different, kind of badass-y with a hint of being a rebel without a cause, and the devil may care grin he’s got on his lips just adds to the effect he’s having on Harry.

And it’s a big one. Fucking huge.

“You’re the thickest idiot I think I’ve ever had the bad luck of meeting,” Harry quips, and it’s a lie — it’s the biggest lie Harry’s ever told.

“Did you mean to say I’m the smartest prodigy you’ve ever had the good fortune of meeting?” Niall smirks, winks, and oh God, he’s so pretty when he’s smiling, so breathtaking when he’s laughing. Harry wants to freeze time for a moment, wants to grab the closest thing that will substitute adequately for a pen and paper, wants to scribble and erase and sketch and doodle till he’s got the plains of Niall’s face, till he’s got the sloping curves of Niall’s shoulders imprinted on something that will last far longer than this impromptu road trip across the U.S. will ever. “’Cause that’s what I heard.”

Harry rolls his eyes. “Don’t be such a spaz,” he replies, snorts, and he’s never been one to use the slang he’s heard around town, around school, but sometimes — sometimes he just wants to be normal, just wants to be a kid from Cheshire who is out of his element in Los Angeles, and insulting Niall like any other “square” he knows.

“As if; keep dreamin’ on that,” Niall says, and he laughs — throws his head back, clutches his tummy, bends at the knees, and he’s laughing like a little kid, like a young boy who has just tricked his friend into hopping in the deep end of the community pool — and it’s all Harry can hear, all Harry wants to hear.

Niall’s beautiful. Harry’s known this for years, known that Niall’s beautiful, but it’s different — it’s different because he’s on his knees and Niall’s standing, because he’s looking on in awe and Niall’s rumbling with laughter that shakes his entire body as his eyes crinkle, as his nose twitches, as cheeks flush red with mirth.

Niall’s beautiful, always has been and always will be, but Harry’s seeing him in a different light, in a different reflection, and he’s surrounded by so much color that Harry’s almost blinded with the intensity of it all.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”
Harry’s broken from his reverie, from his thoughts; he slants his head, wets his lips to get rid of the dryness. “Like what?” he asks, puzzled and confused at the tight expression on Niall’s face.

“You’re looking at me like I’m a piece of art that you want to replicate in every form,” Niall says, sneers, and — and, well, he’s got a nasty attitude about it, and it burns Harry from the inside out in a horrible, horrendous way, but he’s not wrong. “Don’t look at me like that, Harry. Don’t look at me like that ever again.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” And Harry doesn’t. He gazes at Niall in all kinds of ways, each different from the last, and he can’t help the fact that when the world turns ugly, when the world turns dark, he just turns to look at Niall. “Did I do —”

“Be quiet,” Niall interrupts, orders, and his voice, his tone, his way of speaking — it’s so much different than it was last night, than it was just a moment ago, and Harry’s cold, so cold, and he didn’t mean to upset Niall, didn’t mean to dislodge the difficult balance they were able to find with one another yesterday after secrets were revealed and fantasies were lived. “Just take a shower, Harry, and I’ll pack, and — and we’ll be out of here by noon, okay?”

Harry nods, stiff and stony; his heart is hurting, his gut is churning, and he has no idea how he’s never going to look at Niall like that again because — well, because Niall’s slowly taking over his mind and he doesn’t want to fight it, doesn’t want to diminish its strength, doesn’t want to push it into the back of his head where it’s stored, where it’s defiled and only allowed out on the rare occasions he wants to remember a time when he was truly, severely, fiercely happy.

Niall’s worth it. Out of all the people in the world — the good, the bad, the mean, the sad; the liars and the cheats and the fighters and the lovers, Niall’s worth it. Niall’s worth pining over, worth fighting for, and he can’t stop, won’t stop, doesn’t even want to stop looking at Niall as if he’s Harry’s entire world.

He isn’t, by the way. Niall isn’t Harry’s entire world. His heart is full of people — Gemma, because she’s his sister and personal fighter; his mum, because she brought him into this world and she can take him out of it; the boys, Louis and Liam, because they’re the types of people who can go for years without talking and start back up right where they left off even though there’s no chance in hell they’ll ever go more than a week without seeing one another; Maura, because she’s the force behind Niall’s edginess; Greg, because he’s the reason Niall’s winning the battle of being his own self, and so, so many more — that he’ll never forget for as long as he lives.

His heart is full of places — Cheshire, a bit blurry around the edges from the age of being gone; LA, bright and sparkling but dim, dark compared to Niall’s eyes; the Grand Canyon, so vast and deep and endless in liberation, in freedom — that he’ll draw for his children when he’s older and has everything figured out.

His heart is full of so many emotions — anger, because he’s being told how to feel; lust, because he’s thinking of Niall bare and dirty with cum and spit and stickiness; disappointment, because Niall doesn’t feel the same away; elation, because he threw out the quickest runner in the state championship last year and won a ring for all the seniors he said his goodbyes to; bittersweet content, because he graduated and the people he’s grown up with won’t ever be in the same place at once again; fear, because he’s an adult with problems that won’t be solved with swings of a bat, with catches of a football, with steals on a court.

No, Niall isn’t his world — is far from being his world — but if Harry wants to treat Niall like he is, that’s nobody’s business except for Harry’s. He can fight and rage and barter and rebel, but at the end of the day his heart is going to win, and his heart wants Niall.
No matter what Niall says, he’s what Harry’s heart wants.

That doesn’t mean he’s what it’s going to get, though, and it’s that realization that makes Harry go cold.
should've been a cowboy
california's full of whiskey, women and gold
sleeping out all night beneath the desert stars
dream in my eye and a prayer in my heart

— Toby Keith, ‘Should’ve Been a Cowboy’

There’s a plentiful bag of double chocolate chip brownies Niall has stashed away in one of his suitcases he baked the night before he literally broke into Harry’s home — and why Harry never questioned that at the time is beyond him, but he’s always thought clearer with is mind soaring up high with the birds, really, and Niall better be glad Harry and Anne aren’t the type to press charges for breaking and entering — hidden under a pair of socks and tucked between a roll of new t-shirts and an unopened box of briefs, and they’re kind of hard, kind of crunchy around the edges and in the middle at not having been eaten in a certain amount of time, and Harry’s devoured four (and two bottles of water, as well) before he even begins to feel the mellowing effects of weed that’s sure to calm him for hours.

He’s about to be on his sixth now, after having licked his fingers from the gooiness of the fifth brownie, and Niall’s only had one opposed to Harry’s multitude but that doesn’t matter because Harry doesn’t share.

After a shower — after a scalding hot shower that left Harry with a raw redness to match his numb senses, his bare emotions and Niall with lukewarm water — Harry packed up the rest of the things Niall missed on his once-about, and the two checked out by eleven fifty-three and were tucked in and driving out of town by eleven fifty-nine, out of sight of the hotel and south, toward the Mexican border; they planned to skirt along the jagged edges, maybe dipping across here and there, on their way through Arizona and New Mexico, before hooking up north and crossing through the Texas panhandle and on into Oklahoma to check out all the places Niall wishes to see. Greg went to the state a few years back on vacation and came back with a stellar tan and a volley of stories that Niall has held on to for as long as Harry can remember.

And maybe that’s a bit too much, a bit too idiotic for the two of them, but Niall’s got ten thousand dollars and Harry’s got stars in his eyes that seem to have dimmed since their talk in the hotel room, and the both of them have a hot, hot summer to waste before the real world officially starts and they’re swamped with an outflow of life that they don’t have any time to relish the abraded, colorful emotions that they’re feeling right now.

There’s no point in not taking advantage of the freedom, of the time, of the liberation to focus on one thing at a time instead of twenty. Harry reckons it’s one of the best decisions he and Niall have ever made, if a bit half-cocked and more than a little brash.

“You know, we aren’t very far from Tombstone.”

Harry shuts his eyes, raises up his shirt to rub his tummy; he and Niall have been on the road for less than an hour, and since Harry drove most of yesterday it’s Niall’s turn to have his ass in the driver’s seat, and Harry’s enjoying being given the opportunity to get comfy — no shoes, no socks, sunglasses on, hair tucked beneath a hat to limit the slapping tresses on his face, jeans rolled up to his shins, shirt unbuttoned, feet perched on the windowsill as they roll and roll and roll through towns and cities that tell stories with lights and people and scars and places he’s never heard before.

“Like, the Tombstone? The actual, real-life Tombstone?” Harry opens his eyes, turns to face Niall;
Niall’s shirt is buttoned now, but the shoulders are a bit large and the extra fabric there is flapping in the wind and he kind of looks like a bird, kind of looks like he’s about to take flight — and holy shit, those brownies he inhaled are hitting him hard now, fuck. “With… with the outlaws and the ghosts and all that?”

“Yeah,” Niall confirms, nods, says around a bit of laughter. “The Tombstone, the actual, real-life Tombstone with the outlaws and the ghosts and all that.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Harry asks, kind of slurs, but that’s not his fault because his mind is trying to force his heart to stop its rapid, strong boom boom boom at Niall’s smile, at Niall’s bit of mirth, and really, he’s so so so pretty when he’s grinning, when he’s laughing, and he wants to tell Niall that horribly, badly, but Niall told him to not ever look at him like that again and Harry can’t help it and he’s of an opinion that Niall deserves to have every single gaze in the world on him (but Harry doesn’t share his brownies and he damn sure isn’t going to share Niall, fuck you very much; Niall is all for Harry to see, and nobody else is allowed to ever ever ever gaze upon the dazzling, delicious colors Harry’s painted with whenever Niall’s looking at him). “Why do I care ‘bout Tombstone? I passed history with a C, and that’s ‘cause Louis did most of the work.”

Niall shrugs, and whoa, Harry’s never thought a pair of shoulders could be so arousing, Good Lord. He’s fairly sure it wouldn’t be acceptable of him to pull his dick out at this very moment and have a third wank in honor of his best friend in just as many days.

“You were right, when you said we’ve got plenty of time to hang ‘round for a bit,” Niall replies, and what the fuck, he’s actually agreeing with Harry? “I mean, it’s only the thirty-first of June, and we’re making damn good time, and it’s a Wednesday, too, which mean people are working and going to church — which reminds me, I packed a Bible if you wanted to read up on all the passages Paul jotted down for us; I already have, and I think you’ll like Rahab because I do — and so that means there won’t be a lot of people in the way. So, what do you say — wanna check Tombstone out, see if it lives up to all the rumors?”

Harry blinks, slow, left eye an indolent second before the right. “Why are you being so nice to me?” he asks, and he’s surprised, proud that his words aren’t as crooked as the way he definitely feels.

“What are you talking about, Harry?” Niall snorts, laughs, and Harry’s as high as he’s ever been before, yes, but that laugh felt a little bit too forced to be real. Oh, well — let Niall hurt the way he hurt Harry. What goes around comes around, and all is fair in (love and) war. “I’m always nice to you!”

Harry frowns. “Well, yeah,” he acquiesces, rolls his shoulders. All the tricks, all the fights, all the double dates, all the pranks, all the smiles, all the frustration, all the hugs, all the memories — Niall’s nice, and he’s one hell of a good person, too, and he has a funny way of showing his appreciation for those around him, but he is nice, and Harry knows that, is more than a little touched to be given the treasure of seeing Niall at his highest and at his lowest. “But you weren’t this morning. You were mean to me.”

Niall sighs, exhales a sharp burst of air from his nose. “Harry —”

“You were mean to me this morning, Niall. Really, really, really mean.” Harry sneezes, wipes his nose, crosses his arms. “And you made me feel really, really, really badly, too. I should tell you no, should tell you that I don’t want to go to Tombstone with you to so you’ll feel bad like I did.”

“Harry,” Niall begins again, and his voice is careful, level, plaintive, and Harry isn’t a child, goddammit, but he gets his emotions, gets his thoughts across about the same way when he’s high and he doesn’t like the condescending tone Niall’s using with him one bit. “That’s different.”
“It’s really not,” Harry quips, and Niall opens his mouth to retort something in return (and it’s probably mean again, too, and Harry is sick of hurting even though Niall is still worth all the pain) but before he can speak Harry is saying, “But I kind of want to see the place, too."

Niall sucks in a breath, and it’s loud in the cab of the van even as Niall zooms through the tiny, tiny town they’ve found themselves in. “Really?”

“Only if you stop at the next supermarket we see. I want some chocolate, and pickles sound really good, too, and you owe me for being a dick.”

“If that’s all I have to do to make you smile again,” Niall muses, shrugs, and Harry’s heart pitter-patters like the rain on a metal roof in the middle of nowhere. “I don’t guess it’s too big of a price to pay.”

“Harry, no.”

“Harry, yes.”

“Harry.” Niall sighs, pinches the bridge of his nose and shuts his eyes in exasperation, and Harry’s a bit too apologetic and all he can do is smile sheepishly because Niall’s adorable when he’s disgruntled, when his cheeks are still flushed red from the heat. “Harry, come on. Please. I don’t mind spoiling you with all the food you want —”

“— but all of this is going to go to rot before you can eat it all,” Niall finishes, rolling his eyes at Harry’s innuendo, and that kind of blisters Harry’s pride because he thought it was a good joke, one of the better liners he’s told. “Crackers, cookies, Pop-Tarts — all of that is good, all of that will keep. But Harry — grapes and cherries. Really? And carrots. I know you, and I know you aren’t going to eat one single fuckin’ carrot ‘cause you puked for a whole weekend after Liam dared you to try some at summer camp five years ago.”

Harry frowns, furrows his brows and wrinkles his nose. “I thought that was Louis,” he replies, tries to recall all the memories the four of them made at football camp — Niall’s of a mind it’s nothing more than a summer camp with a renovated name to keep the youth from pestering the old on the streets; a harebrained idea, considering it’s not worked any, and Louis enjoys pulling pranks now just as much as he did five years ago and Liam is still the person who bails him out whenever he’s got himself in too deep — but his mind is nothing more than mush. Hungry, kind of horny mush and definitely hot, heat-wise, but still mush, in the end.

“No, Harry. Louis is the one who dared us to go skinny dipping in the lake by the coach’s cabins, and then took off with our clothes when we were out in the middle of the water and we had to walk back to ours as naked as the day we were born.”

“Oh.” Harry drawsl, elongates the word; his mind is blown, his eyes are wide, and he’s cursing his younger self for not appreciating seeing Niall’s bare body when he was given the chance. “We went skinny dipping.” He hums, absentmindedly reaches out and grabs a box of cinnamon graham crackers, tossing it in the cart while Niall’s preoccupied with scanning the shelf for a treat of his own. “We should do that again. Skinny dipping, I mean.”

Niall’s response is instantaneous, and it makes Harry grin. “No.”

“Now, why ever not?”
Niall glances over his shoulder, glares at Harry’s hand as he reaches for another box of cinnamon crackers. “You know why,” he answers, and his voice is strained, harsh and kind of mean, but Harry’s too apathetic at the moment to care because Niall’s words from earlier this morning have already scorched the nerves of Harry’s heart.

“Is it going to be like this for the rest of the trip?” Harry thins his lips, leans his hip against the cart and crosses his arms over his chest; he trusts Niall to keep it steady so he doesn’t fall over and knock anything from the shelves into the floor. “Are you going to keep me at a distance the entire way to fuckin’ Atlanta ‘cause you caught me jerking off?”

“To me,” Niall says, hisses, and his grip on the cart is tight, is white-knuckled and sharp, and it’s sort of funny, really, that they’re having this conversation in the middle of a small-town supermarket with a baked grandad in the aisle over and a young group of adolescents on the other side. “You were getting off to me, Harry. Again. It’s a bit unsettling to catch your friend masturbating because of you. You can’t blame me for being a little bit upset over it, can you?”

Harry blinks, takes a moment to weigh his options, and there’s so many it’s kind of hard to keep count of them all. “No, I don’t reckon I can,” he acquiesces, and Niall sighs, loosens his grip, but Harry is far from finished and he’s not got a white flag to wave — and even if he did, he’s not sure he would bring it out. “But I can blame you for being an asshole about it. You caught me, okay — you caught me jerking off to you again, and instead of ignoring it and letting me finish or asking me to stop, you told me to do it the way you do it for yourself so you could watch me get off. I can blame you for that, and it isn’t like you didn’t get something out of it.”

“I didn’t come.”

Harry scoffs, rolls his eyes; the fire on his skin, the flame in his heart is searing at apparently not being able to do anything sexually satisfying in return for the best orgasm of his life, but he isn’t going to show his weakness like that.

“You may not have come in your britches, but you damn you sure got off to what I was doing for you.” He levels Niall with an insensitive, challenging look, and Niall’s chest puffs a bit in stubborn anger, in hardheaded retaliation. “I know you well enough by now, and you can’t hide from me like you hide from everybody else.”

“Do you?” Niall questions, sneers. “Do you know me?”

“I thought I did,” Harry replies, and it’s a quiet murmur in the heat of the moment; he looks down, and Niall’s features soften delicately. “It isn’t my fault you did what you did, Niall. I know you think it was a mistake, and I know you don’t want to repeat it — trust me, you’ve made that loud and clear — and that’s fine, but me jerking off to you is no different than me tugging one out ‘cause of pinup I’ve got on my wall. That’s it — that’s all that you are.”

“A pinup,” Niall repeats, tone leaden with weighted disbelief and — and hurt — as his eyes narrow. “I’m nothing more than a pinup to you. Is that what you’re trying to tell me? I thought I was your best friend.”

Harry nods, slow and methodic; it’s okay for Niall to hurt a little bit, too.

“Oh, that’s rich, Harry.”

It’s a lie, though. Niall’s more — he’s so, so much more than a pinup to Harry, more than a naked sex-figure with spread legs and wild hair and a come-here smile that tingles the skin; Harry’s just as stimulated, just as astonished by Niall’s mind than he is Niall’s body. It’s easier, though, to pretend,
to lie, to fake it and categorize Niall with a pinup than deal with the somersaulting emotions and — and feelings he’s being overwhelmed with. It’s easier.

But Niall doesn’t fight fair, kicks Harry when he’s down, and Harry can play dirty, too.

“You are my best friend, but you’re acting like what happened last night is singularly my fault,” Harry reiterates, and the last remaining hints of a high is now gone; his tolerance for reefer makes him itch to have something stronger, but he doesn’t want to make that step. “I need you to shoulder some of the blame, too.”

Niall’s lips quirk, and it’s a half-smile, higher on one side than the other, that makes the acidic fire in Harry’s heart burn out. “I’m surprised you know words that big,” he points out, and things are better than they were before but everything is far from being okay.

“Oh, fuck off and find me some orange juice.”

Niall’s resounding laugh puts the quiet, timid silence of wide open spaces in the middle of nowhere with an abundance of glittering stars above to shame.

Harry can make do with this peace offering, this olive branch of trust and friendship and dependence. It isn’t what he needs, damn sure isn’t what he wants, but — but if it’s okay for Niall, it’s okay for him. And maybe he’s settling, maybe he’s bowing down when he should fight, but it’s a tough thought to understand, to consume, to believe; it’s a hard realization to accept that your best friend doesn’t want the same thing as you do, and this is just the first fight of many that are sure to come in the upcoming weeks.

And it’s okay. It’s okay because it has to be okay.

—

Harry sighs, spreads his arms out wide on the blanket Niall’s got laid down on the ground; he blinks, slow and thoughtful, as he watches the stars above flicker and glimmer and fade and glow, bursting and racing here and there in a trail of light that lives and dies in a matter of seconds.

After touring Tombstone — and putting a noticeable dent in all the food purchased at the supermarket — Niall drove a few miles east and found an unkempt road that led to a tiny clearing surrounded by trees on either side; it was Harry’s idea to risk a night in the van instead of hitting the hay in a hotel room (because his record of being able to keep himself under control while being so close to Niall in an enclosed room is practically nonexistent) and Niall seconded that notion, and besides, they’re only a mile away from a moderate-sized town should they run into trouble.

As long as they aren’t looking for trouble, though, everything should be okay.

“Did you have fun?” Niall asks, quiet and gentle; he eases down beside Harry on the blanket, moves close and lifts Harry’s head, curling his arm up underneath Harry’s neck and drawing his fingers through Harry’s sweaty, snarled hair.

“Yeah.” Harry nods, sidles up close to Niall’s side, and the heat of their bodies added to the humidity of the night makes Harry damp with some sort of driving desire and nervous need. “I had a lot of fun. Tombstone’s full of ghosts, though.”

“It’s called a ghost town for a reason, H.”

“Hmm,” Harry hums, turns his head to the side, buries his face in Niall’s bare shoulder; his skin smells like spice and sweat, and it’s a heady mixture that chokes Harry’s resolve, and he’s elated that
Niall decided to keep his pants on. “You aren’t wrong.”

Niall’s nails are blunt as they scratch along Harry’s scalp, brushing the knots from his hair and swiping it to the side, out of his eyes, and the tingles, the tight sensations of submission mingles with the stress of the day, and it all just melts away, decolorizing like the tail of the shooting stars above.

“‘M always right,” Niall quips, chuckles, and his shoulders shake with mirth that causes Harry to shudder, too. “Surely you’ve realized that by now. We’ve been friends for years.”

Harry rolls his eyes, turns his head and lays his cheek against Niall’s shoulder; maybe, just maybe, gazing up at the stars before they get too sleepy and crawl in the van to catch some rest will settle the electric inferno in Harry’s heart, in Harry’s groin at having Niall’s bare skin pressed against his in the most innocent, softest way.

“You are, huh?” Harry raises a brow in question, and Niall must know Harry so, so well, because he laughs as if he can see Harry’s face. “Give me one good example of you being right.”

“Well, I knew you would enjoy Tombstone,” Niall answers, and he isn’t wrong; Harry loved the history, love the feel of the town, and learning about the darkness that went on in the place before and after the infamous shooting still has the hairs raised on the back of his neck, but Niall’s presence is calming, soothing, and he reckons he’s got nothing to worry about when he’s got Niall next to him. “And I was right about that.”

Harry snorts, tugs his eyes off the sky, and he’s pleasantly surprised to see that Niall’s gaze is already on him, and the stars in Niall’s irises are prettier than the ones above. “You enjoyed it just as much as me,” he points out, quiet in the night; he’s afraid if he’s any louder he’ll break the peace.

Niall blinks. “I enjoyed you enjoying it more,” he replies, whispers, and the crickets have stopped their singing and the birds have ceased their chirping, and Harry swears he can hear the steady thud-thud-thud of Niall’s heart in the hot air between them. “Have you ever wondered what it would be like if I were to kiss you?”

Oh.

“Niall.”

“It’s just a question, Harry,” Niall says, as if none of this is effecting him: the close proximity, the tender touches, the heated atmosphere, the skin on skin contact. “Answer it.”
Harry opens his mouth, tries to force his tongue and mind to meet, to meld, but he closes it before he can form stupid words, and he just looks at Niall — looks and looks and looks till Niall’s blue eyes are more familiar to Harry than his own temperamental green, till Niall’s freckled nose is more familiar to Harry than his own crooked one, till Niall’s parted mouth is more familiar to Harry than his own salivating lips, till Niall’s body is more familiar to Harry than his disobedient own.

He stops staring, shuts his eyes in a hard blink that kind of stings; the colors that flash across his closed lids remind him of how sunshine makes Niall’s brown hair look golden, reminds him of how clear water clots on Niall’s long lashes, reminds him how grassy fields with blue bonnet flowers contrasts with Niall’s green-fleckered eyes, reminds him of how pure white cotton brings out Niall’s freckled tan, reminds him of how red cherries paint Niall’s lips darkly, reminds him of monarch butterflies are the inspiration for Niall’s styles.

“I can’t answer that,” he says finally, opening his eyes, breathless and hot, so hot and heated; Niall’s got no right to ask him that — Niall has no fucking right to start asking Harry if he has ever thought about what it would be like if he were to kiss Harry after throwing a fit in public over the fact that Harry jerked off multiple times to him. He has no right, and it isn’t fair — it’s not fair, not fair, not fair. “I don’t want to answer that.”

“Oh, c’mon, Harry,” Niall prompts, turns over on his side; one of his legs fold over both of Harry’s, and his knee is close close close to Harry’s groin, and it’s taking all of his willpower to slow the blood that’s rushing south because the last thing he needs is another erection brought on by Niall. “It’s just a question, and you and I are far from being chaste with each other, don’t you think? Just answer it.”

Harry shakes his head, hard. “No,” he says, spits, planting his feet and standing still as the roots of stubborn, emotional scarring dig deep. “No, I’m not going to answer it.”

“Why not?” Niall asks, frowns. His knee moves up, and — and he’s doing this on purpose, isn’t he; working Harry up only to let him fall back down with a cushion of accepting comfort? “It’s just a question.”

“It’s not —” Harry begins, but his voice is pitched high in hysterical resentment, and he stops himself from whining, from crying and sobbing his discomfort; his mind is fractured and the words balancing uselessly on his tongue are scorching in their torment. He clears his throat, inhales sharply, and starts over. “It isn’t just a question, Niall. It’s not.”
And you know that — you do, you do, you do.

“Harry —”

“No!” Harry shoves himself out of Niall’s half-hearted embrace, moving away and scrambling to his knees, staggering to his feet on the pebbled ground. “If it’s such a burning question and it really matters that much, why don’t you answer it? Since you know me so bloody well, I’m sure you’ll know just what I’d say.”

He wipes his nose — he’s not crying, dammit, but being surrounded by all the unadulterated nature is rousing his allergies, and if you believe that Harry’s got himself some oceanfront property in Arizona, too, that he’ll share — and pivots on his heel, making a beeline for the van, for privacy, for safety.

He’s never not felt safe with Niall, but now — now, when Niall’s aware and manipulating Harry’s emotions, he isn’t sure how he ever felt at ease.

But Niall is fast, wasn’t elected MVP of the state championship for basketball two years in a row for nothing, and is up before Harry can even make it a yard away; his hand reaches out, and he snags Harry’s wrist in a loose, butterfly-like grip, stilling his forward progress, and in some weird way, he’s able to spin Harry around without Harry really understanding what’s going on. Their eyes meet for a second, a millisecond, and Harry has just enough time to gasp before Niall’s jerking him into his bare chest, wrapping his arms around Harry’s shoulders and holding him close, against his heart as if it’s where he belongs.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” Niall says, whispers; Harry’s body is tense, is pulled tight and taut, and he can’t move, can hardly breathe with the pressure, the weight Niall’s putting on his shoulders, on his mind. Niall’s hair smells like strawberries and vanilla, and his neck is Harry’s favorite place to be. “I’m an idiot, a stupid asshole, and I’m sorry, Harry. I’m sorry.”

Abruptly, Harry’s body loosens and he slumps against Niall, bare chest against bare chest, and it should be nasty, should be disgusting as their sweat mixes, amalgamates, as their damp skin slides like lubricated limbs in a mess of passionate desire, but it isn’t — it isn’t, and it feels good, and Harry lets out a muffled groan of unabashed pleasure into the warmth, the musky heat of Niall’s neck as he shuts his eyes and just takes it all in.

“You can’t keep doing that, Niall,” Harry replies, bringing his hands up to slides his fingers through the belt loops of Niall’s loose, ragged jeans. He’s afraid, petrified of what he would try to do should he return Niall’s embrace in full, and this is as good as it’s going to get. For the both of them. “You can’t taunt me like that and expect me to be okay with it. You’re making a joke of me, and I don’t like it.”

“I know.” Niall nods, and Harry steps as close to Niall as is possible, aligning their bodies; they’re close to the same height, with Harry only standing a few inches above Niall, and the way they curl and push and mold and pull makes Harry shudder as goosebumps arise on his skin. He and Niall fit together so well, and it’s as soothing as it is absolutely terrifying. “I know, and I shouldn’t have done it.”

“No, you shouldn’t have,” Harry mumbles, moving his face till his nose rubs along Niall’s acute Adam’s apple, hard bump against hard bump, and Harry’s more emotionally turned on than he is physical. Wow. “It was a dick move.” You hurt me. Again. “And you should’ve known better than to do it. You know me, Niall — you do.”

One of Niall’s hands moves up, and his fingers dance through Harry’s hair, gripping it tight in a
clenched fist, and it kind of hurts, really, but Harry likes it. A lot. And why, he’ll never say, but he
does know, and it’s not really much of a surprise, either.

“It was. Especially with you… feeling the way that you are right now.”

Hmm. Is that an easy way of admitting to the both of them that Harry is nursing a killer crush, or is
that Niall’s refusal to accept that he’s the object of somebody’s complete, unbridled affection for
once in his life?

Niall’s fingers unleash Harry’s hair, and the palm of his hand soothes the itching burn from the pull,
makes Harry’s knees weak and unsteady.

“And I guess it isn’t really that big of deal, that you’re feeling something for me,” Niall continues,
and his words — they aren’t harsh, really, but they’re hard, and sharper than the tip of a blade, and
they cut into Harry, slice slice slice, and he’s bleeding everything out, emotions and thoughts and
dreams and promises, and Niall’s walking away from the mess he’s made because he can’t accept
that Harry has feelings for him that run deeper than that of a brotherly, familial bond. “You and I are
on our own, and we’re on the open road, and — and I’m the only person you see, the only person
you’re with, day in and day out, and it’s perfectly okay for you to feel something for me because it’s
not real. You hear? It’s not real, Harry. It’s just… You’re alone, with nobody but me, and that’s
making you feel things that you wouldn’t if — if Louis or Liam or… or hell, even Greg were here.
It’s not real, Harry, so it’s okay. You’re just… sort of using me as something to put your emotions
on, and that’s okay.”

But if it is real, it won’t be okay? Is that what Niall’s trying to say?

Niall’s ignorant — Niall is so fucking obtuse and close-minded if he really believes the shit he has
just said.

Harry doesn’t say that, though; of course. Instead, he says, “You’re right, of course,” just to make
Niall feel better even if it is at the expense of his own happiness, of his own comfort. Having
somebody tell you that your feelings for them isn’t real, isn’t tangible, is nothing more than just a
summer crush — it hurts. It’s as simple, as indefinable as that. Harry can’t explain, can’t describe it
any better, and he’s always had a way with words better than Niall ever has. “Just like you said.”

“Just like I said.” Niall grips Harry’s hair again, uses it as leverage to pull Harry’s face from his neck;
Harry blinks, opts to stare at the small, pinkish white scar next to Niall’s left brow instead of meeting
Niall’s relieved, fruitful gaze. “I told you I was always right, didn’t I?”

Does he have to look so damn smug about tearing Harry’s heart apart? Does he?

And then it hits Harry: Niall doesn’t know. Niall doesn’t even know because he’s too much of a pig-
headed, stubborn asshole to listen, to pay attention to what Harry’s trying to tell him, and if he
would, oh if he would, every cracked piece in his mind would come together, would stay together.

“Apparently you know everything, too.” And maybe it’s a little bit ugly of him, to grab Niall’s words
and mix them up and throw them back at him in a distorted ball of anger, but only a little bit. “You
ready to crash? I’ll take the front so you can have the back.”

“No. You take the back so you don’t wake up with knots in your shoulders from sitting up. I doubt
I’ll be in the mood in the morning to deal with your whining.”

Harry sneers, but masks it as a smirk. “How chivalrous of you.”

“Always,” Niall replies, laughs, and he leans forward, puts his lips to Harry’s temple in a tender, dry
goodnight kiss, and really, Niall expects the feelings Harry has for him to be nothing but temporary when he treats Harry as if he’s a porcelain doll. Pig-headed fucker. “Let’s get some sleep.”

“I talked to the lady behind the desk,” Niall announces, makes himself known; Harry raises his head, blinks away the water droplets that cling to his eyelashes so he can see Niall more clearly. Niall tosses Harry a fluffy, white cotton towel he held behind his back and Harry caught it, nodding his head as a quick thank you. “She said there’s not much to do in the town on a Thursday night, but that the hour drive a few places over would be worth it if we wanted to have a bit of fun before the day ends.”

Harry sighs, shuts off the water and stands straight, wiping his face; he’s just gotten out of a much-needed shower in the hotel room he and Niall booked an hour ago after they roused up a bit after noon from the makeshift campsite and the van began to cry with low fuel a few hours later, and he thought a quick shave might rejuvenate a bit of his dry nerves. He needed one, regardless, and the clean-shaven skin of his cheeks, of his jaw, of his upper lip makes him look even younger than he feels, and that’s a hell of a lot more than he would like to worry over.

They limped the van as close as they could to a station once it began to whine for fuel, and catching a ride the rest of the way, attempting to recall the limited Spanish they were taught sophomore year, purchasing a jug of gas, and making the five-mile walk back to the damned thing in the heat of day in fuckin’ Arizona took the better part of the afternoon — not to mention Harry’s rationed amount of usable energy; last night, after the halting talk he and Niall had, he lay awake, spread out on the bench seat, just staring at the stars out of the back glass and comparing them to the sparkles in Niall’s eyes, and no sleep plus a layer of stifling heat is not the best combination — and he had to all but beg Niall to stop at a hotel near the Arizona/New Mexico border after filling the vehicle all the way up.

And grabbing a bite to eat at a rundown pizza parlor, too, that made the best chocolate malts Harry’s ever had, which is probably the highlight of this trip.

(So far.)

Earlier, when he was undressing and waiting for the shower to heat up, he caught his reflection in the mirror and it was all he could do to not flinch, to not shrink away in misguided fear and confusion. He’s gotten darker already, just a bit, and his pupils are blown wider than average and his nose is tinged with red and his cheeks are pale pink and there’s deep purple bags beneath his eyes, and it’s a fright how quickly three days can change everything, really.

He’s tired. He’s exhausted, emotionally and physically and mentally, and his bones feel heavier than the sins of all the evil things in the world, and he just wants to rest. For one night, he just wants to take a break, take a breather, and rest.

But Niall’s wild, and a free spirit, one that can go for days without a break, without a recess, and that’s why he and Harry fit so well together, you know — Niall’s a rebel and Harry’s a cause, a loud reminder that life doesn’t have to be led in the fast lane.

Niall doesn’t listen much, though.

“Can’t we just stay in tonight?” he asks, mildly hopeful; it’s July first, and the days are considerably longer than the nights, and Niall’s a firm believer in not going down till the sun comes up. “We’ve gone nonstop for the last three days, and I’d like to get to bed before the ass crack of dawn for once.”

He drops the towel in the sink, reaches for the white t-shirt he’s got folded on the back of the toilet;
he tugs it over his head, adjusts his necklace and fixes the band of his boxers so they aren’t digging uncomfortably into the fleshy skin of his hips.

“I want to get drunk tonight, Harry,” Niall replies, and there’s a hint of barely-contained immaturity that makes Harry roll his eyes as he sits on the toilet and pulls his socks on. “I want to get fucked up.”

“You can get fucked up by yourself,” Harry says, suggests, and really, he knows it isn’t going to go over well with Niall. They made a pact before they took off from Harry’s house: where one goes, the other follows; they don’t leave each other alone for even a second while on the road, while in unfamiliar towns. Still, it doesn’t hurt to throw that up in the air. “Besides, we can make a quick drive down the road to a corner store and get you some liquor. We don’t have to go to a bar for you to get drunk, Ni.”

Niall grunts, moves forward into the bathroom, and it’s already hot enough in here without Niall being close to Harry, okay, and he has a feeling he’ll be suffering from a heatstroke by the end of this half-assed road trip across the country for a band if he doesn’t get any space now.

(He doesn’t want it, though. He wants Niall near, wants Niall here, and that’s just as bad.)

“We’ll stay in tomorrow,” Niall proposes, bending to a kneel so he’s looking up at Harry now instead of down, and Harry’s overly conscious of this position, yes he is, because he’s envisioned Niall on his knees more than once and if his heart is bubbling with messy need right now, he can’t imagine what it would be like if Niall were to actually bow to him, fuck. “I promise you that we’ll stay in tomorrow night if you come out with me today.”

Harry narrows his eyes. “You’ve got to swear,” he says, bringing his fist up in the air and holding his pinkie out for Niall to hook his own on. “You’ve got to pinkie swear to me that we’ll stay in tomorrow if I go out with you tonight.”

Niall grins, and oh, it’s the prettiest thing Harry’s ever seen, better than the brightest firecrackers. “Promise,” he swears, curling his finger around Harry’s, and — and it’s all Harry can do to not think about Niall curling his tongue around the tip of Harry’s prick.

*Dammit.*

“Get up and find me some jeans, man,” Harry scoffs with a forced smile, shoving at Niall’s shoulders till he’s standing, till he’s laughing as he walks out of the bathroom with an air of smugness around him that’s cold enough to take the heat of Harry’s recent shower away, leaving him a shivering mess of *something.* “We’ll leave as soon as I’m dressed.”

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On the Border is an aptly named bar on the Arizona/New Mexico state line, about ten miles north of the Mexican border, with a tall archway covered in flickering neon lights that make red and orange shadows dance across Niall’s devil-may-care grin as he grabs Harry’s hand and tugs him inside, ducking behind a pair of foxes with legs for days and racks to kill for.

Oh. Harry may be drooling already.

Inside, it’s everything Harry would have expected: there’s a bar directly in front of them, squared and long with thousands of bottles of liquor on floor-to-ceiling shelves spanning the wall behind it, and on either side are a multitude of tables occupied by unfamiliar people; to the right, there’s a pool hall with a few staggering players and to the left seems to be an entrance to a sort of backroom that’s
outlined in fluorescent purple light, as is the fluctuating sign above, and Harry’s jaw drops because surely — surely to God — there’s not a lot of scantily-clad women dancing naughtily on poles with lecherous smiles and devious moans of pleasure behind that door.

“Harry?” Niall nudges Harry’s shoulder with his own. “You all right?”

Harry gulps. He’s been in bars before — of course he’s been in bars before; Louis has a talent for talking his way into any situation, any time, and often Harry, Niall, and Liam were coerced (blackmailed) into coming along; besides, Niall’s got a talent for getting them out of most of the trouble they fall in — but never one with… with strippers, with exotic dancers.

Yeah, he’s picked up a few older women in the aforementioned bars — two, and he’s fairly sure one was his fifth grade social studies teacher, too, and that’s something only Niall knows — but this is different. This is so much different.

He can’t say he doesn’t like it, though. The idea of releasing a bit of frustration, of letting loose of a few hang-ups — he doesn’t want to go home with a girl he doesn’t know, doesn’t want to rendezvous in the toilets, but he does want to have an excuse for being hard that doesn’t involve the person right next to him.

“Yeah,” he replies, nods, turns to meet Niall’s eyes and matches the mischievous smirk tugging at the corners of Niall’s pansy pink lips. “Yeah, ‘m all right. Just… I’m just a little bit caught off guard, I guess.”

“You and me both.” Niall slings his arm over Harry’s shoulders, pulls their bodies together; Harry doesn’t expect it, and so he lurches forward, kind of, and his smooth cheek rubs against Niall’s prickly jaw, and oh, that’s a knee-weakening, heart-tugging, reducing feeling right there. *Undefined*. “D’you see those two women in front of us? You and I are going to go see if they’ll buy us a few drinks. I want to get fucked up and lucky tonight, and you are, too.”

Harry shuts his eyes, holds them tightly closed; the burn hurts almost as bad as the liquid coldness in his heart. “Okay.”

Because he’ll do anything for Niall — *anything* — and that’s starting to be a problem.
With a muffled, muted noise of sensation, of skin on skin and tongue on tongue, Harry falls over after the backs of his knees come in contact with the sofa — or, that’s what he thinks it is, at least, but he could be wrong. He’s had a bit to drink, and by a bit that means he’s fairly sure he and Niall emptied an entire keg by themselves, give or take a few pints, and he’s got a beautiful, full woman in his arms, on his lap, and — and yeah, fuck the sofa, if that’s what it is, but he doesn’t really care either way, for the most part.

He isn’t drunk anymore — Niall guzzled most of the beer while Harry opted to sip on his six, grinning sheepishly, hiding his discouragement, his chagrin as Niall talked up the two women who walked in before them just as he said he would — but his mind is frazzled, probably beyond repair, and he’s just kind of winging it now.

She — her name is Alma Jean, and she’s a twenty-seven year old preschool teacher with a baby boy at home with her brother and she’s celebrating her birthday with her best friend Delilah and she told Harry and Niall to call her AJ because she likes the way it makes her feel older than she is, but Harry kind of likes the way the two words roll off of his tongue, really, and he also isn’t in a mood to get that intimate with someone when he’s being… well, when he’s being intimate — laughs, giggles against his lips as she cards her fingers through his hair, scratching at his scalp and tugging at the long strands just the way he likes: hard and stern, but not enough to sting, not enough to bring more pain than pleasure.

And it feels good, too, to have a beautiful, plump woman on his lap, in his arms; her breasts are pressed against his chest and her hips are grinding at his own and he can feel her viscid wetness, her tangible excitement on his bare skin and it’s got him hard and her legs are squeezing his thighs in the way her cunt will be squeezing his cock in a few moments and she’s soft against him, so pliant and easy and sensitive and round, and it’s such a stark contrast to Niall’s hardness, to Niall’s stiffness, to Niall’s selfish thickness that skirts around the edges of Harry’s nightmares just as it forthrightly haunts Harry’s dreams.

Oh.

Alma Jean pulls away, meets Harry’s eyes with her big gray ones, and the smudged makeup around her lips kind of warms his heart.

“You good?” she asks, and her words are kind of slurred, kind of twanged, and most Americans have a different accent than him and Niall, yeah, but hers is one he’s never heard before and he likes it, thinks it’s cute and charming in a weird sort of way. “You all right?”

He blinks, takes a moment to himself. Is he okay? On the outside, yes — on the outside, he’s perfect; he’s ever bit of the virile young man society has decided for him to be, complete with hair and muscles and everything that fits into the clichéd model of the perfect teenager. But on the inside — on the inside, where it counts, he’s not okay, no, because Niall is down the corridor to the left, in a bedroom with a girl, with a stunning girl, and the fact that just last night Harry more or less confessed to Niall that he is overly attracted to him, physically and emotionally, kind of makes Harry mad, kind
of makes Harry hurt.

He doesn’t say that, though. Why profess to the entire world that he’s crushing on his best friend, that he wants to fuck his best friend, wants to pin his best friend down and go at it all night long? It’ll only create more problems, only add to the shit that has already been started because of the aforementioned situation, and it isn’t worth it.

Niall? Yeah, he’s worth it. Always. There’s something about him, something so real and raw and relentless that makes him worth everything. But — but the mess it would create to tell Alma Jean that no, he isn’t good, isn’t all right because his best friend is getting off with her best friend in the room over isn’t worth it.

It’s not, it’s not, it’s not.

He’s just going to… go with it. Yeah, that’s it — that’s right, that’s the thing to do: just go with it, just deal with it.

Wing it.

Yeah. Yeah, he’s good at that, and Niall — well, Niall’s a pro at not thinking things through, really, and he’s here and then there and everywhere else, too, and he’s got this ‘going with it’ down to a science, to an art.

All Harry has to do is pay attention to Niall. Easy.

(Because that’s all he does, you know. Pay attention to Niall, that is. And it isn’t like he can help it, either — there’s just something about Niall, okay, and it’s weird and it’s unique, and Harry doesn’t understand it, hardly comprehends anything that has to do with his best friend, but he likes it. He likes it, and when you like something, you look for it, and you look at it, too, and that’s what he does — he looks at Niall a lot, pays attention to Niall a lot. So keeping his eye on Niall to learn a few valuable things — yeah, shouldn’t be too hard.)

“Yeah.” He nods, smiles, lazy and slow, and slants his head to the side, peering up at her beneath his lashes; he brings his hands up, caresses them across her sides, mapping the soft contours of her body and curling his fingers in the gentle waves of her blonde hair. “I’m all right.”

She sighs, gives him a pointed look of gray fire that kind of reminds him of his mother, and — oh, yeah, she’s a mummy; of course she’s got the mother glare down.

“You don’t look all right,” she muses, combing her hands through his hair in the way his mum does, in the way his sister does, in the way Niall does. Sometimes. It feels nice; nonsexual, very relaxing. “We don’t have to do this, Harry. You know that, right?”

He does. He does, doesn’t he? He does know.

But — but Niall said, and… and maybe he doesn’t know. No, he doesn’t know, at all.

“Don’t feel pressured to have sex with me,” Alma Jean continues, and her tone — it’s accentuated in a different way than Harry’s, in a different way than Niall’s, and he reckons he could listen to her talk for ages because she’s soft on the consonants and hard on the vowels, and she’s got one of those voices that great storytellers have, that makes you stop in your tracks and turn around and sit for hours just to hear and watch that person speak. “You have every right to say no to me right now, just like I have every right to say no, too, but I’m not going to. I’d like to have sex with you, but I’m not going to hound you for it — if you don’t want to, then we won’t. It’s that easy.”
Harry furrows his brows, drops his head on the back of the sofa; he takes a moment to himself, draws in a stream of steadying breaths, and looks around. The place — it’s a flat, an apartment, and he’s fairly sure it belongs to Delilah; or, at least, he thinks so, but between attempting to drive the van back to the place with Alma Jean in his ear and her hand on his crotch, rubbing it to leaking hardness, as well as the image of Niall and Delilah in the back, across the bench seat as he knelt in the floor and hooked her legs over his shoulders before stuffing his face between her thighs and licking, sucking, lapping, snogging her to the brink of an orgasm, over and over and over, kind of fried his mind a little bit — and it’s homey, for the most part: the living room is small, furnished with a sofa and a chair and a television, and the kitchen is to his left, moderate-sized and dark in the dimness of the light being given off by the lamp on a tiny table next to the couch; behind him, there’s a door, and in front of him is the corridor Niall and Delilah disappeared down not long after the four of them braved the stairs and stumbled inside with kissed-swollen lips and reverberating laughter and touches that scald like the heat of the sun in the middle of the day on bare skin.

Whoa.

And he can hear the noises, you know — the telltale signs of sex, of fucking: whispered swears, swallowed moans, muted groans, gyrated springs, sopping wetness, wild abandonment as Niall uses his mouth and his fingers and his body to make Delilah come and come and come.

And Harry’s hard. He’s been hard, honestly, since before they left the bar, after Alma Jean and Delilah dragged him and Niall into a backroom but before Niall slipped half a dozen condoms in his back pocket while they were shoulder to shoulder, side to side, thigh to thigh, waiting on the girls to use the toilets and then come out to escort them to their place, and he’s fairly sure it’s because of Niall — because of Niall’s sticky, excited smirk, because of Niall’s sloppy, elated voice.

Niall’s happy, and when Niall’s happy — goodness, when Niall is happy, the colors of the world are just a little bit brighter, and they were blinding back at the bar, when it was just the two of them, and Niall’s shirt was ripped down the middle and Harry could see the bruising hickies and bites and scratches on his sensitive skin.

(Yeah, it’s because of Niall; after all, when Harry was presented with the image of Niall so sorely, so satisfyingly marked, his mind wondered a bit, and he decided that, if ever given the chance with Niall, he’ll go slow. He’ll go slow, he’ll take his time, and he’ll worship Niall’s body as if it’s a kingdom, as if it’s the promised land of milk and honey; he’ll kiss Niall’s feet and lick Niall’s knees and bite Niall’s hips and suck Niall’s nipples and mark Niall’s shoulders and curl his tongue with Niall’s, and he’ll be on the very edge of a monumental orgasm that rattles his soul in the same way tornados shake houses on their foundation before Harry even touches Niall.)

“How’d you lose your virginity?”

It’s silent a moment, and then Alma Jean laughs, throws her head back and cackles at the top of her lungs, and it’s such a contrast to the pitched high mewls of pleasure coming from the room down the hall that he finds mirth in it, too, and chuckles just as hard as she is.

“You’re definitely unlike anybody I’ve ever known, Harry,” she says, shaking her head as she settles on his lap comfortably; her hands drop from his hair and his move to hold her hips, scratching mindlessly at the cotton of her white skirt. “Why do you want to know how I lost my virginity?”

Harry shrugs, gives her a goofy grin that she returns. “I dunno. I guess I just want to get to know you more.” He’s not in the mood to fall into bed with somebody he doesn’t know, really, but if he knows a little bit about her — well, it counts, and he doesn’t want her to think he’s using her (even though that’s what he’s doing, more or less). “Maybe it’ll make me feel better about this whole thing.”
“Oh, are you planning to give me a ring?” she jokes, falling off his lap, to the side; she scoots, and her ass is up in the air, and it’s not big, really, but it’s large enough for both of Harry’s hands to grab the flesh and mold it against his palm hotly.

“Depends on how good of a story it is,” he retorts, grabs her legs and pulls them over his lap, and they’re smooth against the rough callouses on the palm of his hand, reminds him of the way his entire body felt when Niall’s scruffy cheeked rubbed against his own clean-shaven jaw. “If it’s not better than mine, I’m afraid you’ll be the one giving me the ring.”

“Is that so?” She cocks her head, widens her eyes; he grins, nods, giggles, reaches down and tugs off her boots and socks, massaging his fingers across her heels, rubbing the arches of her feet till she caves, rolls her eyes in defeat, but the encouraged smile on her lips is a far cry from the exasperation she’s feigning. “Are you ready for this?”

Harry smirks, wolfish and entirely too comfortable to be in the presence of a woman he just met less than three hours ago. “Absolutely.”

And they talk for a long time, about everything and anything and nothing and something and all that falls in between, on the edges, up above and down below. He learns that she lost her virginity when she was seventeen to Delilah’s older brother — who is also the father to her son, Isaac, but he left for Europe to partake in a two-month long retreat before the baby was born and the first time he called to check in on her, she called their relationship off and she’s not seen him since although he sends a box of things to his son every month in case Isaac ever gets curious about his daddy — in the bed of his truck in the middle of the school parking lot, “which was more romantic than it sounds, I promise,”, and he moved just right beneath her when he was coming that it cracked his tailbone, and they had to make a trip to the hospital to assess just what was wrong with him, and she didn’t have on any panties under her dress and the pain medicine he was given made him loopy, made him horny, and she allowed herself to be talked into hiking up the skirt, crawling over him, and sitting on his face so he could eat her out profusely till she came, “three times, oh my gosh, and it got all over his hospital gown, but he just kept saying it was okay because I deserved to feel good after all the shit that happened,”, and he was working on a fourth when his mother came into the room and caught the two “fornicating under the watchful eyes of the Lord!” and that is how Alma Jean popped her cherry and also made a best friend in Delilah after it was announced in church the next day that the preacher requested counselling sessions for her and Randall.

(Which is how the community discovered that their beloved preacher was no more than a pervert with an eye for underage girls and boys. Harry isn’t sure if it’s a sin to put a preacher in a choke hold, but it is what it is.)

After he calms himself down, after she shares a bit more of her life with him, “you are honestly my hero, and my sister would love you,”, he tells her about Gemma, about his mum, about the rocky relationship he has with his father; he tells her about Greg, and how is reputation reflected on Niall throughout high school and how he was shunned, evaded, rejected, and he tells her about how hard, how valiantly he’s fighting to not be seen as another Greg, to not be darkened by Greg’s shadow, too, and that he’s so, so proud of Niall and the man he’s becoming.

He tells her about his first time, locked in the closet at Louis’s fifteenth birthday party, and about how he went off like a jackrabbit and came in forty-five seconds, as well as him dragging the same girl up the stairs a few moments afterward, grabbing a wash to clean off the bit of blood and his cum, before he got on his knees and tongued her to an orgasm because “it isn’t fair that I got to finish and she didn’t.”

He tells her about streaking across the baseball field with Liam in the middle of lunch, about singing
in the choir at church for basketball with Louis because their coach lost his wife and they wanted to be there for him, about spray-painting obscenities on the football stadium’s parking lot after getting picked up by the police for breaking into said stadium the weekend before with Niall when it was told that they would be having practice that day.

It helps to take his mind off of Niall, off of Delilah, off of Niall and Delilah; it clears his head, too, and he’s able to realize that the hold Niall has on him — it’s strong, yes, and it’s never going to go away as far as he knows — should not ever put him in a compromising position as it did tonight. Niall shouldn’t have the power to pressure Harry into laying down, into sleeping with somebody when he doesn’t want to.

Niall shouldn’t have the power to pressure Harry into doing anything he doesn’t want to.

He doesn’t. Not anymore.

And after, when she’s laughed so hard she’s cried her makeup off and he’s stripped from his t-shirt to fend off the heat of embarrassed humor, she grabs his hand and pulls him up, takes him into the kitchen where she gathers all the fixings to bake a cake, to bake a mess of brownies, and the two of them dirty up the place with flour and batter, with the noises of innocent fun and loud memories till they bed down on opposite ends of the sofa with their legs overlapping one another’s to sleep off the beer and delicious sweets, and it’s probably one of Harry’s most favorite days, really, because it reminds him that the good should always, always, outweigh the bad.

- A few hours later, Harry wakes up to absolute chaos and a raging hard-on that’s poking at his zipper, and he’s barely got enough time to raise his head, to blink his eyes blearily, before a lamp is being chunked across the living room, smashing against a wall and shattering into hundreds of pieces, and then there’s yelling, cursing, and Alma Jean is jerking him to his feet and throwing him his shirt and Niall is racing toward him, wearing a pair of black underwear with red stripes of bloody fingernail scratches along his body, and he’s followed by a crying Delilah and a furious third woman, and it hits Harry in the next moment.

Oh.

“Get up, Harry! We gotta go!”

And then — that ignorant fucker.

“Get the fuck out of my house!” the new woman — she’s tall; hell, she’s taller than Harry, and he’s holding steady at a few inches over six feet — yells, and somehow there’s another lamp being thrown.

Harry’s not exactly sure where it came from, but it was a lamp, okay, and it crashed really close to him, and he woke up twenty-seven seconds ago, and he doesn’t have the capability at the moment to understand or even handle what’s going on, so he just kind of blinks for a moment.

“Baby, Bo, please stop,” Delilah says, slurs, and she’s crying, and Alma’s twisting her blonde hair into a bun as she steps in the line of fire, between Bo and Niall as Niall tries to gather his shoes by the door. “You don’t have to do this, baby. We can talk about this, Bo. We can talk about this!”

“You’re damn right we’re going to talk about this, Delilah.” Bo grabs Delilah’s cheeks, holds her still, presses a harsh kiss to her lips. Oh. “Right after I take care of this horny little kid, we’ll talk, baby girl. I promise.”
And — and is that a gun? He’s not sure, has only seen guns in passing, for the most part. What the — where the fuck did that gun come from?

Harry shakes his head, stumbles over a bit of the broken glass, and some of the shards cut through his socks, dammit, and he’s ignoring the discomfort in favor of grabbing Niall by the shoulder and jerking him up, tugging him to the door, busting it down because there’s no time for stopping, no time for civility when there’s a fucking gun involved.

“Niall, what the hell?” Harry’s able to ask as they slide sideways in the early-morning light of a new day, booking across the cement and down the stairs; he looks over his shoulder, sees that Bo is putting two red shells into the chamber, and his mouth dries and his feet are bleeding and they need to hurry, hurry, hurry because he isn’t in the mood to die today. “Niall, what the fuck?”

“I thought Bo was a boy!” is his answer, his response, and it’s not much of one but at least it’s something.

Harry fishes the keys out of his pocket, amazed that they’ve not fallen out; the van is there, right there, and Niall is at his side and Bo is behind them with a gun and Alma Jean is trying to catch up and Delilah is crying, and then Niall’s jumping in the vehicle through the window, head first, and he’s screaming at Harry, “Go, go, go!” and Harry’s pulling the handle so hard it breaks and the keys are not cooperating and there’s a shot, a fuckin’ shot, and it zooms right above the hood and Niall’s feet are flailing and his hands are slapping at anything they can reach and Harry’s starting the thing, putting it in gear, hitting the gas, and they’re whizzing through the parking lot, out onto a stretch of blacktop, effectively cutting off a pickup whose horn definitely works, and they’re safe.

They’re safe.

And then it’s hitting Harry in the next moment, all crashing in his mind and toppling over, and his heart is racing, fast fast fast, and his eyes are blurry from sleep and he’s got to piss and his feet are bleeding and he can’t breathe, and Niall’s somehow got himself situated and he’s got a shirt off the floor to wipe off a bit of the bloody mess that’s on his chest and he’s laughing, actually laughing, and they nearly died, really, and the only reason they aren’t dead is because Bo’s aim isn’t what Harry imagined it to be, and it’s this memory, full of adrenaline and disbelief and exhaustion and heat and a hint of anarchy, that Harry is going to tell his grandkids when they ask him about the moment he first fell in love.
my love will not let you down

_i keep searchin’ for you darlin’, searchin’ everywhere i go_
and when i find you there’s gonna be just one thing you gotta know
one thing you gotta know
my love, love, love, love, love, love will not let you down

— Bruce Springsteen, ‘My Love Will Not Let You Down’

“How in the bloody hell did you get glass in not one foot, but both?”

“I was trying to save your ass and mine too before a lady shot us for a reason that I still have yet to talk to you about.”

Niall smirks, looks up at Harry beneath his thick lashes; they’re parked on the side of the highway, surrounded by hot nothing and dry air and dirt, dirt, dirt, and Harry’s perched on a strange sort of rock a bit away from the van and Niall’s between his legs with a pocket knife, holding Harry’s bare feet and preparing to dig out the shards of shattered glass that are lodged inside.

Lucky for him — or, really, lucky for the both of them, because if Harry had to go to the hospital to rid his feet of the glass inside, Niall would not only have known it but felt it, as well; besides, it’s all Niall’s fault, in the end, and Harry’s fear of hospitals has always receded with Niall at his side — the glass didn’t slice too deep, didn’t cut inside too far, and Harry’s partially sure his socks saved his ass back there because if he couldn’t have ran, couldn’t have got himself into gear and away from that shotgun, then he and Niall would both still be there, probably with a bullet in their backsides.

He is kind of pissed off, though. Not because they were shot at, not because he was awakened in a fit of disaster, not because a woman neither of them know got to have a piece of something that Harry wants, not because Niall apparently knew about this Bo character beforehand, but because his socks are fucked. Like, they’re white, you know, and his mum is the only person he trusts to wash the stains out of his clothes because she’s nifty enough to know how to do it, and without her here, his socks are going to be ruined.

And he really liked this particular pair of socks. They’re not any different than most of his other pairs, no, but this — these two were his favorite.

He reckons he and Niall took it well, though. The being shot at part, that is. Just another day in life.

“Go ahead and get to quizzin’ me, then,” Niall says, shrugs; he’s got Harry’s socks wadded up into balls of fabric that were wet with a random water bottle in the floorboard of the van, and he’s using it as a sort of swab to clean the dried blood off of Harry’s feet before he sets to work on using the knife as a pair of tweezers. “We’ve got plenty of time. ‘S only, like, seven, and we aren’t scheduled to check out of the hotel till noon, anyway, and this is going to take a few minutes.”

Harry sighs, puts his hands beside his hips and leans back, tips his head up; the sun is high, a bit slanted to his left, in the east, and it’s warm and bright and relaxing, rejuvenating, and he takes a moment to himself to thank God, to thank whoever else is listening that he and Niall made it out of there okay and relatively unharmed. Whether it was divine intervention or fate or chance — thanks is due, and thanks will be given, too, because that’s the type of person Harry is.

“Let’s start with you assuming Bo was a boy, and we can go from there.”
Niall shrugs again, tosses the wet, soiled socks on the rock beside Harry; his fingers are kind of cool, kind of cold against Harry’s hot skin, and he’s got callouses on his thumb that caress Harry’s ankle roughly as he grabs it to keep Harry still, to keep Harry right where he wants him to be, and it tickles like cat’s whiskers, like dog’s kisses, like butterfly’s wings.

“That’s exactly what it is,” Niall replies, flicks his eyes up to meet Harry’s. “Hold still, don’t move your feet. Grip my shoulder if you have to, but if you move and I cut you, we’re going to the hospital whether you like it or not.”

Harry nods, watches with baited breath, with narrowed eyes as Niall brings the blade of the knife up, and it glints in the sun like a murderer’s favorite choice of weapon, and Harry nearly blacks out right then and there because he’s kind of a wussy, in the easiest sense, when it comes to getting hurt.

All is good till he sees blood, really, and there’s — well, there’s quite a bit of blood, for the most part.

“Keep talkin’,” Harry prompts, shriveling his heart and forcing the thing to stop beating, to stop pounding. “It’ll take my mind off of this.”

“M’kay.” Niall hums, rubs the pad of his thumb across the bottom of Harry’s foot, and — and who knew a heel, of all things, could be that sensitive? “Delilah and Bo apparently had a falling out a few weeks ago, and they hadn’t seen one another since, and she said she wanted somebody to take her mind off of her problems, and I wanted to get laid, and it was a win-win for the both of us. And maybe I should’ve asked her to clarify just who Bo was, but I didn’t, and that’s that. It’s over.”

Harry jumps, hisses, shrinks away from Niall’s touch. “That tickles,” he says, complains, and Niall laughs; it’s at that moment that Harry remembers, notices the red scratches tracing all along Niall’s torso, and they’re mean and ugly but they aren’t bleeding, so that’s a plus. “Who gave you the battle scars?”

He reaches out, puts the tip of his finger on one of the rather uglier scratches, dragging it along the length as it crisscrosses Niall’s clavicle and stops near the base of his throat.

Niall shivers; Harry isn’t exactly sure why. “Bo did it.”

“I don’t even want to know why.”

“Oh, yes you do,” Niall replies, smirks, and he’s fire and Harry’s water and those two things shouldn’t mix, but when it comes to them, when it is them, they do. Oh Lord, they do. “Okay?”

Harry nods, furrows his brows in concentration. Niall puts the blade to the tender skin of Harry’s arch, scrapes at the tight flesh there, and it tickles again, kind of, flutters and frills, and then there’s a sting, a bite that heats Harry’s body oddly, and his hand flashes out, grabs Niall’s shoulder, and he digs his nails in the bare skin there as Niall continues to scratch away at Harry’s foot before removing the knife and wiping it on his jeans, streaking the light denim with brown-red blood that makes Harry sneer and his empty stomach churn unpleasantly.

“That wasn’t so bad,” Harry stories, lets out his breath and pulls in a few deep inhalations to calm the rapid palpitations of his heart. “Didn’t even feel you digging in.”

“That’s ‘cause I didn’t,” is Niall’s response, and Harry’s fairly sure Niall wouldn’t tell anybody if he were to all of a sudden burst into tears. They’re best friends, and Harry’s got enough dirt on Niall to cause a few quakes, too. “You had a sticker, a piece of wood, I think, and it was ready to come out.”

“Oh my God,” Harry hisses, sends up a silent prayer: *don’t let me die today, Lord. “Is that all the
stickers?”

Niall nods. “In this foot, yeah,” he replies, and his eyes — the sun is to Harry’s left and it’s throwing a shrivel of sparkling illumination that hits Niall’s eyes and makes them glow, makes them glimmer like lightning bugs, like fireflies streaking through a meadow of moonlit flowers in the middle of nowhere, and he definitely needs more sleep if he’s going to be seeing stupid insects with lights on their asses in Niall’s gaze. “There may be more, though, so you’re going to have to tough it out.”

“This is your fault.” Harry shits his eyes, forces his body to relax, to smooth into fluid muscle; it’s a bitter ache when Niall digs the tip of the knife into the arch, when Niall pinches the skin and squeezes out the tiny shard of glass. “This is all your fucking fault, Niall.”

Niall laughs, throws his head back and cackles like the little kid he is at heart, and Harry’s equal parts miffed and marveled at the glazed sort of beauty with which Niall shines.

“You’re acting like I’m the only one who had fun last night, H,” Niall muses, and he’s not paying much attention to Harry, really, because if he was — well, if he was, then he would have seen the smile on Harry’s face completely vanish. “You did have fun last night, didn’t you?”

Harry swallows, averts his eyes, decides that the wispy clouds to the west, colored bright white by the rising sun, are more intriguing than the lecherous, sexy smirk on Niall’s lips.

“I mean, forgive me for not knowing if you did or not,” Niall says, continues before Harry can reply, and there’s a lump in the back of Harry’s throat that’s growing bigger and bigger and bigger, and he reckons it’ll choke him up, choke him off as soon as he tries to open his mouth, as soon as he tries to tell Niall to shut up, shut up, shut up, because yes, he had fun, but no, it wasn’t in the way that’s being assumed, and — and really, Niall’s the cause of a lot of misfortunate events because he assumes all sorts of shit when it’s as far away from the truth as it possibly can be. “Delilah and I hardly came up for air after we went into her room, and her noises were all I could hear. And Harry, man, she was so wet — she squirted, too, and that’s the first time I’ve ever seen something like that. I broke history last night, I’m tellin’ ya.”

Harry’s spirits slump, and the hand he has on Niall’s shoulder falls away, lands next to his hips, and he’s leaning as far away from Niall as he can because he needs air, needs to breathe oxygen that isn’t smeared by Niall’s presence.

There’s only so much pain he can take before he retaliates with anger.

“That’s nice,” he says, distracted and conflicted and absent; on one hand, he wants to scream at Niall till he’s finally quiet enough to figure out, to understand what Harry’s feeling, and the other half of him just wants to stay silent, just wants to stay closed off and anonymous because he probably deserves to experience a bit — a lot — of pain for falling for his best friend. “That’s really cool.”

It’s not love, though. Well, it’s not that kind of love, per se; Harry loves Niall like he loves Gemma, like he loves his mum, and the bond they have with one another runs deeper than can be explained with words. It’s degrading, in Harry’s opinion, to take something beautiful, something all-powerful, something simultaneously uplifting and frightening, and attempt to give it a definition when it is indefinable, to give it meaning when it’s meaningless to the people who aren’t experiencing it.

Sometimes, it’s better to just leave things be and let them as they are instead of categorizing them with half-wrong hunches derived from the wrong information.

(And it’s not love, no, but it’s a bubbling sort of emotion that has its ups and downs, that has its good moments and an abundance of bad, and it’s only getting stronger every day, every minute, every
second. It’s not love, no, but at the rate it’s going, Harry’s going to be head over heels — feet over ass — for his best friend.)

“You doing okay?” Niall asks, worried and soft, tender. “Your face is pale, and your hands are shaking.”

Harry bites the inside of his mouth, and it’s a pain he can’t feel, isn’t aware of till there’s a bit of blood marring his taste buds, and he wants to spit it out but opts to instead swallow it down because Niall doesn’t need to ask any more questions today. “Yeah, ‘m fine,” he replies, offers a weak, sad smile. “I just didn’t get very much sleep last night, is all. I guess I’m just tired.”

“Well, we’re staying in tonight,” Niall replies, and Harry’s heart quickens at that because he honestly didn’t expect Niall to remember the conditions Harry set last night. “And I’ll drive today, too, since your feet are fucked, and you can sleep on the road as much as you want.”

Harry snorts, hopes Niall confuses the flush of red on his face for the heat instead of the blush of pure, unadulterated reverence. “You aren’t going to get lonely without me talking your ear off?”

“The radio’s better than hearing your ugly voice all the time,” Niall answers, and it’s a joke, a stupid jibe, and this is the first moment that Harry feels as if all is right in the world because Niall is being a doofus and Harry’s trying his best to ignore the grin on his face, and this is how it should be: easy, light, simple, open. This is them, how they’ve always been, and it’s absolutely scary to imagine not having this. “Besides, I can’t have my best man keeling over from exhaustion on this trip. It’s all for you, anyway.”

Harry frowns, brings a hand up to wipe at the sweat on his brow before it drips into his eye. “What are you talking about?” he asks, blinking quickly, rapidly; the sun is hot, but he’s cold. “This trip isn’t just for me.”

Niall sighs. “Harry.”

“It’s not,” Harry repeats, and his tone is pitched high with worry, with discontent, with the strangest kind of inferiority he’s ever felt before. Niall’s always made him feel equal, made him feel as if the two of them are on the same level, and this — he doesn’t feel like that anymore. “It’s not — it’s not, Niall, is it?”

Because — because if it is, if Niall is wasting ten thousand dollars on Harry, then that’s it. That is it. Harry will go back home, with or without Niall, and the two of them will never speak about this half-assed trip ever again even if it tears them apart at the seams.

He isn’t a charity case, and he doesn’t need Niall to hand him out the luxuries of life, and the possibility that Niall may have thought that — it angers Harry, makes him see colors in flashes of fire engine red and mercury silver and night sky black and panther’s eye green.

The only reason Harry accepted Niall paying for everything is because he was of a mind that this trip was for Niall just as much as he.

Niall shakes his head, but the smile on his face — it’s sad, small, sorry, and Harry prepares himself for the worst. “It’s not completely just for you, no,” he answers, but there’s more to come, and Harry’s sure it isn’t going to taste good going down. “You are the reason this trip is happening, though, and I like the Stones as much as the next person, but you’re, like, their biggest fan, and I wanted — I wanted to have one last amazing memory with you before we started college and our lives got in the way of seeing each other. Besides, mum’s not home and Greg’s an ass and Louis is camping at the beach and Liam’s holed up somewhere with his girlfriend, and you’re the only person
I really want to have at my side. If I’m given a choice, I’m always going to choose you.”

Always, always, always.

It reverberates in Harry’s mind, pinging back and forth, back and forth, like a bouncy ball, hitting his heart and his soul and his nerves and his mind, and the colors are now daffodil yellow and cotton candy pink and wildflower purple and blue, blue, blue.

“That isn’t going to happen, silly boy.” Harry smiles, lolls his head to the side; he barely feels the sting of glass shards in his feet now, and he thinks the reason is because Niall’s blue eyes are like the sky before a thunderstorm, complete with gray clouds of wind and flashing lightning of rage. “You and I — we’re in this together, Ni. We made a promise when we were little, to stay together forever, and you may not remember it, but I still I do.”

“I remember it, too.” Niall smiles. “You had blond hair and my face was stained red with the Kool-Aid Louis threw on me and Liam was putting frogs down the back of Gemma’s dress and we had a church picnic to go to that evening.”

“I didn’t break it in high school, and I’m not going to break it because we’re in college now, either.” Harry thins his lips, gives Niall a tight smile. “You’ve got to have a little bit of faith in me.”

Niall’s smile grows, and he looks away, sheepish and embarrassed; his neck is red with a blush and his cheeks are pink from the heat, from Harry’s words, and Harry wants to coo, wants to commit all the colors of Niall’s body, all soft hues and hard tones, to his memory forever.

And it’ll be like the promise he and Niall made when they were children — something he’ll never forget, something that’ll never be broken.

-

“I can kind of get used to this, you know. You being quiet, not mouthing off about unimportant things and distracting me from my driving. It’s nice.”

A voice rouses Harry out of his sleep, tugs him from the thin dreams he was having; he yawns, stretches his arms up above his head and arches his back, letting out a noise of pure pleasure as his muscles pop and align and settle.

He blinks, bleary and blurry, and notices that it’s almost dark, nearing dusk; the sun has set in the west, to the right, and all the light that’s left in the world is from the darkening blue of the sky and the buggy lights on either side of the kept highway they’re on, sidewalks full of people going and gathering in sick tops and bellbottoms, and the radio is a gentle rumble of incoherent babbles of guitars and drums and pianos and trumpets as they go, go, go.

“Where we at?” he asks, slurs; his mouth tastes awful and his neck has a cramp and he’s got his underwear up the crack of his ass and his stomach is growling something fierce, and Niall looks beautiful in the pale green light shining off the dash of the van. “’ow long ‘ave I been out?”

Niall smiles, soft and silk-like, and he’s still not wearing a shirt, and, for that matter, neither is Harry. Hmm.

“It’s been six hours since we stopped at that pizza place, and you were out before I even pulled onto the interstate,” Niall replies, takes one hand off the wheel and reaches out, cards his fingers through the snarls of Harry’s hair so gently, so sweetly, so tenderly, and it sends a shockwave of electricity through Harry’s body. “I didn’t want to wake you up, thought you deserved to have some sleep before the night rolls in. And we’re in Texas, by the way, goin’ through the panhandle.”
Harry sighs, sleepy and content, and leans into Niall’s touch, puts his elbow on the console and moves his head so Niall has easier access. “Is that so?” he hums, mumbles, shuts his eyes; he’s awake, for the most part, but the lethargic leftover effects of sleep has him goofy, dazed and confused. “What’ve you got planned for tonight, Ni?”

“You and I — we’re finding a place to crash at with a pool, with a hot tub, and we’re staying in for the night and we’re sleeping in tomorrow, too, and it’s going to be fun,” Niall answers, turns his head to give Harry one of the biggest, one of the brightest smiles he’s ever seen. “It’s gonna be fun.”

Harry swallows, brings his free hand up to wipe the sticky, dry sleep from his eyes. “Yeah?” he asks, mystified, and he’s trying so hard to ignore the rush, the flood, the quake of feelings inside of his body, but he can’t, oh God he can’t, and he really shouldn’t want to ever snub something out that’s so great, so pretty, so uplifting, but he’s sleepy and he’s hungry and Niall’s got him up, got him wired. “You think so?”

“Of course.” Niall scratches Harry’s scalp with blunt nails, and it’s an action that tugs a purr of satisfaction out of Harry’s parted lips as he moves about, leans his head on the console and stares up at Niall’s pretty, pretty face, backlit by the lights all around. “I have the time of my life every minute I spend with you.”
i'm on fire

sometimes it's like someone took a knife, baby, edgy and dull
and cut a six-inch valley through the middle of my soul
at night I wake up with the sheets soaking wet
and a freight train running through the middle of my head
only you can cool my desire

― Bruce Springsteen, ‘I’m On Fire’

“I want to sleep. I don’t want to order any room service, I don’t want to take a shower, and I don’t want to go swimming. All I want to do is sleep.”

(Harry’s sounding more and more like a child, like a whining little kid with each passing moment, with every passing second, and, the thing is, he’s perpetually too tired to care at the moment. And why should he, really, when exhaustion has his eyelids heavy and lack of sleep is making his body thick with fatigue?)

(He’s sure he’ll care later, though, when he’s not drunk on exhaustion and high on the thought of sleeping in a bed with sheets, with pillows, with softness, with enough room for him to stretch out and fold in. Sleeping in the back of the van was tolerable, but the couch last night did him in, and clocking out in the front seat wasn’t the best idea, either.)

(For right now, he doesn’t give a damn. For right now, he doesn’t give a fuck.)

Niall groans, rolls his eyes, throws a thick white towel over his shoulder and hits Harry in the face where he’s at, laying down and sprawling out on one of the two beds in the hotel room they’re sharing. Two because Niall made it clear to the concierge — a girl, a pretty girl with fuzzy hair and slim shoulders and dark eyes and ring-clad fingers and chocolate-colored skin and pink lips that curled up into an inviting, open, sultry smile aimed at the both of them, for the most part — that he would tolerate nothing with no less than double bed because “this fucker here kicks like there’s no tomorrow, and I like to take his pillows,” and Harry went along with it.

Because that’s what he’s supposed to be doing, you know — going along with it, winging it.

And it’s working.

Sorta.

He’s actually kind of shit at not thinking things through, whereas Niall is the self-proclaimed king of taking everything that’s given to him and just going with it.

Which is why Harry’s watching him, studying him, learning from him.

Sorta.

“You slept, like, nine hours today, man, and you’ve hardly ate a thing at all,” Niall replies, complains, and Harry rouses a bit, opens his eyes, turns his head; he sees that Niall is bare save for a pair of black swim trunks falling to his mid-thigh, hugging the muscles of his hairy legs, and Harry has to gulp, has to question himself if the fast fast fast pace of his swarming emotions is really worth it, is really real or if it’s nothing but projected feelings on the only person who he has had contact with for prolonged amounts of time. “You’re going for a swim, at least ten laps around the pool, to tire yourself out so you’ll sleep tonight, and I’m going to enjoy the hot tub — Barbara said there was
one — to relax myself, and then we’re going to come back up to the room and you’re ordering whatever you want on this fuckin’ menu, wherever it is that I put it, and you’re going to eat it all, bottomless pit that you are, and then we’re going to go to bed and you aren’t moving till at least noon.”

But — Harry can sleep right now if Niall would just let him.

“We can ditch all of that nonsense and just get to sleep now if you would get swimming out of your mind.”

“Well, look at it this way — if you go swimming with me, you don’t have to take a shower.”

Harry’s mind wanders outside of itself a bit: does showing come with the option of taking it with you, too?

And then, rather menacingly and angry: fuck.

Harry moans, half-hearted and choked off, flipping over onto his tummy and folding his arms beneath the clean-scented pillow, bunching it up beneath his chin and closing his eyes again. “You’ve thought all this through, have you?” he asks around a sigh, around an exhale of exasperation.

He’ll do whatever Niall wants to do, whatever Niall wants him to do. He’s good to Niall — he’s way too fucking good to Niall.

“But all of it,” comes Niall’s response, and he’s laughing and a light is being flicked on, creating a weird kind of orange-like glow behind Harry’s closed lids, and he isn’t opening his eyes, no he is not, because Niall is more than half naked, okay, for one, and he’s very, very comfortable in the decidedly uncomfortable position he’s in, for two, and there’s a third reason somewhere in there, if you look hard enough for it, but he’s in no mood to go digging deeper than the hole that has already been dug for him. “I’m honest to God just winging it at this point. There’s no such thing as a bad idea to me at the moment.”

“There’s something definitely wrong with the way you’re leading your life right now,” Harry says, snuggles deeper into the pillow; there’s a noise of movement, a flurrying sound of clothes wrinkling, and then Niall’s pulling at Harry’s boots, tugging them off and tossing them somewhere off to the left, if Harry’s senses are right, and his socks are following, holy hell, and the air is cold but Niall’s fingers are warm on his ankles and he shivers, shudders with the touch. “I’m a bit too tired to find out what it is, but I do think you need to reevaluate a few things, man.”

Niall cackles, sort of evil and all the way despicable. “Oh, come off it, H,” he says, and he’s always been tough, you know, and sometimes it’s hard to see the muscles that’s cording, that’s rolling and rounding beneath his skin, but it’s there — it’s there, and he’s got Harry flipped over onto his back before Harry knows what’s happening, and he’s blinking rapidly, attempting to clear his vision, and in the next second Niall is atop him, straddling his thighs and squeezing his hips with his knees. “There’s no other person I’d want at my side in life than you.”

And, oh my, there’s lavender bags of exhaustion painting the sun-tanned skin beneath Niall’s eyes, and the purple is setting off the blue magnificently in the dim lighting of the room, and the freckles on his shoulders have multiplied into thousands of little brown dots of adorableness and his biceps are bulging with the strain of holding his upper body up and his forearms are thick and there’s a bracelet on his wrist that looks an awful lot like that stupid little gag gift he won a few years ago at the very first bar they sneaked in to and his fingers, his fingers are on Harry’s hips, digging in, and this is not sexual, it’s not, but Harry’s feelings for Niall run deeper than the surface of the skin and he
feels alive, feels on fire in the most burning, searing sense.

And he kind of has to wonder if Niall is acting like this, so comfortable and easy and pliant and affectionate — like they were not even a week ago, like they were when Niall broke into Harry’s house and tugged him out of bed, naked and muggy with sleep, and told him to pack up, that the two of them were going away for a little while — because he believes Harry slept with Alma Jean last night? Is Niall acting as if nothing is wrong, acting as if Harry’s not attracted to him, because he genuinely believes Harry sleeping with a stranger would knock him off of the road he’s walking down, because he genuinely believes nothing is wrong?

Whoa.

That’s a… that’s a hard, heavy thought to believe, to swallow.

Is the idea of Harry being attracted to him really that horrible to Niall, to the point where he is literally throwing women at Harry to erase what inkling bit of romantic notions he has?

Would it really go against everything Niall stands for to just — to just admit that it’s okay for a man to be attracted to another man, that it’s okay for Harry to be attracted to him?

Would it?

After all, what’s wrong with it? Of course, in the Bible it more or less says that a man laying with another man is an abomination — it depends on what testament you get on how the phrase is worded — and Harry’s of faith and Niall is, too, but… didn’t God give His children the free will to choose, the free will to live your life the way you want to?

The path to heaven is full of sinners and believers.

Besides, Niall’s the one who brought Harry to a delectable orgasm with nothing but his voice, nothing but his orders, and Harry’s taken to being silent, to being respectable about Niall’s qualms and not bring that particular incident up.

The thing is, if Niall’s so against even accepting the fact that Harry’s attracted to him, then why did he tell — tell; there was no asking, only telling — Harry to continue? And it’s weird, it’s wrong to let Niall lead him on, to let Niall make what he’s feeling seem less real because it’s for a man and not a woman; he needs to stop giving Niall power.

“Get off me, lard ass,” Harry says, grunts, bucks upward, and he’s always had more muscle in his core opposed to his legs, but it’s enough to send Niall flying to the side with an echo of laughter that’s cold, cold, cold, that burns Harry with its chill. “Lemme use the toilet, and then we’ll go to the pool, m’kay?”

He piddles around, scoots off the comfortable bed and stretches his arms above his head; his back is to Niall, and he feels Niall’s eyes on him, can almost taste the stare he’s being given, and the scary thing is that he doesn’t know if it’s good or bad, doesn’t know if he should welcome or shy away from the invasion of a look. And it’s sad, too, to slowly, slowly begin to not know somebody after you’ve spent more than half of your life learning everything there is to know about that person.

It’s the declination of it all that’s a bit rattling, a bit rearranging in the worst of ways.

Because thinking you know someone turns into only halfway knowing that person, and then you realize you never really knew them at all.

He wonders if Niall feels the same.
“Don’t take too long, all right? Barbara said the pool room closes at midnight, and it’s already almost ten-thirty.”

The pool room is large and long, with pale brown tile and high fluorescent lights, and it’s kind of cold because of the chilly water in front of them, kind of humid because of the hot water in the corner to the left. The pool itself is long, shallow at one end and deeper at the other, and on the side of it, written in big, bold, black letters —

“The sign clearly says no diving, Niall.” Harry crosses his arms, plants his feet firmly; he’s dressed in an extra pair of swim trunks Niall packed, yellow and uncomfortable and tight and ugly, and he’s standing in a puddle of water that feels lukewarm, feels relaxing on the bottoms of his toes. “I’m not diving into a pool that’s hardly ten feet when I’m six fuckin’ feet tall.”

Niall snorts. “That’s just a suggestion, H,” he replies, tosses the two towels he brought along onto one of the chairs surrounding the length of the pool Harry didn’t notice before, too busy mindlessly checking out Niall’s absentminded allure. “It’s just a rule, Harry, and rules were meant to be broken. Besides, you’ve broken quite a bit, and it’s only illegal if you get caught.”

Because of you.

“It’s still illegal even if you don’t get caught.”

But Niall isn’t listening, has given Harry a smirk that promises something against the rules is about to happen, and with a holler he’s running toward the pool, jumping up, curling his body, wrapping his arms around his legs and perfecting the sloppiest, shittiest cannonball Harry’s ever seen, complete with splashing water that hits Harry’s chest and face and legs.

That’s Niall, though: wild, liberated, and he refuses to half-ass anything, and Harry respects how they’re so vastly different, how they fit so perfectly together.

And — well, he didn’t dive.

He breaks the surface after a moment, and his brown hair is in his face, is obscuring his bloodshot blue eyes, and the clear water is lapping at this body as he bobs up and down, up and down, and the smile on his face — whoa, the smile on his face makes Harry wonder if the stars in the sky aspire to be just as bright.

(They’ve never been, and they aren’t now, either, and Harry’s fairly sure they’ll never be on the same level as Niall’s luminosity.)

“Come on in, ‘arry,” he says, calls, and his smile grows bigger than the sun, and Harry’s afraid of the supernova explosions in his heart as Niall opens his arms wide, as Niall tilts his head to the side and beckons Harry in, beckons Harry close. Close, close, close. “The water is fine.”

Harry grunts, shakes his head, but he finds that he’s walking forward, easing himself down to sit on the edge of the pool; he sticks his feet in first, and it’s a bit cold, nothing he can’t handle with some patience, and then allows his legs to fall in, as well, and the water ripples a bit, distorts the image of his body as it moves, as it dances, as it waves and washes away some of the tight tiredness in his system.

“It’s cold,” he says, muses, flicks his eyes up.

Niall’s a few paces away, wiggling his legs and scooping his arms; his smile hasn’t fallen off his lips
yet, and, for a moment, Harry wonders if he should continue to allow Niall to think everything is okay even when it isn’t if it will keep the grin on Niall’s mouth from fading, from slipping away.

He’s self-deprecating like that.

“Just jump right in. You won’t feel a thing.”

“You’re a fucking liar.”

“Am I?”

And he does the meanest thing then, cups his hands and pushes forward, shoves and splashes Harry with the water, on his face and on his chest and on his groin, dammit, and it’s decidedly more colder at this moment than it was a second ago, and Harry curses, hisses out a string of words that are echoed by Niall’s laughter, that are echoed by Niall’s smeared catcalls of hilarious, hysterical appreciation of Harry’s total baffled anger at being forcibly wet.

“I’m going to kick your skull in.”

“I’d love to see you try, silly boy.”

Niall’s laughing again, deep and loud, loud, loud, and he’s moving forward, treading forward, and he’s got his hands on Harry’s hips, and they’re wet and hot, and he’s flexing, lifting Harry up off of the side of the pool and pulling him in, dropping him down, and Harry’s submerged in the water before he can yell, before he can protest, before he can relish the feel of Niall’s nails digging in to the flesh of his hips.

He breaks the surface, tugs in a few breaths; he’s got water up his nose and it burns, stings, and he’s got to sneeze, but it’s one of those that teases and taunts and tickles his sinuses till it goes away completely.

“I hate you.”

“No, you don’t.” Niall giggles — fucking giggles, and that makes Harry all the more mad, makes Harry feel all the more red, but then he sees blue, too, like cloud free skies and rippling lakes in the mountains and flowers on the sides of the roads they’ve been rolling by. “You love me. You love me too much to hurt me.”

Harry scoffs, rolls his eyes.

You don’t know the half of it.

He surges forward then, does his best to wrap his arms around Niall’s neck in an attempt to push Niall down, but it doesn’t work — it doesn’t work because Niall is fast and Harry is strong, and Niall’s ducking away, treading away, and really, Harry’s kind of upset that Niall’s such a solid swimmer and he’s nothing but a floating chunk of meat in the water.

An impromptu water fight is started in the next second — it’s Harry’s strength to sling water at a distance against Niall’s quickness to get away, and it’s laughs and giggles and curses and grunts (and the occasional sneeze, too, from Harry; what he lost before has come back tenfold) and they’re here and then they’re there and somewhere.

Harry chases Niall with stinging eyes, with a snotty nose, and Niall ducks and weaves and dashes and wades, sidestepping Harry’s advances, and he’s got water dripping into his face from his flat hair and pruned fingers and a wedgie in the ugliest part of his body, and Niall — oh, Niall’s blue eyes are
shining and his pink lips are parted and his brown hair is sopping and his tanned skin is glistening, glowing with the water and the lights above and he looks like the way coming home feels.

And then, somehow and someway, Harry’s got Niall crowded up against one of the edges of the pool in the shallow end, in the corner, and they’re both breathing hard, heavy and heated with the exertion; Niall’s chest hair is scratching Harry’s bare skin, Harry’s fingers are rubbing at the flesh on either side of Niall’s shoulders, and they’re inhaling, exhaling one another’s air.

Harry’s gaze rakes along Niall’s face, taking in his eyes and his nose and his lips and his cheeks and his jaws and his freckles and his moles and his pimples, and Niall is beautiful.

“Come up to the room with me,” he says, pleads, moving closer to Niall; their chests are flush and their thighs are aligned, and Harry feels more calm now than he has in what seems like forever, and what Niall started in the bathroom a few days ago Harry is prepared to finish right now. “Please.”

Niall swallows, keeps his eyes on Harry’s lips and nods.

- Niall lays Harry down on the bed, gentle and easy, and he leans over Harry, puts his palm on Harry’s cheeks and rubs at the skin there with a raw, unbridled touch. His eyes are wide, clear, open, and Harry watches the way Niall’s gaze roams along his face, and Harry’s not the most handsome young man on the planet although he’s got some good qualities, for the most part, but when Niall’s looking at him like this — like this — when Niall’s looking at him like this he feels beautiful, feels breathtaking, feels as if he is the most valuable piece of art on the planet.

“Your eyes are gray,” Niall says, muses, trails his thumb along Harry’s wrinkled forehead, smoothing out the lines with patience, with care. “They’re usually green. Sometimes they’re blue, when the light hits you right. I like the gray.”

Oh, God.

“They change colors,” Harry replies, breathless, clenching his hands at his sides; Niall’s leaning over him, has him bracketed by his elbows on either side of Harry’s shoulders, and Harry wants to move with Niall, wants to move against Niall, but they’re in a precarious bit of reality and he doesn’t want to damage the freedom he’s suddenly received to be himself. “They change colors with what I’m wearing.”

Niall smiles, lopsided and closed-mouthed, and it’s higher on one side than the other. Perfect. “What color would they be if you didn’t have anything on?” he asks, teases, and his voice is deep and his tone is dark.

Harry shivers, unclenches his fists and moves them up, puts his hands on Niall’s shoulders from behind and just keeps them there for a moment, relishing the heat, the solidness. He feels as if everything is frozen, suspended in time, and the stars in Niall’s eyes are what are leading Harry to safety, to completion.

“Why don’t you find out?”

Niall’s smile grows into a smirk and he moves his thumb down, caressing the pad of his finger across Harry’s dry lips, dipping just inside of Harry’s mouth, scratching the tip of Harry’s tongue to gather a bit of moisture to make the touch easier, better, wetter.

“This is what you want?” Niall asks, narrows his eyes, licks his lips; Harry does his best to try not to imagine having that tongue do all sorts of lecherous things to his body, but his hips buck fruitlessly
into the air and Niall’s puff of chuckles tells him he’s failed. “This is what you want me to do to you?”

Harry jolts, gulps, nods his head. “Please.” Please, please, please. Harry’s mum raised him to have manners, and he doesn’t mind begging. “If you want to, please.”

“Why? Why me, Harry?”

That’s so simple.

“Because you’re you.”

And it’s all the answer Niall needed, apparently, because he’s leaning down, leaning in, and his exhalations are hitting Harry’s lips and he’s got chills on his legs, on his tummy, on his shoulders, and the bed is wet and he’s wet and Niall’s wet, too, and he doesn’t care that they’re soaking the sheets, that they’re soaking each other.

Niall’s fixing to kiss him, fixing to consensually entertain Harry’s abrupt gratification of him, and Harry doesn’t care about anything else.

“Oh, Harry.” Niall’s voice is soft, delicate, sensitive, delicious, serene, and it’s the only thing Harry cares to listen to — but then his smile is vanishing and he’s frowning, shaking his head and leaning away, pushing Harry’s hands, pushing Harry’s touch off of his body, and Harry’s stomach is tight with rejection, with acidic hurt, and he raises up, follows Niall’s retreat even though it feels as if he’s fighting a losing battle.

“Niall?”

“This is wrong.” Niall’s still shaking his head, over and over and over, and it’s slow, it’s deliberate, and it is awful. “This is wrong. You’re — Harry, you’re you and I’m me, and this is wrong. This is so wrong, and I shouldn’t have — we shouldn’t have. We shouldn’t.”
There’s a fire in Harry’s stomach, and he feels it… blow up. And Niall’s in the perfect line of fire.

“That’s really fucking rich coming from the person who told me not to stop, who told me to do it the way they liked it and watched me come right in front of them.”

Niall scowls, moves hurriedly off the bed to stand; his swimming trunks are wet, are stuck to his thighs and crooked on his pale hips and riding up his ass, kind of, and he’s making a puddle in the floor but Harry reckons it isn’t that big of a deal considering they’ve already ruined the mess of sheets and blankets and pillows he’s lying on.

Besides, it’s just water, and water always dries.

“What are you talking about?” Niall asks, shakes his head; Harry makes a face, pushes himself up to sit on his bum and scoots back till he’s flush against the frame of the bed. The wood is sort of cold on his back, dim and blunt, and he can’t find it in him to shiver because he’s on fire with desire, on fire with anger, on fire with betrayal. Niall knows something special about Harry, and he’s mutilated the trust Harry’s giving to him over and over and over, again and again and again. “What have I done now?”

“What have you not done?” Harry snorts, rolls his eyes, and grabs a pillow, puts it across his chest and pulls his legs up, crossing his arms in front of his shins in a defensive sort of way. If he’s like this — curled up, curled tight, rolled in, rolled together and protected by his arms, by his legs, by a pillow that will hopefully stop Niall’s mean, mean words from reaching his heart — he’ll be okay. He will be okay, regardless if the precarious relationship he has with Niall will continue to be as strong as it was before. “Don’t stand there and pretend you don’t remember what happened between the two of us a few days ago. Don’t stand there and act like I’m the only one to blame in this mess you and I’ve made.”

Niall’s hands fly up and his fingers run through his hair, tugging harshly at the dark brown locks till they’re standing up and his face is red and pink, and he’s full of so much color that he’s black, depressing and hazardous and alarming and loaded and malignant.

“I haven’t forgotten about that, Harry,” he replies, and it’s a hiss, a snarl, as if he’s afraid to admit to Harry that he’s not been able to put the memory of that night, of both of their dirty, naughty actions out of his head. “I can’t forget it — not when you remind me every day, every fucking second about it, sitting next to me and just… just saying nothing.”

“What do you want me to say?” Harry demands, and his voice raises, kind of, and it’s deep and dark and he feels the danger in the room, feels the desolation preparing itself to reap havoc on this room, on the two of them. “What do you want me to say, Niall? ‘Cause you can tell me, and I’ll do it. All you have to do is tell me what you want me to say and I’ll say it!”

— KISS, ‘Rock Bottom’
Because he’ll do anything for Niall — absolutely anything.

And that’s a problem. That’s the biggest problem of all. Not the fact that Niall’s afraid they won’t be able to sustain a close relationship when college starts next month, not the fact that Harry’s having qualms about allowing everything to be paid without a penny coming from him, not the fact that Niall is almost disgusted with everything that is happening around him, not the fact that Harry’s nursing the biggest crush he’s ever had — none of that matters because the only thing that matters is the fact that Harry will do anything, anything anything anything anything, for Niall.

_Aways._

Niall’s silent, shaking his head; his face is fading from red to pink to white, and he backs up on shaky—legs, feels around behind him till he’s got hold of one of the chairs in the room, and he sits lightly, carefully, softly, as if he’s afraid it’s going to be jerked out from beneath him.

And Harry kind of wishes it would, kind of wishes he could do it himself. Niall’s been nothing but a complication, nothing but a liability, nothing but a mistake — he’s laughed in Harry’s face, led Harry on, tossed women in Harry’s arms as if him sleeping with a female will diminish, will erase, will shrink Harry’s bubbling attraction to him till it’s gone, till it’s waned, till it’s wasting and shriveling and wrinkling and deflating into a memory, into an ugly recollection of the could-have/should-not part of the mind and Niall’s nothing more than an ex-almost, an ex-maybe, an ex-possibly, an ex-something.

But then Harry remembers one thing, and it’s the biggest thing — Niall doesn’t know. He’s been doing all these horrible things to Harry, and they hurt and they leave an ugly taste in the back of Harry’s throat that makes his heart burn to beat, tingle to thud, but he doesn’t know. Niall doesn’t know that whatever Harry’s feeling for him is far deeper than that of shallow attraction, doesn’t know that whatever Harry’s feeling for him is akin to endless skies and reaching lakes and rolling mountains, doesn’t know that whatever Harry’s feeling for him is _real._

Harry doesn’t talk to Niall, doesn’t express himself to Niall, so Niall doesn’t know.

He just — he just doesn’t know.

And, since Niall doesn’t know, it sort of fucks with Harry’s mind, makes him wonder if what he’s feeling for Niall is actually real, is actually lasting, is actually true. For the longest time, Harry’s never felt anything for Niall except kindship, except friendship, except a brotherly love, and then, all of sudden, seeing Niall in a tub full of hot water has him feeling explosive, has him feeling on fire when nothing like that has ever, ever happened before.

He’s had girlfriends before, had flings before, and while there was clear, palpable attraction between them all, it was never deep-rooted and enduring and incessant and eternal and constant and everlasting. What he’s felt before — it doesn’t hold a candle, doesn’t hold a flame, doesn’t hold anything to what he feels for Niall.

It shouldn’t be this fast, shouldn’t be this easy. It was all of a sudden: abrupt, spine-tingling, confusing and — and horrible, and Harry’s let it go too far, let it get too strong, and now there’s a strain on his relationship with Niall, and, the thing is, he’d rather have Niall as nothing more than a friend, nothing more than a brother, nothing more than a good memory than not have Niall at all.

So maybe what Harry’s feeling is fake; maybe what Harry’s feeling is nothing more than a projection of starvation, of thirst, of a relentless pining need for somebody — maybe what Harry’s feeling isn’t even for Niall, maybe what Harry’s feeling is the repression of emotion for another person and he’s pushed it onto Niall because it’s not in the cards at the moment for him to settle it on the person who
deserves it.

But then Harry remembers — there isn’t anybody back home he wants to be with. Sure, there’s been some girls, some flings in between the very few girlfriends he’s had, but none of that was serious and they mutually agreed to stay friends, to stay in touch even if they aren’t in touch.

What Harry’s feeling for Niall isn’t a projection, isn’t a repression, isn’t something that’s supposed to be for somebody else.

It’s for Niall. And it’s real. It’s as real as Harry, as real as the sun and the flowers and the butterflies and the rivers; it’s as real as Niall, as real as the moon and the rocks and the birds and the mountains, and it’s real.

It’s real. Harry knows it, believes it, and Niall needs to accept that what Harry’s feeling for him is as real as if it were for a girl, for a woman.

And the fact that Niall’s making Harry think it isn’t real — well, that’s a problem.

“Do you want me to tell you that I think about kissing you when you’re talking to me about the stupidest things? Do you want me to tell you that I think about the way your body would look when you’re naked and spread out in front of me? Do you want me to tell you that I think about touching you when the sun hits the freckles on your shoulders? Do you want me to tell you that I think about how it would feel like to be beside you, to be against you, to be naked and bare with you? Do you want me to tell you that I think about how it would feel to be with you?”

Niall shakes his head — again, again, again.

But Harry continues. He’s on a roll, and he’s got every reason, every right to continue.

“Do you want me to tell you that seeing you in that hot tub the first night we were on the road is when it began? Do you want me to tell you that seeing you sprawled out on the bed is what got me so fucking hard that I had to jerk off in the shower to the thought of you on your knees and sucking my dick? Do you want me to tell you that you laughing at me because I tugged one out the next day hurt my heart and made me feel disgusting in my own skin? Do you want me to tell you that you asking me to continue in front of you and then you eating my cum gave me hope that you crushed? Do you want me to tell you that the things you say and do need to be thought through because they make me wonder if I’m normal for thinking about a man instead of a woman?”

“Stop,” Niall says, pleads, shakes his head; his hands are shaking and his face is pale and his eyes are wide, quivering as he meets Harry’s gaze. “Please, Harry. Stop.”

No.

No, no, no.

Never.

It’s Harry’s turn to be mean.

“Do you want me to tell you that I’m tired of running around with you? Do you want me to tell you that throwing women at me to fuck left and right isn’t going to fix me or destroy what I’m feeling for you? Do you want me to tell you that I heard you and Delilah having sex and it made me sick to my stomach? Do you want me to tell you that Alma Jean and I didn’t get past second base because she knew something was wrong with me? Do you want me to tell you that you’re what’s wrong with me?”
“Harry.”

“Do you want me to tell you that your fear of us not being friends when school starts next month isn’t going to be because we’re too busy for each other but because of this shit that’s between us that you run from? Do you want me to tell you that I hate feeling like a charity case and having you pay for everything now that I know the reason behind this trip? Do you want me to tell you that I hate how self-deprecating you are because of your brother and everything he’s done? Do you want me to tell you that I hate how you hide yourself away because of the things your mother has taught you?”

He stops then, takes a deep breath; his heart is pounding in his chest and his blood is racing in his ears, and his fingertips are numb and his knees are knocking and his eyes — his eyes are burning, but he isn’t going to cry, he’s not he’s not he’s not, and Niall’s body is blurred in front of him and it doesn’t settle, doesn’t clear no matter how hard he blinks.

This has been a long time coming, though, and while this isn’t the ideal confrontation Harry (never) had in mind, it’ll do.

For the most part.

Niall inhales, shaky and sharp, and his shoulders shudder, stutter with the movement. “I — I want you to tell me the truth,” he says after a moment of gathering his thoughts, of mulling over the word vomit Harry bestowed upon him. “All I want is for you to tell me the truth, Harry. That’s all I want."

Harry sighs, wets his mouth, picks absentmindedly at a scab he has on his knee with his index finger. “I am telling you the truth, Niall,” he replies, just as soft and just as quiet and just as sweet and just as easy. His eyes are locked on Niall’s big nose instead of his wide eyes; it’s the best he can do at this moment, and it’ll have to work. “Everything I just said is the truth, and that’s not all of it. You know it isn’t.”

It’s not — of course it’s not. Some of the things Harry threw into his small speech — about how earnestly disproving Niall is of himself because of the things his older brother has done, about how skewered Niall’s thinking is because of the selfish things his mother has taught him through the years — are in need of addressing at a later date, at a different time, and it’s the tiny, miniscule details about the care Niall receives that will help him live down his shortcomings, his weak points.

“Why me, Harry? Out of all the women, out of all the men that we know, that are in the world — why is it me that you’re feeling this way for me, Harry?”

Harry thins his lips, shrugs off Niall’s questions. It’s not as if he knows the answer to it himself, and if he did — if he did, he isn’t quite sure he would tell Niall. That’s… that’s for Harry to decide, not Niall.

Maybe if he knew why it would be easier to repress the driving desire he’s got in his tummy.

Niall stands up, runs a hand through his hair while the other scratches awkwardly at his hip. “I — I’m sorry, Harry, but I… I don’t think I can be that person for you,” he says, slow and calculated and smooth and careful, and it’s just words — it’s just words but they hurt, a lot, way worse than if it were sticks and stones thrown at him because at least physical injuries can heal. “I know I can’t be that person for you. I love you, but I — I don’t think I can ever love you like that. I’m sorry, Harry. I’m really sorry.”

Harry nods, swallows, and says, “Yeah? I’m sorry, too.”
Hours later, when Harry’s in bed, dozing in and out of sleep and watching the orange and yellow and pink and red lights outside dance shadows across the white ceiling above in an entertaining show, the door to the room opens and Niall comes in quietly, carefully, like the two of them have before on multiple occasions of sneaking in the next morning. The door shuts, locks, and there’s a muffling of blurry noise before Niall’s turning a lamp in the corner on and bathing the room in enough dim light to illuminate the darkness.

“Harry?”

He’s silent, drifting in and out, in and out; a weight has lifted off of his chest, and he feels like he can finally sleep, like he can finally shut his eyes and catch up on the all the rest he’s lost now that Niall’s inside of the room if not by his side.

“Harry, are you still up?”

He rouses around at that, makes a noise in the back of his throat and rolls over, away from the light that’s shining in the room; he blinks one, two, three, four times before he decides he likes his eyes better closed, and calls, “Niall?”

Niall’s by his side in the next instant, one hand in Harry’s hair while the other is grabbing at the blankets, pulling them up to cover Harry’s shoulders. “You sleeping?” he asks, carding his fingers through Harry’s hair lightly, lovingly. “I didn’t wake you coming in, did I?”

As if.

“Yeah,” Harry replies, drawls, slurs the word, keeps his eyes shut against the touch, the sound of Niall. “’m sleepin’.”

“That’s good,” Niall replies, coos, and Harry nods, sighs, breathes deeply; he smells rain and skin and wetness, and he comes to the conclusion that Niall must have been outside walking around in the rain after he left when Harry ducked into the shower in the wake of both of them expressing their apologies. “Everything’s okay, Harry. Just go back to sleep.”

Everything’s okay? Yeah, in Harry’s dreams.

And even then — they’re nightmares.

The windows are down, and the wind is whipping in the vehicle, dragging Harry’s hair out of the elastic tie he’s got it in and drying the sweat on Niall’s temple where it’s beaded below the brim of his hat; true to Niall’s word, Harry didn’t wake up a single second sooner than noon, and when he finally roused around at one-thirty, he discovered all of their things were packed and put in the van, ready to head out, and Niall was sitting on the bed, leafing through the Bible in the bedside drawer the hotel offers and patiently, quietly, thoughtfully waiting for Harry to come around.

He gave Harry a smile when he woke up, when he opened his eyes and blinked enough for his vision to clear to see completely.

It was forced, and it was fake. Harry chose to not comment on the fact that Niall left Harry to go to bed alone and came back in the wee hours of the morning.

(Harry also chooses to believe that Niall slept even though he knows Niall didn’t get any rest at all.)

And now, hours later, it’s after five o’clock and Harry’s been driving for hours, zooming through
towns and zipping through cities; the speedometer is clocked out at seventy-five, and they’re far enough into south central Oklahoma that they can see the hills crawling upward to the sky in the distance, in the east.

Oklahoma, this part of Oklahoma is ridden with farmland, long and rolling, rolling, rolling; there’s no trees, no hills, no mountains, but the stretch of green pastures, of beans and corn and crop and harvesting equipment parked next to the fields and barns that seem to hold the headquarters of the businesses, and it’s all so naked that Harry himself feels naked, too.

“Are you hungry?”

Harry takes one hand off the wheel, brings his fingers up and wipes a bit of sweat on his brow; it’s been so long, they’ve gone for so many miles without speaking that it’s more than a little weird to hear Niall’s voice above the radio, to hear Niall speak above KISS, singing about rocking and rolling all night long.

“I could eat,” Harry replies, shrugs his shoulders. He had a decent snack of grapes and graham crackers and peanut butter before they left the hotel, but he’s not quite in the mood to eat, to put anything in his stomach that can be thrown up. “If you’re hungry, I could eat.”

Niall nods, and it’s movement that Harry catches out of the corner of his eye because he can’t bear the thought of meeting Niall’s blue, blue gaze at the moment.

(He sees enough blue looking out of the dirty windshield of the van, and even though it doesn’t compare to Niall’s, it’s good enough.)

“Please?” Niall asks, folds his hands in his lap and acts like a scolded child, acts like a heartbroken teenager swallowing their pride and asking for help (maybe that’s what the both of them need to do). “If you don’t mind stopping.”

Harry sighs. “No, I don’t.” It’s Niall’s vehicle, anyway. Well, for the most part, it is; Niall’s in charge of it, at least. “What do you have in mind, Ni?”

Niall thins his lips, tries to hide the smile that Harry can see wants to, needs to escape. At least it would be real if unwanted, unwarranted. “There’s a diner a few miles back,” he answers, blinks slowly, languidly. “We can go there, if you want, or we can drive around and look if you aren’t interested in a burger.”

“That’s fine. I don’t care where we go. It’s up to you.”

“I’d like to go to the diner, please.”

Harry nods, grits his teeth, digs his nails into the leather of the steering wheel; the tension, the tightness, the tautness — it’s deafening, it’s screaming, and Harry doesn’t know how to fix it, doesn’t know how it got to this point.
Read the tags!! And please, please know that college starts Wednesday, so if there's only one update a week it's because my ass is drowning in work. Hope that's all right.

"jolene, jolene, jolene, jolene
i'm begging of you please don't take my man
jolene, jolene, jolene, Jolene
please don't take him even though you can"

— Dolly Parton, ‘Jolene’

The diner Niall asked, almost begged to stop at is tall and long and broad and wide; it's colored brightly, brilliantly, with neon lights that shine dimly compared to the glimmer of the setting sun to the west and windows that give illusions to the jubilance, the rowdiness and delayed joy of the weekend filtering about inside.

Finally.

Niall jogs ahead of Harry a bit, kicking at the dry dust with his sneakers and hurrying to do up the buttons of his floral, pink and yellow and orange shirt; his brown hair is a sweaty mess, a damp tangle on his head left behind from the hat, and the jeans he's got on are ripped, frayed at the edges, and from this angle, from behind, he looks hard and he looks tough and he looks resilient and he looks confident and he looks sure of himself, sure of all things with a towering physique that glows with the sun and shines with the moon.

He isn't, though. Hard, tough, resilient, confident, sure of himself, sure of all things. It's all just a game to him — Niall's so fucked up, and Harry's known it for years, but he's just now realizing it, and it's all just a game, all just a fake, all just a mask. Niall's got layers, got levels to who he is as a person; his mum is one and his brother is one, too, and Harry himself is another and Louis and Liam have their own, as do Anne and Gemma and all the other people in Niall's left worth remembering, worth loving.

But Niall's not solid. He's not. He's got all these walls built up around himself, and they're tall and they're towering and they're full of titanium thunder, but that's all they are — walls, wall, walls. He's got walls like he's got layers, like he's got levels of loves and losses and lasts.

The thing is, Niall's just as afraid as Harry. That's one of the recent things Harry's realized even though he's known it for days, for weeks, for years. Niall's just as scared, just as afraid, just as frightened as Harry — he only hides it better. He practically hides it from himself.

And Harry can't seem to hide nothing at all.

They make a perfect, balanced match: fucked and fucked up. Unique.

Niall tugs the heavy-looking glass door open for Harry, ushers Harry inside; it closes, and Harry stops, stands still, waits for Niall to come to his side, and the smell of the diner — it's greasy and it's
fresh, and it's rotten like spilled beer on clothes and comforting like homemade French fries sliced up fresh, and the people are dressed colorfully in hues that range from daffodil to fire engine to lavender to pansy pink to grass to royal blue and it's loud and they're laughing and the noise is so rumbling, so thought-consuming that Harry can't gather his wits about himself for a moment.

Till Niall's fingers are tapping at the back of his hand, are curling along the sensitive skin of his palm, are tickling at the tender flesh on the inside of his wrist, and his eyes are jerked off the scene around him and to Niall's gaze, and it's green and blue, forest and ocean, air and earth meeting.

(Harry wonders what kind of colors Niall sees when he looks into Harry's eyes.)

"You don't have any preference where we sit at, do you?" Niall asks, slow and quiet; his eyes are sparkling, blue blue blue blue blue, and they make Harry think of stupid cotton candy at stupid overpriced baseball games in the mix of a stupid crowd with stupid fireworks at the end and stupid music to go along with the stupidity of it all.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

"No, I don't care where we sit," he replies, shakes his head; he wouldn't mind taking a booth to see the sun and watch as it eases itself lower in the sky, or even a stool at the bar to be close to the staff as they cook. "Just — find somewhere for us, and order me whatever you get, I guess, and I'd like a glass of iced water, too, okay?"

Niall nods, frowns. "Okay, Harry," he says, soft and slow. "Where are you going to be?"

Good question.

"I'm going to go find the restroom, maybe clean up a bit," he answers, quick and assertive, and he's quite surprised at how rapidly he was able to come up with that little fib. It's not a complete lie, though — he reckons he ought to ring his mother, ought to let her know how he's doing, and if he spots a toilet on the way, so be it. He'll duck in, clean himself up a bit; he's got sweat in places he never knew he had before and beads of dust at the corners of his eyes. "I'll be out in a minute, and I'll find you then, m'kay?"

"Kay," Niall says, gives Harry a tentative, watery smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. "Hurry back, yeah?"

Harry nods, thins his lips, and then he's off; Niall's going to the left and he's going to the right, weaving through tables and around standing occupants, offering his apologies whenever he catches a foot or trips over a chair and they're all very nice, waving off his worry with a smile and a small comment.

He finds a waitress, and she's short and round and black, with wrinkles around her eyes and faint gloss on her lips and curls in her hair that climb high. "Excuse me, ma'am?" he calls, catches her attention, nearly topples into her when he trips over his own two feet; he grabs the two jugs of tea from her hands, holds them steady while they right themselves with a softhearted chuckle from her and a raging red blush from him. "Can you tell me where your phone is?"

She nods; his eyes flick down, past her eyes, as he hands her the jugs back and he sees that her nametag reads Abilene. "Pretty.

"Oh, sugar, you need to have yourself somethin' to eat if you're trippin' over yourself like that," she says, chastises, and Harry feels a ping of pain, a sting of sorrow in his chest; he misses his mummy, just a little bit, and the way her smile made him feel like every battle he was fighting would turn out
in a hard-earned victory in his favor.

"My friend is ordering for me," he replies, gives her a lilted smile; her accent is thick, heavy, decidedly different from everybody else he's met on this impromptu road trip, and he finds that he likes hers the best — except for Niall's, of course, but that goes without saying. "I wanted to call my mum and let her know how everything's going before I settle down to eat."

"Right over there," she points, and Harry follows her finger with his eyes, "is a hallway; follow it all the way down, past the bathrooms, and take a left, and the phone's hangin' up on the wall in front of you. Sound good?"

"Sounds great." He nods, gives her a courteous smile. "Thank you very much."

"You're welcome, sugar," she says, waves him off, and he steps to the side, allows her to pass before he's off toward the corridor on the south side of the building; the hallway is dimly lit with a few yellow lights above and it smells like syrup, smells like sweet Sunday mornings with big breakfasts and slight hangovers and tons of cat naps on the sofa as the radio drones on and on and on.

He follows her directions, goes all the way down the corridor — he decides to call his mum before he relieves and washes himself in the restroom — and hangs a left; there, on the wall in front of him like she said, is the phone, and it's big and black and dirty with smudged fingerprints and the chord is long, curling a few inches above the floor, and he strides forward, takes it off the hook and dials the number that's a wrinkled piece of paper in his duffel bag, that's a slant of cursive handwriting in the back of his mind.

It rings for a second, and rings and rings and rings, and right before the dial tone is to pick up, there's a burst of noise that crackles uncomfortably in Harry's ear, and then his sister is saying, "Hello?"

He breathes a sigh of relief, closes his eyes and brings his arm up, leaning forward to rest himself against the wall. "Hi, Gem," he says in greeting, grinning from ear to ear; he's not seen his sister in a few weeks as she's been vacationing with her friends — that's what Anne thinks, but Harry has his suspicions that he's learned to keep to himself — and it's kind of nice to hear her pitched voice.

"What are you doing home?"

She snorts. "Mum rang me up the day you left and asked if I could spare her a few weeks while she took off of work herself," she replies, and Harry opens his eyes, stares at the crinkled, yellowing newspaper clippings that are tacked on to the sandpaper-like wall he's leaning against. They're so old that the words have smudged. "She's pissed that you and Niall up and left without telling her a word about where you were going."

"I left a note."

"You're son of the fucking year for that one, Harry."

He frowns, scratches at his temple, wipes a few stray strands of hairs off of his forehead. "It's not any worse than when you skipped out and ran off with Greg to Woodstock," he points out, beats her at her own game.

She's quiet a moment; there's a bit of ruffling, shuffling, and he reckons she's grabbing at a chair in the kitchen where the phone is to sit for a moment. "You've got me there; I guess the Horan boys are just destined to get the Styles kids in trouble," is her response, and Harry nods his silent agreement.

"How's the trip going so far?"

"It's going." He thins his lips. "We're in Oklahoma right now, south central, I think, and we're
stopped at a diner to get something to eat. I reckon it'll be dark by the time we get out, and we'll probably drive till we find a motel."

"Oh, I love the food in Oklahoma," she admits, and Harry's confused; when was she ever in Oklahoma? "What all have the two of you done while you've been gone?"

Harry narrows his eyes, racks his brain. What all have the two of them done that is suitable for her to know about?

But she's his sister, one of his best friends, and really, she knows everything about Harry and he knows everything about her. That's how they've always been, how they're always going to be, and he likes the dynamics they share — she's herself and he's himself, too, and they fight a lot but they also fight for each other a lot, as well, and it's nice to have somebody who shares the same blood as you, who shares the same memories as you in your life.

"Well, do you want me to start with the time I was high out of my mind and discovered Tombstone is haunted or when Niall and I got shot at after going back to a house with a few women and we were almost killed?"

Gemma coughs out a bark of laughter that echoes in the receiver. "My goodness, Harry, how are you still alive?" she asks after a moment, setting down her raging hysterics; the grin on Harry's face is big. "Greg was wild when we were your age, but it seems like Niall's making up for all the guts that you lack."

He scoffs. "Be nice to me."

She giggles. "Never. You're my baby brother, Harry — there's only one person in the world who can give you shit, and that's me." She takes a second to ponder, and Harry patiently awaits her next thought. "And Niall, too, but everybody already knows that."

And — and then it's coming out like a flood of water, like a gust of wind, like an avalanche of earth, like a blast of fire:

"Gemma, I want Niall to be my boyfriend."

And, the most magical thing happens, and Harry realizes just how golden Gemma is, realizes just how one of a kind and awesome and uniquely her own and supportive Gemma is:

"I've always thought the two of you would make a good couple."

Harry lets his tense shoulders fall, lets himself rest completely against the wall. "You don't... you don't think it's weird, do you?" he asks, small and tiny, quiet and easy. "Ni and I are both boys."

"Of course not," is her answer, and the fluttering of adoration in Harry's stomach belongs only to her. "I mean, I don't believe in God the way the two of you do, but I think even if I did... Love is love, Harry, and God — He gives you the choice to either pretend to be somebody you're not or to always be the person you're meant to be. He's a pretty cool dude like that, I think."

Harry grins — spoken like a true believer, even though she'll deny belonging to any faith every time she's asked. He respects her reluctance to conform; it's who she is.

"Besides, I was at Woodstock, Harry — it was men with men and women with women just as much as it was women with men. I saw enough cocks and pussies to last me two lifetimes, and I can honestly say that I enjoy being eaten out more by a woman than a man. Women just know how other women work, and there's no awkward coaching through it, either. Or teeth. Honestly, if I weren't so
deep in the relationship I have with Ollie — well, I reckon I'd be living life like I did at Woodstock."

"And how was that?"

Harry can't see her, but he knows she's smiling just as big as he is. "Any way I wanted."

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Harry hangs up a few moments later after asking how everything is happening — their mum is off for two weeks and she's attempting to date her shift manager, as well, (which Harry and Gemma both think is a good thing; Robin is quite the man, and he's been over for supper well enough for him to be part of the family) and her and Olivier are looking at flats in the city they're planning on moving into in the fall while they finish up at UCLA, and that's great because Harry misses his big sister more than he'll ever verbally confirm — and ducks into the restroom, pisses and takes a much-needed moment to shit, and splashes water on his face, cleans the granite beads off of his neck and wrists and hairline before making his way out of the corridor and into the main dining area in search of Niall.

Niall's got the two of them a booth next to the window; the sun has set dramatically, and it's low enough that it's shining through and into Harry's eyes, blinding him for a second.

"'ave you ordered yet?" he asks Niall, shifting around till he's comfortable in the red-cushioned booth.

Niall nods. "Got you a barbeque burger with cheese and pickles and lettuce and onion rings on the side, and I ordered a BLT with hash browns and dills," he replies, scoots Harry's sweating glass of ice water toward him; the cup is cold and it freezes as it goes down, but it's smooth, smooth, smooth, and it tastes too good to be a problem. "Jolene said it should be out in a few more minutes."

"Jolene?" Harry quirks a brow.

"Our waitress."

"Oh."

Niall smiles, folds his arms in his lap and slants his head; the movement catches a bit of the sun, and Harry averts his eyes so he can blink away the bright spots in his vision. "How'd the call go?"

"I got Gemma." He twirls the straw around in his water, watching the tiny droplets of condensation slide off the glass and onto the polished wood of the table. "She says her and Ollie are thinking of getting an apartment close to home together before the semesters starts."

"That's great, H." Niall's grin grows, and he kicks Harry fondly beneath the table. "I know how much you miss not being able to see her whenever you want."

"Yeah." Harry nods, sighs, brings his arms up on the table and folds them together; he leans down, puts his chin on his forearm, and blinks sleepily, tiredly up at Niall, over at Niall. "You should ring up Greg and let him know how you're doing, make sure he's aware you're still alive."

Niall's smile fades and he shakes his head, once, firm and final. "I'd rather not."

"He might be a dick sometimes, Ni, but he's still your brother."

Niall snorts, rolls his eyes. "You're telling me if Gem acted like a bitch to you the way Greg acts like a bastard toward me you'd still want to talk to her?" he asks, and Harry wonders if this is a trick
question, wonders if there's some sort of hidden meaning beneath the colorfully-worded question. Harry nods. "I would," he answers, blinks; Niall's nostrils flare, annoyed and aggravated. "Because she's my sister, and she's the only one I have, and I don't want to ever think of my life without her in it."

"Greg isn't Gemma," Niall says, grips the trimming of the table in white-knuckled fists that makes Harry wonder what's caused the rift between them this time. "Now, stop asking me about my family and raise up 'cause our food is coming and Jolene's got a load."

Just as Niall directs Harry, a tall woman with auburn hair and green eyes and plump lips arrives; her breasts are large and her stomach is soft-looking beneath the thinness of her white t-shirt and her pale legs are creamy next to the darkness of her skirt.

She sets the food down, flashes Niall a secretive smile that is returned in kind; Harry wets his lips, leans back, and decides that tonight is going to be the night the lights in his eyes go out because Niall's got that glimmer to his grin that Harry knows all too well.

"Suck," Niall commands, shoves Jolene's naked thighs wide and pushes Harry to his knees, on the floor and between her legs as she's spread out on the bed. "And make her come."

Harry swallows, flicks his gaze up to meet Jolene's emerald-colored eyes; her face is flushed and her hair is in a disarray from Niall's fingers brushing through it and her shirt is off and her breasts are pillowing against her chest and the swell of her stomach is pale against the darkness of Harry's palm as he puts his hand to her skin, as he pushes her down, and the smile on her face is pretty.

He leans close, takes a sniff; she's sweaty and musky, and with a tentative lick to the outside lips he concludes that she's more salty than sour, than sweet, and that she's sensitive enough already that he can problem have her coming in a few minutes if he's thorough.

With the hand not on her stomach, he parts her folds, finds what he's looking for; like a ravaged animal, he pushes his fast between her legs and licks a long, bold stripe from asshole to clit, drinking a bit of the moisture that's gathered, and once he's at the top he swirls his tongue around the hard nub there, over and over and over; he raises his eyes off the mess of her dark pubic hair when the bed dips and sees that Niall is kissing her senseless, kissing her deep, fucking her mouth like Harry's fucking her with his mouth, and it's hot to see and even hotter to be a part of. Niall's hand is trailing along the mountain of her breasts, curling against her skin till he's at her mound, and his fingers dip through the coarse hair and rub at her clit, tangling and massaging and disrupting Harry's tongue as he sucks, sucks, sucks, and Niall rubs, rubs, rubs, and she's coming fast, coming hard, coming wetly against his mouth, against Niall's palm with a gush that Harry swallows completely.

Fuck, that was hot, that was so good; the erection Harry's got in his britches is just as much from sucking on Niall's fingers than it is eating Jolene's pussy.

"Up," Niall orders, and he's in command here, it seems. "And strip."

Harry does so, takes off his shirt and pants and underwear and socks; he trips over himself, falls onto the bed, and why he's doing this he isn't sure — Niall gave him one look at the diner, and the rest turned into history, and that's why they're here now, why Harry is on his back and easing Jolene onto his cock as Niall fingers her ass with enough jelly that she'll be slipping around for ages before lining himself up with her hole and pushing inside to complete the contact.
It's a tight fit, really; she's warm and wet, and Harry can feel the ridges of her walls through the condom he's got on. Her hands are in his hair and her face is against his throat, and she's breathing heavy, seemingly trying to calm herself down, and Niall's whispering words in her ear as he leans up over her, so close so close so close to Harry's face that he can feel the brush of Niall's brown hair against his forehead as he shuts his eyes and lets out a muffled moan that rattles with Jolene's and mixes with Niall's.

Jolene makes a sobbing noise; she arches, moves her hips, and Harry hisses, digs his nails into her the fleshy skin of her slick hips, and Niall makes a breathless sound, too, slams his hands on either side of Harry's face, and she picks up a slow, simple rhythm that has her caressing his body with her own.

Up, grind, down, grind, side, grind, side, grind, and it's probably a little hard to fuck and be fucked when you're getting it from both ends, and he applauds her for her beaming resilience.

It's all sensation now: tight, wet, heat, proximity, sweat, weight, touch, hair, feel. It's a mess of amalgamations, of heightened and lowered senses that make Harry feel electrically alive; he and Niall have tugged together, have pulled together, but they've never fucked together, and this is new and this is good and Harry likes the closeness he feels with Niall through Jolene because he can look into Niall's eyes, because he can look at Niall's smile, because he can look at Niall's face as he comes apart over him.

And it hits Harry in the next moment: Niall's using Jolene to fuck Harry, using this perfectly nice young woman to have sex with his best friend.

That's... that's just wrong.
it's all over now

well, baby used to stay out all night long
she made me cry, she done me wrong
she hurt my eyes open, that’s no lie
tables turn and now her turn to cry
because i used to love her, but it’s all over now

― the Rolling Stones, ‘It’s All Over Now’

Harry rushes through the house, through the apartment, tripping over every single little thing in his path as he dashes to the door — it’s quite large, quite big, the place he foolishly allowed Niall into talking him in going to for a “quick fuck that’ll take a load off our minds”, and there’s lamps on one table and a vase of flowers on the other and a pile of mail in the kitchen with coffee stains on the envelopes, and there’s decorative pillows on the couch and knitted blankets thrown over the chairs and a stack of albums in a corner and a sewing kit laid out in the other and it smells like faint cinnamon and ripe apples and warm pumpkin spice, like fall and Halloween and Thanksgiving and Christmas, and he needs to get out of here.

Now.

Now, now, now, now, now.

If he doesn’t, if he can’t… then that’s it. He’s going to… he’s going to do something; he doesn’t know what, but he knows he’s going to do something, and it’s probably not good.

He’s dressed — barely, but barely is better than not at all, and it isn’t like he’s the only streaker in the world — with the zip of his jeans undone and his shirt inside out and backward and scratching uncomfortably at a mark on the nape of his neck that passionate nails must have left behind and his boots aren’t all the way on his feet and that’s not good because he’s breaking the tops and turning his ankles as he goes, goes; his hair is tangled and knotted, and his chest is on fire with suckled kisses Jolene slathered him pleasantly in moments ago, seconds ago, and his underwear is lost somewhere in her room and he doesn’t quite care enough to get them back when he’s already out, and his soft cock is rubbing nastily against the fabric of his pants and it’s chafing the insides of his thighs disturbingly, and he needs to leave, leave, leave.

Before it’s too late, before he finally loses his grasp on the pressurized pain he’s kept bundled, bottled up in his heart and in his mind and in his soul.

There’s shouts behind him; he isn’t sure if it’s Niall screaming his name and Jolene struggling to cover herself modestly as she quietly, patiently, sweetly asks what’s going on, or if it’s Jolene yelling after him deeply and Niall trying to cover his bareness with whatever it is he can grab on his way in pursuit of Harry, and Harry feels a rush of guilt, of indignation hit him solidly in the gut like a fist to the stomach, like a tackle to the ground on freshly-beaten dirt — she’s such a nice person, kind and courteous and kindred and careful, and it isn’t her fault Niall’s in denial (ha) or that Harry wishes he was in (de)Niall or that she’s been brought into this big fucking mess nobody wants to address because they’re all running and running and running and denying and denying and denying.

Ha.

It’s nice to be able to crack jokes and poke fun at the situations like he used to do all the time, and it’s a spectacular way to break the ice around his heart, to erase the thick fog of tension in his mind, to
get rid of the tight choke of confusion in his soul; Harry’s a people person, for the most part, but nobody’s a Harry person.

Except for Niall, and he doesn’t even want to believe it.

It’s probably a good thing that he doesn’t believe it, though — if what Niall keeps saying, over and over and over, again and again and again, about how the feelings Harry’s got for him are shallow and won’t last the summer, maybe it’s a good thing Niall doesn’t believe that he’s the only person Harry can see himself with at this moment in time.

It could change. Harry’s feelings, Harry’s thoughts and emotions regarding Niall — they could change, just like everybody’s regard for someone they love, for someone they care about can change. Things aren’t sturdy; the only thing in the world that doesn’t change is the fact that everything changes. He isn’t going to say that they aren’t, isn’t going to say that they won’t; he’s learned that attempting to predict the future is a messy waste of time, and it’s better to just take what life gives you and run run run with it till you’re as far away from the tangle of lies and deceit and unfaithfulness and disloyalty that dug the hole, that pulled you in deep.

Harry’s going to do what Gemma said — he’s going to live his life any way he (fucking) wants to. And he’s going to live it for him, and nobody else, and it doesn’t matter that he wants Niall by his side, doesn’t matter that he wants Niall to be there with him through the ups and the downs and the total all-the-way-arounds.

If Niall doesn’t want to be there, he won’t be, and — well, Harry can’t fix that. He’s not Niall, he’s not a controlling person, he’s not an intriguing string of mysterious entertainment — he’s not a thing to Niall, for Niall, with Niall.

(And that — it’s hard to realize, hard to understand, hard to accept that the person you’ve thought as your best friend for years is nothing but a shell, nothing but a stranger in familiar skin with eyes that shine like cloudless blue skies and a smile that feels like coming home after being gone for so long.)

He can fix this, though. This situation, the ugliness of this idiotic road trip they’ve set out on to park in Atlanta and enjoy a Stones concert — Harry can fix it easy, easy, easy.

And Niall can either be with him, can either go with him, or — or stay here, stay stuck in the same time lapse, reliving everything the same in different situations.

After all, Harry can’t control Niall, has no want to control Niall — who craves control, who runs off of control, who strives to have everything under control. Niall likes to be in control and Harry tends to not care either way, but — but when somebody loses all the control they once had before, it’s unnerving.

Maybe that’s one of the things wrong with Niall.

(Maybe that’s one of the things wrong with Harry — he doesn’t care who is in control as long as it’s somebody, as long as it is not him.)

“Wait! Harry! Wait!”

Harry scoffs, shakes his head, and allows a hard, self-deprecating smile to screw across his face, to sting along his lips. He doesn’t stop.

(And neither does Niall. Fuck.)

“Harry, stop!”
He does this time, reckons he should probably hear Niall out since they’re (hopefully) going to share a vehicle again for hours upon hours upon hours to wherever the hell it is that they’re going now.

“What?”

Niall stops several paces behind him. “Are you okay?” he asks, breathes heavily, and Harry’s heart inflates like a balloon, like a wasp sting, like a thorn scratch: Niall is concerned about him, Niall cares for him. “Jolene’s got a mark on her forehead, and she’s worried about you, taking off like that and all. You didn’t have to… to run off, Harry.”

And, just like that, his heart deflates; even the prettiest rose has thorns, and it seems like the more attractive the flower the deadlier the stem, really.

(Harry can guarantee the truth in that.)

He really is sorry that he’s hurt Jolene, though; she’s just a civilian in the line of fire of two warring armies who know nothing but pain, nothing but destruction, nothing but annihilation, and she’s the daisy in the cracked sidewalk of the aftermath.

“Fuck off!” Harry screams, yells over his shoulder; it’s dark outside save for the bright stars above, and he can just barely catch Niall’s half-naked form with the limited illumination. He’s only wearing his red and green and blue underwear, with no shoes and no socks and no shirt and no pants, and the thing is — Harry’s fairly sure those are his boxers, not Niall’s, because he likes plaid and Niall likes solid. And his naked chest, his bare torso — there’s passionate marks scratched across his skin, yes, and Harry’s kind of miffed that he isn’t the one who was able to leave them behind, but they’re still hot, still sexy, still… alluring in every way Harry’s been taught they shouldn’t. “I’m so fucking sick of —”

“Of what?” Niall interrupts, calls, whines — well, kind of, but it’s close enough — and stops a few feet ahead of Harry; his face is bathed in darkness that’s highlighted with shadows from the stars above, but Harry can make out his heavy frown. “What are you tired of, Harry? And why… why do you always run?”

Harry rolls his eyes, digs around in the pocket of his jeans and snags the keys, pivoting on his heel and resuming his retreat, stalking ahead and away from Niall. If Niall’s that dense, if Niall’s that oblivious, if — if Niall’s that idiotic, Harry doesn’t want a thing to do with him because explaining something to him that he should already know, that he should already respect is kind of a waste of time, kind of a waste of breath.

It’s… it’s just a waste. And it isn’t worth it.

“Harry!” Niall’s close to him now, right behind him, and then there’s a hand on his arm and fingers closing around his bicep, and he’s being stopped, being spun, being stripped down to fire by the watery chill of Niall’s halfhearted glare and he can’t jerk himself away fast enough. “Harry, what is — what is wrong with you now?”

Now? What is wrong with him now?

That… that hurt. A lot.

“You!” he says, screams — screams, screams, screams, and it’s so loud that it echoes, so loud that it burns his throat, so liberating that it soars his heart on wings of freedom that he hasn’t felt since he started seeing Niall in a different light, in a different perspective. “You’re my problem — you’re what’s wrong with me!”
Niall’s brow furrows; over his shoulder, Harry can see that Jolene has got herself covered with a pale orange throw, wrapped up tight, and she’s standing on the stoop of her house, of her home, and the porchlight is throwing off enough illumination that Niall’s being backlit, that Niall looks like an angel, and he’s far from a celestial being, far from the idealistic version of a human.

(Harry’s just glad that Jolene lives far enough in the country, far enough out of the way of others that any yelling between the two of them, him and Niall, and any yelling between the three of them, him and Niall and Jolene, can’t be heard.)

“You’re my problem, Niall, and you have been since we started this — this damn road trip,” Harry repeats, elaborates, and he doesn’t like the way the color drains from Niall’s face, doesn’t like the way the light in Niall’s eyes flicker to a fading flame, but what’s done is done and he’s sick and tired, and sick and tired and sick and tired and sick and tired, of having to swallow down, of having to repress, of having to ignore the way he’s feeling to make Niall smile. “And… and I’m sorry that I like you, okay, and I’m sorry that I’m a boy and I’m sorry that you’re a boy and I’m sorry that I didn’t fuck Alma Jean and I’m sorry that I didn’t finish fucking Jolene, but you were fucking me through her and it’s wrong of you to use her like that and I — and I’m not going to let you do this to me any longer.”

Niall slants his head to the side, and dammit, he looks adorable when he’s disgruntled and confused, but he’s got no reason to be either because what Harry is telling him, what Harry is screaming at him — it’s all been laid out in the open and it’s common knowledge, easily seen.

He’s just really, really good at ignoring all the thorns in his life, isn’t he?

“What am I doing to you?”

Harry sighs, brings his palm up to wipe the sweat off of his face; it’s nighttime, probably closer to ten than nine, but it’s also July in Oklahoma and it’s hot, hot, hot, and humid and sticky, too, and his clothes feel as if they’re a second layer of skin, of thick flesh, and he’s heavy with fatigue.

“You make me feel like I’m not in control of myself,” Harry replies, shrugs, gives Niall a lilted grin that feels dirty with poison from thorns. “You make me feel like I’m worthless, and you make me feel like I’m dirty and disgusting and degrading, too. I — I can’t help the fact that you and I are both boys any more than I can help the fact that I’m attracted to you in every way there possible is or the fact that I don’t look at anyone the way I look at you, and all my life, all our lives, Niall, we’ve been told that it’s wrong for two men or two women to be together, and it may be to them, to you, to most of the people in the world, but it isn’t for me and I never thought I would have to beg for support from the person I thought was my best friend, from the person who is supposed to build me up when I’m falling down.”

He’s not going to cry — he’s not, he’s not, he’s not. And if he does? Well, Niall’s going to be crying, too, because this is one fight that neither is going to leave unscathed.

These tears — they might be the tears that don’t stop falling, either.

“I… I never realized,” Niall says, replies, and his arm reaches out and his fingers twitch, curl in a sheepish invitation of touch, but Harry moves to the right to fend off the unwanted contact and Niall’s hand falls to his side slowly, sadly, and it makes Harry’s throat thick to see the look of resignation on Niall’s face but he doesn’t care, doesn’t care, doesn’t care. Not now, at least. “I didn’t even think, Harry.”

“Yeah. A lot of people don’t, and you never do.”
They’re silent, quiet, thoughtful for a moment; Jolene moves back inside, shuts the door, but keeps the porch light on for them, and he’s sorry, so sorry for literally throwing her off of him and onto the floor and giving her a knot on her temple, and she’s such a nice woman and he should really apologize for turning her evening into the biggest disaster of the week.

(So far. It’s only the third of July, and the concert is the thirtieth, and — and that’s still a lot of time for him and Niall to mess up everything.)

“I’m sorry, Niall,” Harry says, again, and shrugs, again, and that’s all he can do, really, is apologize and apologize and apologize for himself, for Niall, for them, and hope, and pray and beg and plead to God, to a higher power that the damage that’s already been done to their relationship doesn’t tear them apart. “For making you uncomfortable, for making you mad, for relying on you when I know I shouldn’t, for putting you in all of these situations you don’t like. I really am sorry for everything that’s happened so far.”

“Harry.” Niall takes a step forward, one and two and three and four, and then he’s right in front of Harry, so close that the sizzling heat between them is more stifling than the humid air surrounding them in the cleared lot they’re in, and Harry’s dense with everything. “Harry, you don’t have to apologize for everything that’s happened.”

Niall’s right — Harry shouldn’t be apologizing as much as he is, no, especially for the things he can’t control, for the things neither of them can control, but he is, and it isn’t like Niall’s going to buck up, going to man up, going to take responsibility for his own actions and ask for forgiveness when he’s so used to having a contained, determined balance on himself, on his atmosphere, on his situations and everything that surrounds him.

And that’s just kind of funny, really, because for as long as Harry can remember, Niall’s always preferred to ask forgiveness opposed to permission and Harry regardless of approval so he doesn’t sulk back to deliver an avoidable apology, and it’s the exact opposite now.

Hmm. Maybe this road trip is a good thing, after all — maybe this road trip is teaching a much-needed lesson for Harry, for Niall, for the both of them together and for the both of them separate.

After all, they aren’t kids anymore. According to society, according to the world, they’re adults, two eighteen-year-old young men with hungry eyes and wild hearts, and they’re expected to know everything when they know nothing, expected to do it all when they’ve never done it before. This road trip is nothing more than a classroom the size of the United States with teachers of all ages and sizes and races and sexualities and religions that deliver tests that never never never end.

And maybe, just maybe, Harry needs to let go of Niall on this road trip to Atlanta so he can live his life the way he’s supposed to, the way he’s expected to.

(Gemma told him to live his life any way he wants, though, and he thinks she’s got a good point there, too, but he doesn’t know anything, really.)

He wonders how it would go over with Niall if he were to ask if they could call it quits, if they could go back home to LA and familiarity and support and acceptance.

It’ll probably break Niall’s heart just as much as it’ll crack Harry’s.

Harry wrinkles his brow, lets out a humorless puff of laughter that burns his lungs in the same way Niall is freezing his soul. “And I think the shittiest thing about this mess is that you can’t even apologize for your own part in it, Niall,” he muses, announces, and Niall’s lips push together, thin into a straight line of sharp displeasure, but it’s the truth and Harry’s tired of feeding Niall falsity.
“Now, I’ve got the keys to the van in my hand, and I’m leaving, and you can go or you can stay, but either way I’m gone.”

Niall blinks, folds in on himself. “Do you even want me to come with you, Harry?” he asks, wetting his lips, cupping his elbows and holding himself in the way Harry wishes he could be held. “I won’t blame you any.”


Always, always, always.

Even if the only thing Niall’s good for is breaking his heart, little by little, piece by piece.
independence day

let the whole world know that today is the day of reckoning

― Martina McBride, ‘Independence Day’

Harry’s been driving for hours — and hours and hours and hours; he and Niall got themselves together, got themselves in the van at seventeen till eleven last night, after the both of them went back into Jolene’s place and retrieved the things they left, and he’s driven all night long, all morning long, and the Fourth of July dawned crater gray dull blue and liquid silver, preparing for streaking colors of bursting bombs in the sky tonight, and the clock’s just clicked on twelve o’clock in the p.m. and his stomach’s began to growl for a bite to eat.

(He’s found that it’s quite hard to sleep, to rest, to stop when you know nothing but go and go and go, and he was too wired from the one-sided confrontation last night to mellow out.)

Besides, he reckons all this driving he’s done through the night has been productive; they’re not short on time, per se, but they’ve got a few thousand miles more to go till Atlanta looms in the distance, and they’ve still yet to purchase their tickets for the concert the thirtieth. Harry’s not too worried about that, though, because if they’re able to keep up the pace they (he) had last night, they’ll be in Georgia in less than a week with plenty of time to buy the tickets and sightsee around for a little while.

That’s a big fucking ‘if’, though. And he likes to see new things just as much as Niall likes to, as well; they’ve not ever strayed too far from LA and the surrounding area, and now that there’s a limited amount of time left that they can explore the world before college starts and consumes them, Harry reckons it’s better to take advantage and appreciate what little days they have.

He’s decided that Oklahoma’s a nice, comfortable state. There’s a bit more mountains than he would have thought, tall and long and thick, and the temperature is relatively colder than it was last night, and there’s white stuff, snow, capping the tops of the hills that are arching to his left, to his right, to his front, to his back, and —

— and he got off the wrong ramp somewhere along the way because this is not Oklahoma and it damn sure isn’t Arkansas or Louisiana or Missouri or any other state east, and he’s never been to Colorado before, no, but he’s fairly sure Wyoming is tied in there somewhere and if he has to guess, he’s going to say they’re no more than a day’s drive south of Montana.

Fuck.

(At least the people wave when they pass by you on the highway, though.)

(And if that’s the only highlight of this entire trip — people waving at him nicely, politely as they meet one another on the road — Harry’s going to be sourly, sorely pissed.)

“You want to pull over and let me drive?” Niall asks, and his voice is thick, rough with sleep, and he startles Harry out of his mind, out of his musings; Harry turns his head, sees that Niall’s hair is matted and that there’s a line of drool on the corner of his mouth that matches the damp spot on the blanket he’s covered up with as well as they drying area on the black flannel he’s got on. ‘You’ve been drivin’ for more’n twelve hours straight, ‘aven’t you?’

Oh, fucking hell, Niall’s so damn adorable when he slurs himself awake, oh my God, and Harry was
irritated, is still irritated, but the thing is — this is Niall, this is Niall, and it isn’t healthy, isn’t right, isn’t fair to let Niall’s disgruntled cuteness to rid him of his anger, of his understandable aggravation, no, and he finds that he’s smiling just as soft, just a smooth as he can.

(It’s not very much, by the way.)

“I’ve stopped to piss and stretch my legs here and there,” he says, shrugs, wonders what Niall’s going to do when he figures out they’ve been going in the wrong direction for an indefinite amount of time because he knows what he would do if their roles were reversed, and really, Harry’s taking this a whole lot better than he would have ever guessed. “You hungry?”

Niall shakes his head. “No.” He yawns, stretches his arms up over his head. “Where we at now? Arkansas?”

*Shit.*

“I took the wrong exit.”

Niall sniffles. “What?” he asks, slow and heavy, rubbing at his nose and clearing the sleep from his eyes. “What’d you say? You mumbled; gotta speak up, H, ‘cause my ears are doing weird things right now.”

Harry thins his lips, flicks on his blinker to pull off onto a gravel-paved rest area with a scenic view of the hills and rolling mountains below and above; they’re on a winding road that’s going up, up, up, and his ears have been popping since before dawn and he reckons this would be a good conversation to have when one of them isn’t driving for obvious reasons.

“I took the wrong exit somewhere,” Harry says again, louder, and hits the breaks, shuts the van down, takes his seatbelt off. He turns to look at Niall, but Niall’s not meeting his eyes and — and last night’s interlude plus this fucking mess right here is not good, and Harry just wants to go home because there doesn’t seem to be a light at the end of the tunnel the two of them have created for themselves. “I — I guess I didn’t look at the map good enough.”

Excuses, excuses, excuses. He didn’t look at the map at all — it was Niall he couldn’t keep his eyes off of.

(Of course, Niall knows that; he knows Harry, front and back and side to side. *Always.*)

Niall’s quiet, brows furrowed as he thoughtfully, bitingingly chewing on his thumbnail; Harry sighs, opens the door and steps on the ground, takes a look around — and then Niall’s getting out, too, and he’s announced by a slam, and this is probably the best moment for apologies and strategies and fixes, and Harry turns his head just in time to see Niall rounding the vehicle, just in time to see Niall coming at him with a fierce look of wild inhibition.

“You drove twelve hours in the wrong fucking direction?” he asks, and Harry opens his mouth to answer, to reply, to explain all the things he can’t explain, but then Niall’s tackling him to the ground and his ass is hitting the gravel hard, and it’s cutting into his elbows and his biceps and the backs of his legs in his shorts, and that’s it.

It’s over. It’s all over now.

And he and Niall have fought, have wrestled, have thrown down before, yes, of course — they fought when they were eight and Niall wouldn’t give Harry back his favorite toy soldier; they fought when they were ten and Niall dropped a hammer on Harry’s head when they were attempting to build a treehouse with Louis and Liam; they fought when they were thirteen and Niall admitted he
had a crush on Gemma; they fought when they were fourteen and fifteen and sixteen and seventeen, too, because Niall took Harry’s underwear out of the locker room and because Harry left Niall at the arcade to deal with a group of overzealous girls in favor of a pool game in the back room of a bar and because Niall jerked Harry’s uniform down in front of the cheerleaders during championship week and because Harry pushed Niall into the lake they were fishing at during break and, looking back, all of the reasons they went at each other’s throats kind of melts away, kind of fades into the distance of unimportance and he thinks it’s that this time it’s real, Niall’s fists and Harry’s blocks and Niall’s curses and Harry’s knees, and it’s for a far better reason than any of the above.

Maybe.

Niall’s not hitting Harry in the face, though. His fists — they’re sharp with acute knuckles and heavy with years of being a star player on nearly every sports team he found a place with — are planting on Harry’s shoulder, on Harry’s chest, on Harry’s sides, and Harry’s knees are spread as Niall straddles him and he’s ducking the blows, blocking the hits, smacking the assaults to the side, and his throat is tight and thick and taut and he can’t breathe, can’t breathe, and Niall’s not heavy, no, but he’s not particularly light, either, and Harry’s never seen such anger, such disappoint, such unabashed and unadulterated and unamicable gloom and grief and guilt in Niall’s sunshine-flecked blue, blue eyes.

“Stop! Stop it!”

(He isn’t sure who screamed the words.)

Harry opens his mouth wide, drags in air that inflates his lungs; he puts his hands on Niall’s hips, risks getting a busted lip or clipped chin or bruised jaw, and bucks his abdomen, shoves Niall lower on his body till Harry’s got enough leverage to arch his thighs and throw Niall the side, but that’s not the end of it, of the fight, because Niall’s fingers are somehow wound in Harry’s hair and he’s following, too, and his time he’s on top, and Niall’s faster and he’s stronger, bigger, sturdier, bulkier, and it takes some manhandling, some alterations, before Harry’s able to brace his palms against Niall’s upper arms to hold him down, to hold him still.

He’s spitting mad, Niall is, and his face is red and his eyes are impossibly blue and his skin is pale against the darkness of the gray gravel, almost ghastly white, and words are being spewed, are being slung from his mouth, and they hit Harry harder than any punch, harder than any kick, harder than any jab.

(He never thought he would hear those words come out of Niall’s mouth.)

“I hate you, Harry! I hate you, I hate you, I hate you — I hate you! And it’s your fault, all of it is, ‘cause you can’t keep your dick in your pants or me out of your mind, and I don’t want you like that, I’ll never want you like that because you’re a boy and I’m a boy and it’s wrong, they’ve all told us it was wrong, and you need to get it through your thick fuckin’ head that I love you but I’ll never be in love with you! You’re not that — you are not that to me, Harry! You aren’t the person I want, and you’re not the person I’m going to settle down with or have kids with or — or make love with! You are not what I want and you’re never gonna be and you need to realize that all this pining, all this shit, all these emotions you’re feeling for me are fake, are stupid, aren’t real, and they’re not going to last the rest of the summer! You need to understand that I’m never going to want you like you want me before what we have between each other is so far fucked that we can’t ever get back to how we used to be!”

Harry frowns, loosens his grip on Niall’s arms and pulls his fingers from Niall’s arms; there’s nail-shaped crescents in his skin, half-moons of waning (or is it waxing?) pink aggression, and Harry’s eyes blur as he scoots back, as he scoots away on the gravel that tears into the seat of his jean shorts and cuts his flesh in the same way Niall’s slicing his heart.
“And I’m sorry that you feel this way for me, Harry — honestly, I am. I’m so damn sorry that you… that you think of me in every way that I can’t think of you.” Niall leans up, sits up, meets Harry’s wide eyes as he continues to move, as he continues to back away till his shoulders are hitting the van and he can’t get any farther. “But I can’t do it. I can’t look at you and see you the same way you see me. You’re a great friend, my best friend, and you’re more of a brother to me than my own brother, Harry, but that’s all you’re ever going to be to me.”

Niall stops after that, shrugs, rolls his eyes, expels a humorless laugh that kicks around in the air with enough force that the tingling tears on the edge of Harry’s lashes fall lightly, delicately, harshly against his red, red, red cheeks.

“I want to go home,” he says then, blinks, and it’s a flood of salty water from his eyes that he wipes away with the back of his hand, smearing his vision so horribly that Niall’s no more than a bleary image of a person who holds Harry’s paradise, Harry’s true nirvana in his hands, and he isn’t sure if it’s his heart or his mind or his soul that’s playing tricks on him at the moment but he swears, he swears, he sees Niall’s entire body flinch like a flickering flame of a wilting candle at his announcement. “I don’t want to be here with you anymore. I — I want to go home, Niall.”

It’s almost dark outside now, and the slight chill of northern Colorado — it’s official: Harry took the wrong exit somewhere or another and wound up doubling back and up north, according to a few people at the restaurant he and Niall stopped to eat at — has faded away in favor of Oklahoma’s humid night air.

He’s sat in the passenger seat, curled up and buckled in with his cheek smashed against the window, and Niall’s driving to his left, all hard edges and stony fingers and confused expressions, and they’ve been on the road for what seems like forever; an hour or so back, Niall cruised through the Colorado/Oklahoma border, and they’ve been passing grassy, fresh-cut fields that are laden with big bales of round hay here and there, and a stop at a convenient store a few miles back relented the information that there was a small lake up ahead that had a rest area available for travelers to stay, free of charge, and they decided, the two of them, with a brief nod and ‘okay’, that they would crash there for the night.

Besides, it’s the Fourth of the July, and the young boy at the store told them the city shoots off the firecrackers over the lake and that they’ll have prime view of the colorful sparkles in the sky if they made it in time.

Harry hopes they do; the Fourth of July is his favorite holiday, and the promise that he’s going to be able to enjoy at least that on this trip makes his heart flutter with the need to force his lips to smile.

“I… I’m sorry, Harry,” Niall speaks for the first time in what feels like hours, what feels like forever; Harry turns his head to the side, sees that Niall hasn’t taken his eyes off the road, and scoffs beneath his breath. “I’m really sorry I said all those things to you.”

Ha. What a load of shit.

“Don’t be,” Harry replies, turns his head back to look out the window, tucking his chin against his chest; the stars in the sky above are beginning to twinkle with anticipation of the show they’re going to be presented with in a few short minutes, and Harry wills Niall’s foot to turn into lead, to hurry hurry hurry so they can make it in time to see the firecrackers. “You wouldn’t have said it if you didn’t mean it.”

Niall sighs. “That’s the thing, Harry — I say a lot of stupid shit that I don’t mean,” he responds, and
It’s all just excuses, really, even if it’s true. “And you know that. You’re my best friend, and you know how — how stupid and inconsiderate and careless I can be at times. You know me better than anybody in the whole entire world.”

Harry closes his eyes, lets out a deep breath. “I thought I did, Niall. I really thought I did.” He shrugs, turns back to look at Niall, and this time Niall’s got his eyes on him, on his, and it’s green and blue mixing, meeting, melding. “I don’t think I do, though, ’cause the man I know, the Niall I know would never, ever act the way you have been lately. I’m not sure you were ever the person I thought you were.”

Niall’s eyes widen and his lets out a puff of gasped air. “Harry —”

“Stop.” Harry shakes his head, faces the window, taps his fingers against the glass in an attempt to outline the stars in the distance. “Let’s just get to the lake so I can watch the fireworks, please.”

It takes Niall a moment, but he nods, shuts his mouth, puts both hands on the wheel and weighs his foot down on the gas pedal. And it’s sad, really, because Harry’s just now realizing how pitiful it is to be sat in silence with somebody who always used to have something to say.

There’s a wooden, splinter-infested dock jutting out into the lake, rising above the water; the moon is reflected on the ripples and the stars shine bright enough to illuminate the way for the fish beneath the surface as he kicks his bare feet back and forth, back and forth in the lukewarm liquid, and Harry hears the first boom of bomb before he sees the colors in the sky, all orange and yellow and red, mixing and molding in a pop-pop-crackle sequence that reminds Harry of sitting out in the backyard on the bottom stair of the stoop, gobbling down his third hotdog and second Coke and watching as the world lit up around him.

Like the Fourth of July.

As he watches the fireworks in the sky — it’s blue and green and purple and yellow next, bang-bang-crackle-bang, followed by purple and orange, boom-boom, and fuzzy white and metallic gold, fizzle-crackle — he allows his mind to wonder, allows his heart to rest.

He reckons that today is Independence Day, yes, for America, but it’s also his day of independence, too, kind of; the things Niall said — for him, for Niall, they’re true and honest, but for Harry they’re wrong and lies. He can’t change Niall’s mind like he can’t change his heart, but that’s okay; what he’s feeling is real and it’s here to stay because it would have fled, would have flittered away by now.

He’s not okay, not really. His mind is a cluttered mess and his heart has been crying for hours and his soul is dark with despair, and he’s not okay. And it’s — it’s really sad, okay, because his mum, his mummy, told him that loving somebody means you let them be who they really are, and Niall’s not giving Harry the free reign to be the person he is, to be the person he wants to be, and maybe Niall’s not the man Harry thought he was, no, but he’s still Harry’s best friend and it’s like no matter what happens between them, around them, he’s always going to go back to Niall.

And maybe it’s just bad timing, you know? Harry wasn’t going to apologize anymore for the things that have happened, that will happen between himself and Niall. One day, they’d be together, and it might be as only friends, but it might also be as more, and while those two are completely different in comparison with one another, they’ll be two halves of the same whole they’ve been for almost their entire life.
That’s too great to apologize for.

“They’re really pretty,” a voice says behind Harry, and he looks over his shoulder, sees that Niall is standing to the side a bit; he’s wearing a clean black shirt and jeans that are rolled up to his calves, and he’s watching the fireworks in the sky but Harry’s watching him. “All the colors. They’re so pretty.”

Harry swallows, nods. “Yeah.”

“Mind if I sit?” Niall asks, drops his gaze to meet Harry’s; Harry nods, and Niall eases down next to him, right next to him, and they’re shoulder to shoulder and thigh to thigh and all the colors in the sky hold nothing to the sparks of hues in his heart at their proximity. “You’ve always loved firecrackers a lot more than the rest of us.”

Harry looks back out across the lake as another monster explodes in sparkling color, reflecting beautifully off the shimmering water. “It’s my favorite holiday.”

“I know. You’ve told me a thousand times.”

Harry’s lips twitch, and he can’t fight, can’t hide the smile. “That’s a bit of an exaggeration, don’t you think?” he muses, purses his lips. “And how in the world do you remember all these things about me when I can’t even remember them?”

“I remember everything you’ve ever told me, and I’m going to remember everything you’re ever going to tell me, too,” is Niall’s reply, and they’re at an angle with one another, kind of, and Harry finds that he likes watching the image of the fireworks popping in the sky in Niall’s wide eyes better than he does seeing them in their glory. “We aren’t going back home, Harry. We’ve come… we’ve come so far, and we’ve done so much, and I promise, I swear to you, that it’s going to be better for you, for me, and that we’ll have fun and you’ll never not smile when you’re with me.” He turns, meets Harry’s eyes. “I don’t ever want to see you cry like you did earlier. It scared me.”

Harry sniffs, scratches at the raw skin beneath his nose. “I’m sorry.”

Niall snorts a laugh, shakes his head. “And stop apologizing for all the things that are my fault, H,” he says, wraps his arm around Harry’s shoulders. “Most of the times you’ve said you’re sorry on this trip, it’s because of something I did, and you’re not doing that anymore, either. That’s finished. It’s my turn to be sorry.”

Blinking, Harry moves into Niall’s side, cautious and careful; there’s so many things that can go wrong in this moment of time, but, above all, there’s so many things that are right. “Are you? Sorry, I mean.”

Niall nods. “For everything,” he replies, whispers, and somehow Harry’s got his head laid on Niall’s shoulder and Niall’s cheek is pressed to his temple. “It’s gonna get better, Harry. From here on out, it’s you and me, together and happy, and you’ll never cry like you did again because I’ll never make you feel like you’re not important to me ever again.”

Harry’s shaking, and he’s sensitive with it all because Niall’s saying all the words he never knew he needed to hear. “Promise?” he says, worms his arm out between his body and Niall’s, holds his hand up and his pinkie out. “Pinkie swear?”

Niall laughs, turns his head and puts his lips to Harry’s temple as his chuckles mellow out into a deep round of giggles in his chest that vibrates both of their flush bodies and causes Harry to blush brighter, hotter than the fireworks. “Of course,” he agrees, hooks his pinkie with Harry’s and holds
on tight. “Promise.”

In that instant, with the fireworks and the stars and the moon, the sky’s never looked so alive.
The sunlight is unyielding and bright, so very brilliant, and the air circulating inside the cab of the van is hot, thick with humidity and heavy with a temperature that keeps climbing and climbing and climbing, and Harry’s awakened from his doze, from his impromptu nap in the passenger’s seat after he and Niall roused about at dawn this morning to hit the road when one of the tires shifts into a pothole and the vehicle lurches, jerks to the side, slams his temple against the panel of the door and splits his vision dirtily.

“Fuck,” he says, hisses; he brings one hand up to rub at the stinging on his temple and uses the other to wipe the sleep from his eyes, smearing the half-dried wetness on his knuckles as he yawns, as he stretches to wake himself up from the sudden pull out of a dreamless, comfortable rest. “That hurt like a bitch.”

Niall winces. “Sorry, H,” he apologizes, wholly and warm, and Harry blinks, one and two and three and four times till his vision isn’t blurry with sticky sleep and he’s able to see Niall’s shirtless form as a single piece instead of splintered fractions of an image, kind of like a broken mirror reflecting a watercolor-painted sky. “I passed a sign a while back that said we’re seventy-something miles southwest of Oklahoma City, and I stopped at a store to take a piss and asked for directions and the man behind the counter barely spoke English — his accent was hard as fuck to translate, man, but he was a nice dude — and he told me this road would lead into Norman and then from there up into the city, and I’ve been on it for about five minutes now.”

“That doesn’t explain the holes,” Harry replies, grunts, moves and shifts from his slouching position and into a straight-backed sit that aligns his spine pleasurably. “This a backroad or somethin’?”

Niall laughs, breathy and hoarse; Harry sighs, keeps his eyes on Niall as Niall watches the road, and it’s dirt, too, and the smell of dry dust permeates the air thickly, heavily, and it’s dancing in the atmosphere of the van, sticking to the sweat on Harry’s skin and making him feel grainy with the breathless stuff, making him feel weighted with the thin layer.

“Oh, it’s somethin’ all right; the man said it was a shortcut,” is Niall’s reply, and it’s not an excuse, per se; besides, Harry’s not particularly in any situation to be deciding what’s true and what’s not true considering he’s slept the day away and offered Niall nothing in return for driving for hours. “I’m not so sure if this is leading to a house where we’ll get murdered or not, but either way I think we’ll be okay.”

Harry snorts, rolls his eyes. “Don’t joke like that, idiot,” he says, chastises; he tips his head back against the seat, brings his bare feet up and puts them on the dash, picking at the stray stitching on the cuff of one pant leg till it isn’t dragging annoying and wrapping around his ankle annoyingly. “With the luck we’ve been having, I’m not so sure that we won’t run up onto a murder house or something.”

The... scenery definitely doesn’t do anything to calm Harry’s racing, palpitating heart. Around him,
there’s nothing but space: the trees are hit and miss, here and there, placed at spotty and random
intervals, and the fields are bare, cut and raked and baled for hay, square and round, and alfalfa bales
loom large, too, and the houses — well, what few houses they’ve passed, they can see — are pushed
off as away from the tiny, tiny dirt road they’re on, so far out of the way that Harry can’t make out
the color of the siding or the items scattered around in the yard. And Harry knows that speed limits
on unmarked roads (and he’s going to consider this as unmarked, all right, because you can’t judge a
book by its cover, no, but they never said anything about judging a road by its asphalt, or lack
thereof, and he hasn’t seen a sign, either) is forty-five, but he’s fairly sure Niall’s exceeding that by a
few notches.

He can’t blame Niall any, though.

Besides, it’s only illegal if you get caught, as Niall keeps reminding him, and Harry’s always been of
a mind that speed limit signs were nothing more than a suggestion — or, that’s what Gemma told
him, at least, and she’s not been wrong about very many things and he often believes her probably
more than he should. She’s never let him down, though, in all the years they’ve been brother and
sister.

“It’s really naked out here.”

“Hmm?” Niall asks, hums, takes his eyes off the road and flickers his gaze to Harry’s; it’s a glance
that Harry catches in his peripheral, that Harry will remember for the rest of his life. “What’d you
say?”

“It’s just so naked out here, is all,” he repeats, quiet and soft, narrowing and widening his eyes at
sporadic intervals, testing out the theory that different things would appear, would become clear. “I
mean, everything looks so — so lost, you know, and scared and baited, almost as if it’s waiting for
something that’s never going to come, and… and empty of faith and hope, like it’s all trying to find
its home and the search, the journey has worn all the energy out of it. Or the place where it’ll belong
the most, I guess, if that’s what a home really is.”

“Are you trying to offhandedly tell me that you don’t know where your home is?” Niall asks after a
moment, and it’s a question Harry isn’t prepared to answer, wasn’t prepared to be given, and his
mind is running to and fro and his heart is a nervous organ in his chest, thump thump thump, and just
as he opens his mouth to reply, to cite some sort of rehearsed saying in his mind, Niall announces,
“Because, if that’s the case, I feel the same way. California, LA — it’s as much of a home to me as
Mullingar was when I was younger, I guess, and it’s going to stay that way for a while, prob’ly,
but… but I always thought of you as a home, I guess.”

Harry frowns; his fingertips are tingling, shaking, and he hides the tick by shoving his hands beneath
his thighs. “What do you mean?” he asks, slow and fluid.

“I dunno.” Niall shrugs. “You’ve been there for me through it all, I guess, and — and they say a
home is just four walls that protect you from the elements of the world, but maybe, just maybe, it’s
two arms and a smile and a word of support, too, and that’s what you’ve given me. My mum’s there
and my brother’s there, but you’ve always been there for me, you know, and — and it’s just really
hard to explain right now.” He turns his head, gives Harry a timid smile; Harry wants to ask, wants
to capitalize on the ‘right now’ portion, but he reckons it’ll pay off more if he were to wait for a bit.
“You’re my best friend, Harry. You’re the one person in the world I’d rather not think about losing. I
want us to stay this way.”

Harry gulps, nods. “I know,” he says — and he does. He’s as entangled with Niall as the roots to
two towering trees, as corkscrewed together as the vines crawling up a long-forgotten structure that
could tell the greatest stories if it were ever given the chance to speak again. “I know you do, Ni, and
I do, too, and I — I’m trying, Niall. I really, really am.”

“I know that.” Niall’s smile — it’s small and teensy and sheepish, and it’s growing into a dazzling, delicate grin of bubbly joy, and Harry’s not an artist or a photographer, either, but he paints Niall’s face, captures Niall’s innocent purity in this moment. “And I’m trying, too. I really am. I hope you — I hope you can see that I… that I mean what I’m telling you. I hope you can see that you mean so much to me and I don’t want to ever let you go.”

Harry blinks, tears his eyes off of Niall’s in favor of watching the way a lock of his thick brown hair curls against his sweaty temple. “I do,” he says, and he kind of wonders what it would be like to be saying that in a completely different setting. “And we’ll be okay.” Harry smiles, doesn’t try to hide the rush of pink flush that’s rolling across his cheeks because Niall’s blush is red on his face, too. “‘Cause everything’s always been okay.”

Harry kicks the door shut, turns, takes a minute to look around the motel room Niall has rented for the two of them: it’s rather large, rather spacious, with a dark-colored couch to his left and a set of recliners to his right; there’s a bed — one bed, mind you, when not even a week ago Niall was insisting that there be two for obvious reasons, for hidden reasons, and Harry’s not in the mood to feel perplexed, to feel confused, to feel foolish — with a sink and mirror and coffee pot on the counter and a bathroom in front and to the left.

It smells like apples: fresh, vivid, wild like a forest of trees damp with pure rain.

(It smells like Niall.)

“One bed?” he asks, turns his head, sees that Niall is sitting a sack full of chips and cookies and beverages on a small table; there’s a lamp there that Niall flicks on, and Harry likes the color scheme of tan and red and brown in the room. “You okay with this? We can get another room if you want — or we can go find another motel, sleep in the van if you aren’t comfortable sharing a bed.”

Niall makes a noise, rolls his eyes. “I don’t want to leave, or find another, or sleep in the van against tonight,” he replies, walking past Harry and giving him a giggling grin before toppling over onto the sofa, sprawling out and throwing his limbs every which way. “I asked the guy at the desk if they had any single beds available, and this is the last one. We got lucky.”

“Why?” Harry asks, befuddled and — and feeling lost, feeling lied to. He can’t explain it, not with words, but there’s a thickness, a tightness in his throat that strangles his air, that blocks his breath at the thought of Niall putting himself out in order to make Harry feel better. Niall shouldn’t have to do that; Harry shouldn’t have to do that, either. “Why would you do that, Ni?”

Niall groans, grabs the collar of his shirt and pulls it up, pulls it over his face to hide himself from Harry’s inquisitive gaze. “You’ll laugh at me,” he says, whines, and Harry’s confusion just keeps growing and growing and growing.

“We got lucky?”

“Why?” Harry asks, befuddled and — and feeling lost, feeling led on, feeling lied to. He can’t explain it, not with words, but there’s a thickness, a tightness in his throat that strangles his air, that blocks his breath at the thought of Niall putting himself out in order to make Harry feel better. Niall shouldn’t have to do that; Harry shouldn’t have to do that, either. “Why would you do that, Ni?”

Niall groans, grabs the collar of his shirt and pulls it up, pulls it over his face to hide himself from Harry’s inquisitive gaze. “You’ll laugh at me,” he says, whines, and Harry’s confusion just keeps growing and growing and growing.

“Silly boy.” Harry moves further into the room, finds himself sitting down on one of the plush cushions of the chair; Niall’s got himself ten thousand dollars, and while they’re still going strong with over seven and a half left, Niall isn’t sparing any expense. Whatever he wants, whatever Harry wants, whatever they want — they’re going to get it. “Just tell me.” He brings his feet up, takes his boot off, throws it at Niall, and narrowly misses the center of Niall’s groin. “Come on, tell me.”
“You almost hit me in the dick.”

“Well, I didn’t.”

“Fuckin’ child.” Niall slings Harry’s boot at him, blindly and offhandedly, and Harry ducks, lets out a puff of chuckled laughter that rings in the air around them, light and solid. “I asked for a single bed because I want to sleep with you.”

Blue, red, purple, pink, green, yellow, orange — all the colors in the world flash in Harry’s vision, one two three four five six seven, so fast, so quick, so immediate.

“Niall.”

“Not… not like that, Harry,” Niall says, reiterates, and he gives Harry an apologetic smile — I’m sorry for not using the right words. “It’s just — for me, in my mind, when I’m in one bed and you’re in another, we’re a million miles apart from each other and I don’t… I don’t really like that.”

Harry’s brows furrow; there’s got to be more behind this story than Niall’s giving him. “Niall?” he asks, timid, tentative. “What’s — what is it?”

“When I’m home, back in LA, and I always… I’d wake up by myself a lot. I mean, I’ve got my own room — you know that — and I’d wake up alone, but when I… when I got up, I was alone. Mum’s worked the weirdest hours ever since I could remember and half the time when Greg was in charge of watching me during the night, he would sneak out before I went to bed and not… not come back till after Mum did. I didn’t like it very much.”

Harry looks down, watches his thumbs twiddle in his lap. “I didn’t know.”

“I didn’t want you to.” Niall smiles, thin-lipped and tight. “All the nights I’d spend with you — you were there when I went to sleep and you were there when I woke up, too, and I guess I just… just want to feel close to you right now. Is that okay?”

Harry nods; he’ll give Niall anything, and he’s asking for a lot, asking for so much, but there’s not a price on happiness, on comfort, and Harry will hand over the world, his world.

“Thank you, Harry.” Niall stands then, walks over to Harry; his fingers slide into Harry’s hair, grips the greasy curls and tilts his face up so they’re eye to eye, looking up and looking down. “Go take a shower and wash your hair, H, ‘cause it’s kinda nasty.” He delivers a grin that Harry mirrors. “I’m going to go find a market and buy us some food, ‘kay?”

Harry nods. “M’kay. Be careful.”

Niall smiles, scratches delightfully at Harry’s scalp. “Always.”

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Harry tips his head forward, shuts his eyes, lets out a sigh of relief; the water from the showerhead washes over his sudsy hair, cleaning the shampoo out of the thickness, and it dribbles across his face, over his skin, sliding off, sliding down with languid, indolent ease. He imagines the tiny ribbons of liquid on his flesh as fingers, as lips, as tongue, and the heat he’s standing in is arms, is an embrace, and the cool tiled walls he’s leaning against is hot, hot, hot words whispered in his ear.

It causes him to shiver, the thought of pretending the water washing, gushing, swishing over his skin is Niall’s fingers, Niall’s lips, Niall’s tongue, and it sends a jerking shock to his cock that begins at his toes, at the top of his head. The last time he touched himself, the last time he came is when Niall
caught him, coaxed him through the strongest, the wettest orgasm he’s ever had, and — and Niall’s still out shopping, as far as he knows, and he’s got the entire room to himself, and there’s a tightness stretched along his shoulders, a tension divided through his body that stings, that tires, that swears to never let him go, and he thinks, he knows, an orgasm or two would help to lessen the weight he’s carrying around.

He leans away from the spray, puts one hand against the wall to brace himself while the other rubs, scratches at the tender skin just above his pubic bone, teasing the sensitive flesh till it’s too soft to touch; he moves lower then, uses his blunt nails to trace the veins of his length, hissing hotly through clenched teeth when he digs in a little bit too deep.

It’s good. The hurt, the pressure, it’s good; he likes it, likes the contrast between hot and cold, between black and white, between pleasure and pain.

He throws his head back, opens his eyes, lets out a low mewl of pleasure as it scratches, drags his nails up and down, up and down, up and down the shaft, curling around the base and squeezing as he jerks up, squeezing as he smooths down, and he’s got himself into a steady, well-paced rhythm bordering on this edge of too much, of not enough.

“Oh, God,” he says, moans, and — and on a whim, he takes his hand off the wall, puts it to his mouth and sucks on one finger, two fingers, three fingers till they’re sopping wet with his spit; he raises his leg, puts the ball of his foot on the edge of the tub to keep himself steady, and probes between his legs, along the touch-sensitive perineum till he’s at his hole, at his entrance.

(He doesn’t know how to do this, doesn’t know how to finger himself, but he’s been with enough girls to be aware of the general gist, and even though he’s a man, even though he’s blatantly different, he can’t help but imagine Niall slicking his fingers, Niall pressing inside, Niall stretching his tightness till he can fit the flat head of his engorged cock all the way.)

(Oh, fuck.)

He wraps his fist around the base of his cock and holds firmly; he takes a deep breath, relaxes his body, and pushes one finger inside. It’s a tight fit, and it’s weird, too, and his rim halts quick progress; with an exhale, he’s able to push all the way in, and it feels strange, kind of, like he’s fuller than he’s ever meant to be, and it’s dry and hot, different than a pussy, and he remembers the motions of hand-fucking a girl, of curling his fingers till he can rub against her g-spot, and —

— and it’s quite easy to find, his prostate, for the most part, and it’s like a tiny sack, sort of, and he spasms, jerks forward into the glove of his hand, and he reckons one finger will do, will be okay. He begins a careful, learning pace of fucking his hand, of fucking his finger, and it’s a different experience than he’s ever felt before — he feels open, spread out and sprawled, and everything is heightened, everything is ten times, twenty times, a hundred times more than it was before, and he isn’t sure how long he keeps up with the pace but his back is cramping from arching so hard and his hand is slick with precum that’s dribbling out continuously from the angry head and his finger is crooked uncomfortably, and his climax is sudden, abrupt, and it’s colors and it’s explosions of fissions that quake his body till he’s out of his skin, out of this world.

Slowly, shakily, he pulls his finger from his hole and steps back into the spray, washing the come and sweat from his body; he brings his hands up, gathers some water in his palms, and rinses his face.

And then he realizes he’s crying — crying; fat, alligator tears are crawling down his cheeks, are mingling with the water on his face, and it’s flashes in his mind as he sits down, as he draws his legs up to his chest, as he puts his head between his knees, as he lets out a scream of repression.
He’s crying for himself, crying for Niall, crying for the pain of unrequited love, crying for the desperation of a child starved of affection. Niall took him down earlier, in a way, and gave a little bit of himself to Harry, and Harry has to wonder — does he feel free? Does he feel better?

Because Harry doesn’t. What Niall’s taken off and given to Harry, about the loneliness no child should face, has landed on Harry, and now he’s next in line to crumble under the weight of it.

He’ll bear it, though, because that’s what you do for people you love. And he loves Niall Horan.

He stays on the floor of the shower for a moment, for a second, for an hour, and he cries about everything that’s ever hurt him, everything that’s ever hurt Niall — he cries till his nose is stopped up and each breath is scalding as he inhales; he cries till he’s numb to the chilling water beating down on his back; he cries till he’s sure he can’t cry anymore.

And then he cries some more.


A strong heat settles behind Harry above the thin sheet he’s tangled up in, and it’s the weight at his back that wakes him up, that tears him out of his sleep. “Niall?” he asks, raw and hoarse; Niall’s arm wraps around his waist, pulls him close, and they’re flush from top to bottom and Harry feels comfortable, completely joyous at the way they fit together so entirely, so wholly. “What time is it? Where have you been?”

“It’s late,” Niall replies, quiet and soft; his breath puffs against the shell of Harry’s ear and he shivers, kind of, and sniffs at the air. Niall smiles musky, like sweat and floral perfume, and all the questions he wants to ask are answered. Niall’s been out. “And it’s a rather long story, so I’ll tell you in the morning, okay?”

Harry nods, jerky and hurt, and burrows his face in his pillow; he isn’t in the shower to cry right now, but that doesn’t stop the tears from falling.
On and off, Harry dozes, comfortable and indolent and lax, in and out of the best sleep he’s gotten in a while; he’s aware of the soft, cool, silk sheets against his skin, he’s aware of the spicy apple scent in the air, he’s aware of the plushness of the pillow beneath his cheek, he’s aware of the covers tangled with his feet, he’s aware of the largeness of the bed he’s sprawled out on, he’s aware of the missing weight at his side that solidified his shattering heart last night.

With a stifled exhale breathed into the pillow, he grunts, murmurs a few broken words beneath his breath, rolls over; the sunlight shines through the window, blinds him beneath his lids, and he raises his arm fast, hard, and puts it to his face, fends off the ugly light of day and turns the other way, worming himself around till he’s on the other side of the bed, till he’s bundled up in the body heat Niall left behind, semi-satisfied and all the way loose, all the way contented.

He’s not here anymore, but he hasn’t been gone for very long, if the heat Harry’s basking in is any clue to go by; he sighs, breathes in the fabric, the linen, and it smells like apples, like flowers, likes sweat and musk — and Harry’s heart seizes, constricts, and he holds his eyes shut tight, squeezes squeezes squeezes till all the colors in the spectrum are dancing across his closed lids and he’s hurting from the hues, scared from the shades that blanket his sight in the way that Niall covers his heart.

And he wishes he could just go back to sleep, wishes he could just roll himself over onto his side of the bed and forget, pretend, ignore, fight the rushing angst in his heart that’s gripping, that’s grabbing, that’s using guilt to bring hot, scalding, fucking unnecessary tears to his eyes that burn almost as much as the thought of Niall leaving him after spreading a little bit of his heart out to find solace in the arms of an unknown woman instead of the apparent one person in the world he doesn’t want to ever think about losing.

He thought — he thought they were trying; thought he was trying and thought Niall was trying and thought they were trying. And trying for what, Harry isn’t sure — platonic, romantic, familial — but that’s just a category, just an identification, and it shouldn’t matter because Niall said, because Niall promised, because Niall swore he was going to try.

Maybe he’s not worth it, you know? Maybe his friendship, maybe his care, maybe his love, maybe his support, maybe everything he can give Niall — maybe it’s not worth it, maybe he’s not worth it.

And it’s really sad because he thought — he thought Niall thought he was worth it. The realization that your very best isn’t good enough is a viscid heartache that brings everything into perspective.

“You up?”

Harry shifts, startled and caught off guard; he makes a noise in the back of his throat, rolls over onto his side and opens his eyes, peers through bleary vision and sees Niall standing in front of him, dressed in dirty blue jeans and an unbuttoned red and black flannel that shows a few bruises, a few burns, a few dirt-smudged spots on his chest.
Oh, my.

“What happened, Niall?”

“Are your allergies acting up?” Niall asks, completely disregards Harry’s question; he sits down on the side of the bed, reaches one of his hands out and puts his fingertip against the tender skin beneath Harry’s eye, wiping at the wetness of his tears where they’re sat, ready to fall and make his cheeks sting with rawness. “Your eyes are watering. Was it the dirt road that messed you all up?”

Harry gulps, tries not to — I wish you would mess me all up — think about the string of indecencies running rampant, running relentless through his mind at Niall’s proximity, at Niall’s headiness, at Niall Niall Niall.

He can’t help it, doesn’t want to fight it, shies away from explaining it. He just wants Niall, in every way possible. It’s as simple as that.

Besides, what’s an excuse that’s accepted by every single person in the world? It isn’t like he’s living his life for them, isn’t like he’s been made to please them, isn’t like he’s the key for their utmost happiness; love is love, and if they can’t respect it, they clearly don’t matter.

“Prob’ly,” he says, agrees, nods, lies, and he reckons it’s better in this moment to tell a small fib that the truth because his throat is itchy and sore from yesterday’s tears and he just wants to have a normal day, just wants to have a simple and uncomplicated and easy and predictable twenty-four hours that doesn’t push him forward, that doesn’t pull him back. “I’m sure it’ll blow over in a few hours, though. S’not too bad. I can breathe through my nose just fine.”

Niall hums, moves the palm of his hand up to rake the hair out of Harry’s eyes, to feel the heat of Harry’s forehead. “No fever, I don’t think,” he muses, mostly to himself, and Harry shakes his head, nearly plummets away entirely when Niall leans down, presses his puckered lips to the skin of his forehead. This isn’t the first time Niall’s checked his temperature this way, but it’s different now, and oh my, this is the first time he’s felt Niall’s warm mouth, hot lips, scalding breath on his skin. “I hope you aren’t getting sick on me, Harry.”

Harry shiver, shuts his eyes at the sensation of Niall smearing his worry, painting his words across the overheating skin of his forehead. It makes him want to melt. “No,” he says, replies, and his hand comes up, clutches at the lapel of Niall’s flannel in fingers that tug a bit too hard at the fabric. “What happened last night? Why are you so beat up?”

“Funny story, that,” Niall replies, laughs, pulls back; he keeps his hand in Harry’s hair, curls his fingers and scratches Harry’s scalp lightly, softly, and Harry wants to purr with the affectionate caress but holds himself in check. “I was on my way to the market — I had to stop and ask where the nearest one was ‘cause I actually got lost at some point and drove out of town — and the van broke down right as I pulled into the parking lot. I thought maybe we’d run it out of gas and forgot to fill it up ‘cause we’re really fuckin’ good at that, but I found out that after I asked for a ride to a gas station that it blew up.”

Harry frowns. “Like, the motor?”

Niall nods. “Mmmhm. The lady that helped me — Janie; she was nice — told me she can get it towed to a mechanic early this morning, and I’ve been down there since I woke up a few hours ago making sure everything was going okay with the loading and stuff.”

Janie? Hmm. Harry agrees — I bet she was nice.
And then — no, no, no, no, no. That’s wrong of him to think; men and women, boys and girls, can be friends, can be nothing more than platonic, nothing more than familial, and really, it isn’t as if Harry’s got any claim on Niall to keep other possible romances away. If Niall’s happier with other people than he is Harry, so be it — Harry isn’t going to allow the unfairness in the world, in his world to keep him from being proud of Niall for finding something, for finding someone that he wants to share his life with.

However, to say he doesn’t want it to be him would be lying, and Harry’s never been a liar when it matters.

“How’d you get…” Harry begins, trails off; he unfurls his fingers from the lapel of Niall’s shirt, moves his hand across Niall’s chest, caressing at the burns and rubbing at the dirt and soothing at the bruises. “How’d you get all cut up like this, Ni? And the burns. How’d you get them?”

Niall chuckles, reaches his free hand up, finds Harry’s fingers on his chest and tangles them with his own, moving their interlocked digits across his torso himself. “That’s a hell of a story that won’t make any sense since you weren’t there to see it,” he says, gives Harry the tiniest grin he’s ever seen. “Janie and I were fiddling around under the hood, and I got burned, is all, and when I went to jerk back I caught on a few sharp edges and fell over the side. Nothing hurts right now, and she gave me some cream stuff to put on the burns, so they aren’t near as bad as what they would’ve been.”

“Should’ve tried to be more careful.” Harry thins his lips, admires the way their hands thread together so completely as they move, as they dance along Niall’s chest; it’s almost as if the spaces between his fingers were created for Niall’s to fill because he’s the only one who has done it so entirely in all Harry’s life. “You’re going to be sore for a while.”

Niall nods, chuckles, wipes a few stray watery tears off of Harry’s cheeks. “Should’ve been there,” he teases, grin tilting up higher on one side than the other — and Niall’s always hated it, always poked and prodded at his smile because of how lopsided it tends to be, but Harry finds it endearing, entralling; it reminds him of a silly little boy who went barefoot and hunted frogs in the middle of the night with dirty jeans and a laugh that still rings out like firecrackers on the Fourth of the July, and Harry’s always loved it, honestly. “Maybe if you were I wouldn’t have gotten hurt.”

“You didn’t invite me along,” Harry replies, points out, and there’s only a little bit of anger in his tone, only a little bit of irritation in his voice. Niall either doesn’t notice or chooses to ignore it, thankfully. “You told me to take a shower because I was dirty.”

“And now you’re not dirty!” Niall laughs, ruffles Harry’s hair with his hand; it’s soft now, definitely cleaner, and Harry moves into Niall’s touch. “I like your hair.”

“Huh?”

“Your hair, silly boy,” Niall repeats, chuckles, and now he’s got two hands in Harry’s hair, combing and raking and sifting through the long curls, through the thick snarls. “It’s so long, and soft and heavy. And the color, too, how it turns red sometimes when the sun hits you just right and then how dark it is when all the lights are off.” His easy smile falls away, and Harry goes with it. “Sometimes, Harry, I just —”

“Why’d the van blow up?” Harry asks, quick and hurried, cutting Niall off; his breath is a tight pinch of air in his chest and he’s afraid if he were to allow Niall to continue that he would completely keel over from lack of oxygen. “You didn’t tell me.”

Niall gives him a look, a glance, and there’s so much hidden in his eyes, so much concealed in his expression, and Harry doesn’t like how they’re so open with one another, doesn’t like how they’re
so standoffish with one another as well. This mix and match, give and take, lie and fake — it’s not who they are, not who they’re supposed to be.

And it’s getting old.

“Oil,” Niall replies, moves his hand, soothing the pad of his thumb over Harry’s furrowed, worried brow till his face is even and smooth of befuddled concern. “Greg’s fuckin’ ass didn’t tell me how fast the van goes through oil or that it was in need of a change.”

“He knows?”

Niall nods. “I rang him up last night and let him have it. I had to walk around for two hours in the heat to find a damn phone, and I thought he should know that I was livid with him.” He smiles, pokes at the tip of Harry’s sloped nose with his index finger. “Janie was really nice to me after everything I had to deal with, too.”

“You’ve already said that.”

Niall’s lips curl into a knowing smirk. “Are you jealous?” he asks, and — and it isn’t malicious, isn’t angry, isn’t derogatory, isn’t ugly. He’s teasing Harry — teasing, something the two of them haven’t done in what seems like years. “It’s not what you think it is, Harry. She took me back to her house —”

“I don’t want to hear this, Niall.”

“— and offered me a shower to clean myself up so I didn’t come back to you dirty and stinky and bloody, kind of. She even washed my clothes for me, though I’m afraid they’re rather awful looking; practically unwearable. I threw them out this morning before I went out to the van. She also gave me a dish of lasagna for you and me to share, but when she dropped me off last night you were asleep and I didn’t want to wake you up. And I kind of ate it all myself.” Niall smiles, tilts his head, curls his fingers along Harry’s jaw, digs his blunt nails into the tender skin just beneath Harry’s chin. “Nothing happened, Harry. Nothing like you think. I promise.”

Harry averts his eyes, thins his lips; his sweltering jealousy is now damp and ash-like, but he knows that even the faintest embers can start the fire again, bigger than it ever was before, and he’s afraid that he doesn’t trust Niall like he used to, like he still should.

“She’s nice.”

“Very.” Niall grips Harry’s chin tight, somewhat harsh, and turns his face rigidly, which makes Harry’s shoulders slacken their intensity; their eyes meet, lock, and hold, and Harry’s simultaneously ashamed and uplifted, and he’s mad and he’s overly joyed at once with knowing Niall has this disastrous effect on him. “I told you I’m trying, Harry, and I meant that. Don’t you trust me?”

No.

Harry swallows, and his silence is all the answer the two of them need, and Niall — Niall’s smile is sad, soft, and Harry’s amazed at Niall’s ability to keep himself in check even when he’s faced with something that isn’t what he originally wanted.

Harry wonders just how much of that little boy starving for affection is still active in Niall at this moment, wonders if there’s anything he can do to make sure the rest of Niall’s life is spent in the luxury of love and care and support that his childhood lacked.

“Well, I can honestly say that I’m going to have the time of my life earning your trust back,” Niall
announces, ever the optimist, and he leans down in that moment, puts his lips to Harry’s forehead, and it’s a kiss, a chaste mouth-to-skin touch that makes Harry’s heart pitter-patter into a steady rhythm even as his fingertips are tingling, even as his toes are curling. Niall pulls back, gives Harry a confident smile, and Harry’s not sure what it means but it means something, all right, and that’s as good as it’s going to get at this moment. “Now, get up and get dressed, please. Janie’s waitin’ outside on us to take us back to the shop. We’ll stop on the way and get you something to eat.”

Niall pushes off the bed, stands up and looks over his shoulder at Harry.

Harry’s heart jumps into his throat. “Niall!” he exclaims, throws the sheets back and stands up, grabs Niall’s hand, Niall’s wrist. His fingers can wrap all the way around, and it startles him, shocks him, reminds him that he’s big and Niall’s big, too, and they’re adults, they’re grown ups, and they can’t ignore their problems the way they did when they were kids and confrontations come as simple as breathing now. “I’m sorry.”

“Why?” he asks, furrowing his brow, and it hits Harry then — Niall is honestly, completely confused as to why Harry’s apologizing, and really, Harry kind of is, too. “You’ve got nothing to be sorry for, silly boy. Stop worrying over things you can’t control and get dressed. Janie’s probably ready to skin me alive for taking so long, and I’d rather you meet her when she’s smiling instead of yelling.”

Harry nods, smiles, and lets go of Niall’s wrist, though not before making sure he’s committed every little bit of this moment to memory.

- The late afternoon sun is hot as it beats down, sifting through the stitching of Harry’s thin shirt; he’s got sweat on his temple and sweat on his back and sweat on his tummy and sweat on his thighs, dampening the denim of his jeans and adding weight to his body, and he feels dirty with it, and no matter how tight, no matter how high he ties his hair up off his neck he’s still on the brink of overheating.

(As it happens, he’s fairly sure he’s sweated enough in the few hours he’s been awake to not have to piss for a couple days.)

The shop the van is at is rather large, kind of out of the way of the main city; it’s got a wide yard and a tasty, tall building positioned in the middle, along with trees surrounding it and a mile-long road of total privacy. There’s people milling about, tinkering with projects and fixing up the lot of the cars parked in the yard, and it smells like oil, like grease, like sweat and heat, and it isn’t too far different from all the other shops back in LA he’s been to.

Janie — she’s a rather short young woman with brown hair, green eyes, large breasts, round stomach, thick legs, and a grin that makes Harry wonder if the devil could be scared of a little lady that has a tattoo on the side of her palm — drove them to the shop, offered them a small warning that the head mechanic may be a bit too hard to take at times, and she loosened the tension in Harry’s shoulders with a few smiles, with a few words, and he reckons Niall was right.

She’s nice. Very nice.

And also one hell of a girl. Harry’s not sure what he was expecting, but it definitely wasn’t that.

“It’s definitely blown, that’s for sure,” the mechanic — he’s Janie’s older brother, by the way, and his name is Charlie, and he’s got a grin that’s as big as the state of Texas and a heart that puts the entire universe to shame, Harry reckons — confirms as he shuts the hood of the van, wipes his greasy hands on the pant legs of his tattered, pale blue jeans. “Keepin’ the oil life of a vehicle is vital
for it to stay alive. It’s like feedin’ a baby milk, if you will.”

“I know that,” Niall says, sneers, and ever since the two of them checked out of the hotel room and folded themselves into Janie’s Camaro — don’t even get Harry started on how quickly he took to that car; it’s always been a dream of his to own one — he’s been tense and wired, high on aggravation and easy to rile up should the wrong word be said. Harry feels awful, feels heavy with the wait of guilt because he’s not entirely sure how to soothe the nasty impatience and heightened annoyance in Niall’s mind, in Niall’s heart. “You’re telling me everything I know already, man.”

Charlie grins, and he’s not a bad guy, no, but Harry’s deduced that he likes to joke around with people while he does his job, and that’s all find and dandy for the most part till he runs into someone who can match his friendliness with aggression, and that person is Niall.

“Charlie, quit pussy-footin’ around and tell the boys what you told me last night,” Janie says, orders her older brother; Harry looks over his shoulder, holds his hand up to fend the sun from breaking his clear vision, and sees her solidly. She’s leaning against the wall of the towering building, dressed in shorts and a gray t-shirt; her legs are short and her thighs are thick and her stomach is protruding from the fabric and her dark brown hair is a mess on top of her head, curly and wispy and frizzy. He likes her; she’s very, very nice, if a bit rough around the edges, and she’s got a laugh that makes Harry want to tell jokes forever and ever and ever. “They’ve not got all day, and you’re clearly throwin’ them for a loop that isn’t needed.”

“Janie —”

“Do it before I tell mama on you.”

Charlie’s eyes widen, and Harry steps to the side, bends low, hides his wide grin behind the width of Niall’s shoulders; that’s a fear he definitely shares with the older man. “You wouldn’t.”

“Oh, I would.”

Harry chuckles, and Niall shifts backward, knocks his shoulder into Harry’s chin; this back and forth banter between brother and sister reminds him of himself and Gemma, and he thinks that Gemma and Janie would surely get along well with one another — two spitfires with hearts of gold.

“The good news is that I have all the parts and tools lying ‘round that are needed to fix the vehicle,” Charlie says on an exhale, warily eyeing his sister; they look alike, kind of, because of the hair and the eyes and the cleft to their chins. “The bad news is that it’s going to take two or three days, maybe four.”

Niall’s shoulders drop and he lets out a sigh of relief. “That’s not so bad,” he muses, and Harry moves away, looks to the side, sees that Niall’s got a grin on his lips that makes Harry feel like there’s stars in his blood and lightning in his chest. “I thought it was going to be worse.”

“Gives you some time to experience life in Oklahoma for a while, doesn’t it?” Charlie replies, winks, gives both Harry and Niall a grin, all-knowing and mischievous. “Janie, why don’t you take these two young men out on the town for a night? Surely they don’t want to spend their entire stay in hotel rooms.”

Harry stiffens, narrows his eyes, looks at Niall with a speculative gaze. “I don’t think —”

“That’s a wonderful idea.”
“I don’t think this is a very good idea,” Harry announces, and it isn’t the first time these words have tickled at his tongue, have left his lips; in fact, he’s fairly sure it’s the twenty-third, if that matters. He’s found that counting — anything: the birds, the clouds, the people, the white polka dots on Niall’s blue shirt, the brown freckles on Niall’s cheeks, the smiles and the touches and the glances Niall’s given him since they ducked into Janie’s car, since they pulled up to Janie’s house, since they were pushed into a random room and handed colorful clothing and told to change, told to make it quick ‘cause they’ve got places to be before the night ends. “I don’t think this is a very good idea at all. In fact, I’m sure it’s not a very good idea. I’m positive.”

(Although he isn’t exactly sure how he likes polka dots on Niall, he is fairly fond of the chevron pattern he’s got on his own button down. It’s all sorts of spring colors: pale, faded, pink and green and purple and yellow.)

“Relax, Harry,” Niall says — and again, this isn’t the first moment of the night those words have fallen from his mouth, either, and, the thing is, each time he repeats himself, each time he promises and reiterates and swears, his smile grows. Grows, grows, grows, and he’s looking at Harry now, so naked and raw and sensitive, and Harry can see all the colors in the world in Niall’s eyes and it terrifies him but he loves the adrenaline in his blood because Niall’s been the only person to implement such a strong feeling in Harry. “It’s going to be okay — we’re gonna have a good time, we’re gonna have a lot of fun.”

Harry scoffs, rolls his eyes, grabs for the chair he tripped over when he was shoved inside and sits; the room they’re in must be some sort of laundry space because there’s a washer and drawer pressed against the east wall and a rack of hanging clothes on the west, as well as a half-mountain of jeans stacked against the hamper beneath the window. It smells faintly of dust and florals, kind of like Niall did last night when he crawled into bed, when he folded himself around Harry.

“In what world is going partying at a disco club considered fun, Niall?”

Niall shrugs. “Janie’s, I guess.”

“And — and you’re going to trust her?” Harry continues, as if Niall didn’t answer; as far as he’s concerned, Niall didn’t, because he knows that Niall’s not that big of a fan of disco. “Just like that? She’s — we don’t even know her. I don’t even know her. And you’re just going to trust her to… to not hurt us?”

Well, it is two against one, maybe, and yes, Janie’s quite broad and Harry’s fairly sure she could give him, give Niall, give Louis and Liam and Greg and all the boys from back home a run for their money, he’s not too worried about taking her on.

If he has to.

(And he doesn’t want to. He kind of likes her, really.)

He probably won’t have to.

(Hopefully.)
Niall nods. "Yeah," he answers, moves forward, kneels down in front of Harry; he folds his forearms across Harry’s knees, tangles his fingers between Harry’s legs, and gives Harry the tenderest smile in the world, and it’s as sensual as it is intimate and Harry isn’t sure if he wants to laugh or cry or leave or cave because Niall’s got so much going on in his head that Harry doesn’t know about. “Listen, Harry, okay? Janie’s — Janie’s a good girl, a good person. And I trust her.”

“Why?” Harry asks, whines, and he knows he’s sounding like a child, but frankly, he doesn’t give a shit. “Why are you so easy to trust her?”

“She reminds me of Gemma.”

Harry blanches, refuses to admit that he thought the very same thing earlier today; it appears that Gemma’s got a tight hold on the both of them, more so than either anticipated. “But Niall —”

“None of that.” Niall stands, puts his hands in Harry’s hair, uses it as leverage to drag him up till their eyes are meeting strong, meeting hot, and it’s green and blue, earth and air, and Niall said he likes them gray and Harry wonders what color they are now, wonders if Niall likes them just as much now even if they aren’t a hue of silver. “I know you don’t trust me, Harry — I know that, I do — and I meant it when I said I’m going to have the time of my life gaining that trust back. And this is my first attempt: I trust Janie, and all you have to do is trust me.”

Harry’s nostrils flare; he’s surrounded by the smell of flowers, by the noise of crickets outside and yells of children inside and they’ve never been so far away from everything that they know before, and Harry’s simultaneously reveling and horrified at the complete withdraw from it all.

“Niall.”

“Will you?” Niall asks, steps forward, and Harry’s pressed up against the wall, with his legs oddly spread to accommodate the chair he was pulled from; the close proximity between the two of them is fizzing with electricity and it takes all Harry’s willpower to not read further into the situation, the predicament, because he’ll probably be wrong if he does, like all the other times before, and he doesn’t know if he can take another blow to his ego. “Will you trust me for tonight?”

“Niall.”

“Just for tonight, Harry, and then you can go back to not trusting me again in the morning if you want to, no questions asked.” Niall gives Harry a tight-lipped smile, moves his hand from Harry’s hair and over his chest, undoing one of the buttons and opening the neck of the shirt. Harry gulps, and for some reason he’s reminded of big bullfrogs in murky ponds that scatter when they’re caught in the light, when they’re disturbed by something they don’t know, something they can’t control, and that’s what Harry wants to do — scatter. “I promise.”

Harry shuts his eyes, inhales through his nose. “I hate the power you have on me, the way you make me feel,” he hisses under his breath, clenches his fists at his sides. “I honestly do.”

But he doesn’t. He doesn’t, he doesn’t — because the effect, the wild influence Niall has over Harry is one of the reasons Harry’s falling fast, all at once and in quick motion, down down down, and Niall’s smile, Niall’s voice, Niall’s touch is what lifts him up and asks, begs him to take it in separate, to take it in as hundreds, as millions of pieces of the perfect whole.

“I love it.” Niall grins.

Harry opens his eyes, and he’s floor with blue, with purple, with gold, with brown, with pink; all the colors are so pretty and he realizes, in that moment, that when Niall’s not here he only sees black
and white and gray. “Okay, Ni,” he says, breathes, and his tongue is thick and his lips are lax and he reckons that now, right now, is the perfect time for him to kiss Niall if he wants to — if he really wants to.

He does.

But he doesn’t. Kiss Niall, that is. Not yet, at least; he isn’t sure how well-received it would be at this moment, but — but soon. Soon. He wants Niall to want it just as much as he does.

And Niall just laughs as he backs away, as he tangles his fingers with Harry’s, as he tugs them out of the room and into the light and toward Janie’s idling Camaro, and he wonders — he wonders how much damage it would have done should he have listened to his mind when it told him to kiss Niall.

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“What even is there to do at a disco club?” Harry asks when the tall doors swing open; they’re black, darkened by spray paint so they’re sort of ugly and dull and splotchy with heavier spots of attention, and there’s splashes of color across the dankness, every shade of neon there possibly is, and Harry reckons All the Colors is quite the name for the club. Very fitting, if you will. “I’m all about the music, man. And I mean, the drinks — how’s the drinks? How’s the music?”

“Chill out, worry wort,” Janie says, pats him on the head; she steps past him, walks ahead, and he takes a moment to admire her outfit, to admire the confidence and self-respect and appreciation she has for herself. He doesn’t think he’s ever seen somebody pull off a pair of bellbottoms and a long-sleeved colorful crop top quite like she does, regardless of how large and short she is. She’s beautiful, and kinda crazy. “We’ve got all the time in the world.”

Harry furrows his brows, risks a glance at Niall, who’s understandably too caught up looking at all the lights, looking at all the colors in the club to be of much use right now, and there’s a lot going on — there’s people and there’s drinks and there’s balloons and there’s strobes and there’s ruckuses and there’s music, and it reverberates, thump-thump-thump, and Harry isn’t sure if his stomach is growling for food or if it’s the base of the song, really.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She turns and gives him a big, bright smile; her hair is down, wispy and wavy and warm-looking and somewhat gold in the flashing lights, and she looks smaller, looks skinnier with the high-waist bellbottoms she’s wearing even though her fleshy hips are protruding from the denim.

“It’s about finding who you are, about connecting to yourself just as much as other things. Trust me.” She moves forward, crowds into his space, and Niall takes note of the close proximity between the three of them now, tears his vision away from the glittering, from the noise, from the sparkling, from the people to catch Harry’s gaze with a tender smile of soft acknowledgment. Harry tries not to revel the skin of Niall’s throat where he’s got the collar folded down and unbuttoned to his chest “Now, come dance with me before you think so hard you give yourself an aneurysm. Do you mind if I borrow him?”

It takes Harry exactly two seconds to realize that Janie is talking to Niall as if — as if Harry is Niall’s, as if they belong to one another.

Whoa.

And… she’s not even bothered by it. Awesome.
‘Course not,’ Niall says, waves off Janie’s question; he turns his head, meets Harry’s eyes, and Harry decides right then and there that polka dots — especially the snow white and pale blue kind — look magnificent on Niall in the way that he’s shining like a lighthouse off the coast and Harry’s the boat full of weary seamen he’s bringing in after being gone for so long. ‘Have fun, Harry. I’m gonna go hit up the bartender for a few drinks, so come over when you get tired. I’ll have a drink waitin’ for the both of you.’

He smiles, leans over, presses a sloppy, slick kiss to the side of Harry’s already sweaty temple, and then he’s off, skirting around and through the crowd of swinging, of gyrating, of throwing, of sliding, and Harry’s eyes are as wide as Janie’s grin and he doesn’t have any time to mull over what just happened because she’s got both of his hands in hers and she’s dragging him out onto the dance floor that’s speckled with metallic lights being thrown off from the disco ball above.

“I don’t know how to dance,” he says, screams over the music to be heard, thump-thump-thump that rattles his bones and skewers his mind just a little bit; somebody hits his shoulder by accident and he goes lurching into Janie, and she throws her head back, cackles like a little kid. “I really don’t.”

“It’s easy.” She lets go of his wrists, puts her hands on his hips; he can feel the chill of her palms through the denim of his jeans and it makes him shiver. “You just gotta keep movin’. Hear that, the beat? Count the beat, step to it. Shimmy, roll your shoulders. A three-step sort of thing works the best if you’re not the hottest. Wiggle your hips, and don’t stop moving ‘cause you’ll fuck up the flow of things and I can’t have that.”

“Gee, thanks for that,” he says, rolls his eyes, but he does as she says; the song’s weird, loud and electronic and a little bit too much for his tastes. It’s simple to count the beat, to move his feet to the tune, to the boom-boom-bang-boom-bang-boom-bang-boom-bang; he reckons Gemma ought to be proud of him since she’s always hounding him for never going out clubbing for her. “You’ve got the greatest advice I’ve ever heard.”

She smirks, takes a step closer to him; the dancefloor is crowded enough — he’s got people at his back, people at his sides, touching touching touching him, and he’s already sweating regardless of how much deodorant Niall forced him to apply — and though it’s kind of hard to breathe with the bodies, kind of hard to muse with the music, he welcomes her proximity because he knows her, because he likes her, and while they’ve only been acquainted for a few hours he reckons he trusts her better than he does the bear of a man to his left.

“Your humor is insanely dry,” she quips, and it’s not a whisper but it’s not a yell, either, and he finds that he can hear her better while being close, so close. She smells like lilies and tulips, like a bunch of flowers rolled up into one rather large bouquet.

“So I’ve been told.”

More than once, and most of those were from Greg, the fucker.

“I’m dehydrating just being next to you.”

Harry narrows his eyes, tries to be intimidating, tries to be angry at her joke, but she grins, winks, and Harry loosens, completely slackens the tension in his shoulders and throws his head back and laughs so loud it rings out above the music he’s swinging to.

“That’s the worst joke I’ve ever heard, holy shit. Like, totally shit — I don’t know enough words to describe how shitty it was. Please, please never let anybody talk you into doing standup for a livin’, all right? Completely awful.”
She grunts, moves her icy fingers beneath the hem of Harry’s chevron-styled shirt and pinches at his sensitive love handles and he jumps, squeals, backs up into the bear of a man who waves off Harry’s stuttering apology with a smile and a raised brow of inquisition on whether or not he’s okay, as well.

Harry nods.

“It’s not my job to be funny,” she says, gives him a wicked grin, and Harry wonders again — would the devil himself be scared of this spitfire of a woman? “Everyone has a job to do, and as it happens, mine is to have fun.”

“Is that so?” Harry raises a brow, steps left and steps right; his hands are on her hips, too, and they’re swaying, swinging to the beat, to the high-powered adrenaline that’s taking over their bodies.

“What’s mine?”

Her grin fades, falters into a gentle smile as she tips her head back, as she winds her arms around his neck to share his rhythm instead of control it. “To live your life however you want to,” she says, and his heart squeezes and he’s hit with a surge of nostalgia, with a surge of remembrance — this is his last summer before his life starts over, starts again, and he’s going to enjoy it any way he wants. Everybody keeps telling him to, and he’s going to listen to them. “Speaking of Niall —”

“Which we weren’t.”

— he’s staring at you,” she continues as if he didn’t interrupt her, as if he isn’t turning red against her cheek where it rests on top of his shoulder. “He’s looking at you so hard.” Harry bites back a shiver, nibbles on his bottom lip to hide a groan — oh God, he wants Niall hard. Always. “He’s jealous. Oh my God, he looks so jealous even though he’s smiling and waving at me. He’s jealous of me. Wow.”

Harry rolls his eyes, quiets the flutter in his heart, wonders how long it’ll take before he has an aneurysm in her presence, in her embrace. “He’s not jealous of you,” he rejects her words, refuses to believe her babbling nonsense. “He’s got nothing to be jealous of.”

“Are you sure?” She uses her grip on his upper body to spin them around, and now Harry’s facing Niall, who’s sat at the long bar; there’s pink lights above that are shining down on him, making him glow and fizzle and glimmer and fade like the fuzzy pills people are putting in their drinks next to him, and he gives Harry a smile, a soft blink of something that makes Harry clench hard. “He looks pretty jealous to me, but then again, my job is to have fun and not play therapist for two boyfriends so I wouldn’t listen to a word I say.”

Harry chokes, coughs, tears his eyes from Niall’s and turns his face, shoves his nose in Janie’s hair. “We’re not — we aren’t —” he tries, stops, and he can’t breathe when Niall’s looking at him like that, when Niall’s looking at him in the way he’s wanted ever since the first night. “We aren’t really boyfriends.”

She hums, and he knows — he knows she doesn’t believe him and even though he’s got claims, even though he’s got evidence he doesn’t want to share any of it with her just yet.

“You know, it’s weird to some, and taboo, but it won’t be forever,” she says, muses, and how they got here from — from “and don’t stop moving ‘cause you’ll fuck up the flow of things” is beyond him, and there’s nothing he can do about it. “And, as far as I know, there’s no law about it.”

She’s right. There’s no law, as far as he knows, that’s stopping two men from being together.

*But.*
“In the Bible,” he replies, chokes on the words, wonders if he’s going to hell for wanting to be with his best friend, for wanting to be with a man. He doesn’t think he is, has always been of a mind that God gives you the power to choose but also plans every path of your life out. “It says in the Bible that two men shall not lay together.”

She sighs. “I hate to be the one to break it to you, Harry,” she begins, pulls away, blocks Niall’s body with her head, “but not everyone believes in the Bible. And not everyone is going to shame you or him or anybody else for wanting to be with people of the same sex. Besides, a sin is a sin, and one is not greater than the other.”

Harry frowns. “Do you?” he asks, disregards the fact of how personal his question is.

“Shame you? No. Do I believe? Yes.” She smiles, spins them around again so he isn’t looking at Niall, so he isn’t choking on his breath. “It gives me hope when I think all is hopeless. It’s one of the only things that doesn’t change when everything… when everything else around me changes.”

Harry’s lips curl up into a mocking half-grin that she returns with a smirk of her own. “We’re quite the morbid pair, aren’t we?” he jokes, pinches playfully at her tummy.

She tugs on his hair. “At least we can talk to one another,” she says, points out, and Harry reckons she’s right — some people, it’s hard to strike up a conversation yet alone keep it going, and with her… with her it’s easy. She’s like Niall, kind of — he can talk about anything with her, doesn’t have to worry. “Besides, I reckon —”

She’s cut off, rather abruptly, by a vicious yell and the sound of smashing, shattering glass; Harry pulls away from her, wide-eyed and confused, and spins till he finds Niall — and Niall’s on top of the bar, literally on top of the fucking thing, and he’s got the bartender by the collar, screaming in his face, and there’s men rushing from both sides, one and two and three and four and five, and Harry’s off before he can understand why, understand how, and Janie’s on his heels, as well.

Harry gets a punch in on a short, stocky man, and then he’s tackled from behind, shoved to the floor, and he’s got a guy on him and a guy beneath him and it’s a sandwich of curse words, of flying limbs; he takes an elbow to the jaw, a kick to the thigh, but he lets the men have it — hits and hits and hits and hits, and they’re screaming, spitting, slapping, and he’s giving just as hard as they are, too.

And soon one man is pulled off of him and he’s jerked to stand; he looks over his shoulder, ready to pounce, but it’s Niall, and he’s got a tiny cut above his left eye, and they share a smile before Harry turns, finds Janie, and she’s taking on two men by herself, punch-kick-duck-punch-swing-slap, and she’s got them down in a matter of seconds.

There’s not even a hair of hers out of place.

She runs toward both Harry and Niall, grabs their wrists and drags them behind as other men, the club’s security, shows up, and she takes them through a winding, dimly-lit corridor and out of a small gray door, and the humid night air embraces Harry like a welcomed hug.

He stops, pulls away from Janie, puts his arms above his head and takes deep breathes, deep breathes; Janie’s fiddling around with some sort of pipe, shoving it through both of the handles on the door to stop a pursuit just as the door is slammed by the security, and Harry looks at Niall, illuminated by the streetlights above.

“What happened?” he asks, slants his head; he reaches out, wipes the blood off of Niall’s temple before it drips into his eye. “Why’d you fight?”
Niall grins. “Why’d you fight?” he repeats, steps forward, nudges Harry’s chest with his shoulder, sort of half-hugging Harry even though their arms are hanging at their sides, useless and lax with bloody knuckles.

You, Harry thinks, and he has to wonder if that’s the same reason Niall was fighting, too.

“The night’s not over yet, boys,” Janie says, catching both of them off guard; they step apart, but she’s got a look, this look that feels too smart, and the grin on her face is one Harry’s coming to be leery of. “We’ve still got a few places to hit before we call it quits. A quick wardrobe change and we’ll be on our way.”
“I don’t know if I like this,” Niall says, offhanded and mostly to himself; he’s wearing a different shirt now, and it’s long-sleeved, cuffed at the end and starched so many times Harry’s fairly sure it could stand and walk on its own if it ever managed to get loose of the hanger it was on. It’s an off-white color, sort of like the hue of a shiny pearl, and there’s designs on it, tiny, tiny flowers that are pink and purple and blue and green and orange and yellow. Harry likes it, for the most part, but doesn’t appreciate how tight, how high the collar is. Harry likes skin, too. “I mean, I’m all for trying new things — when they’re reasonable — but this is the second change of the night and I just don’t know how I feel about a honky tonk saloon after the mess at the disco club.”

“Why? You ain’t looking forward to gettin’ down with Cotton-Eyed Joe?”

Niall snorts. “Fuck you, man,” he swears, falls over into the chair Harry was in earlier, spreading his legs and knocking his booted feet into Harry’s annoyingly.

Harry grins, sucks in his tummy and tucks the long shirt he’s got on inside of his jeans, pulling it to puff out a bit for comfort; it’s pale yellow, like faded sunshine, and there’s white stitching all along it that’s creating a mess of intricate designs. Stylish, pretty and simple, and the material is soft, well-worn and washed and warm against his skin.

“Well, it was your idea for us to have a night with Janie,” he says, reminds Niall, and Niall groans, throws his head back and lets his shoulders hang. “And I’m havin’ fun. The way I look at it is that we have a few hours left before this night is over, before all the clubs in the city close down, and Niall? I’m going to have a damn good time, and you should, too.” He buttons his pants, adjusts the thick leather belt Janie tossed him; it’s got a buckle on the front, large and engraved, all silver and gold and jewels, and he’s fairly sure it weighs almost as much as him. “Don’t you think we deserve to have a good time?”

“Yeah, we do.” Niall reaches out for Harry, grabs him by the hips and pulls him close; Niall’s sitting down on the chair Harry was earlier, dressed and lazy, and he leans forward, lays his forehead on Harry’s tummy and hooks his fingers in the loops of Harry’s jeans. Oh, my. “I just thought it would be one club and then we’d be able to hit the hay. I thought it would be you and me. I’ve been up for almost twenty-four hours straight and I kind of want to go to sleep.”

Hmm. Karma’s a bitch.

Harry thins his lips, wishes he could take some of Niall’s exhaustion, but he can’t and he doesn’t feel too awful bad for Niall. After all, Harry’s felt that way for a while now; maybe if Niall does, it’ll be like walking in one another’s shoes. “I’m sorry,” he says, combing his fingers through Niall’s thick hair, sifting through the brown locks till he’s got a handful. “Stand up and I’ll tuck your shirt in.”

“Kay.”

Niall releases Harry and stands, wets his lips and levels Harry with a hot, hot look; Harry holds his breath, undoes the button on Niall’s jeans and pulls the zipper down — because it’s easier to do it like that, promise — and takes pieces of Niall’s shirt, tucks it in slowly, languidly, and he has to
reach completely around to get the back, and Niall lurches forward, knocks his hips into Harry’s, and it’s a touch, a little touch, that sets Harry on fire, and he’s doing up Niall’s pants and stepping back and gasping, gulping.

And Niall’s eyes are wide, too, and his cheeks are pink and Harry knows he’s red, knows he’s got a burning blush, and there’s millions and millions and millions of questions swarming around in his head, in his heart, but he doesn’t have the strength, the resolve, the nerve to ask them.

Everything’s going so good, so great. He doesn’t want to mess it up again now that they’re balanced, now that they’re together.

Even though they aren’t together.

“I like your shirt,” Niall says, adjusts the way his is tucked in till he’s got himself looking good, looking comfortable, looking perfect enough that Harry kind of wants to mess him up. “Yellow looks nice on you.”

“You —”

The door to the laundry room is opening and Janie is stepping in before he can finish his sentence; this time, her hair is tied back and she’s wearing a white cotton dresses that reaches her scabbed knees with a dark denim jacket and a pair of red boots that look a bit too worn to be new, and the smile on her face has only gotten bigger the longer the night drags on.

“Hurry with the kissing and let’s go,” she quips, and she’s pushy as fuck, holy shit; she tosses a hat, a Stetson, into the room, and Niall catches the hay-colored thing out of reflex, holding it awkwardly in his hands. “I’ll be in the car while the two of you get yourselves lined out. Don’t take too long; it isn’t polite to keep a lady waiting.”

She’s gone then, and Harry’s red and Niall’s pink, and the only thing Niall says is, “I’m not wearing this fucking hat,” which works just well for Harry because he grabs it out of Niall’s hands, fingers the waxed material before putting it on and adjusting it so it’s up, so it’s out of his way, and he doesn’t have to wonder if he looks good because Niall is staring, is gawking, and it’s answer enough.

They’re going to a honky tonk bar in the middle of the city; might as well dress the part, right?


The bar is long and wide, decorated in the way Harry imagines cabins from the west were: wooden, with tools hanging up here and guns mounted on the wall there, and there’s tall columns made out of thick tree trunks all around, and there’s beer joint lights — big, thick, bright, colored up like the Fourth of July — and it smells like dirt and leather and sweet, sweet liquor.

To the left, there’s a dancefloor, and to the right there’s rows of pool tables; directly in front, there’s a bar that lines the entire south wall with a dining area stretched, and the people inside, black and white and red and brown, are dressed to the nines, either caked in dirt or shining in pearls, laughing and rolling their hips as they dance, as they party, and Harry doesn’t feel near as self-conscious as he did before.

He is rather glad he decided to leave the Stetson in the car, though.

“What’s so cool ‘bout this place?” Niall asks, leans down so both Harry and Janie can hear him over the music. It’s loud, colored with a twang that Harry always associates with country music, but it’s a bit more rock, a bit more roll, a bit more Johnny Cash and Rolling Stones opposed to Waylon
Jennings and Merle Haggard. “Drinks better be good.”

Janie scoffs, grabs both Harry and Niall’s hands and pulls them inside, tugs them through the bar and around the crowd of dancing, of caterwauling people as they move and sway to the beat of the song.

“Who’s this?” Harry asks, reminds himself not to trip over his feet as Janie maneuvers them around a thick block of wood. “Who’s singing?”

“Bachman Turner Overdrive,” she replies, tosses him a look over her shoulder that’s a bit condescending. “Kinda new, very good. I would’ve surely thought you of all people would’ve known since you’re driving ’cross the country for a concert in Atlanta.”

Harry’s neck heats, and he gives Niall an inquisitive look; he just shrugs, offers a timid smile. “This isn’t really my type of place,” Harry replies, tries his best to find the right words, to find the right way to say that this is the first time he’s been in a honky tonk. “I’m more of a Stones person, really. I kinda like Johnny Cash, though.”

Janie snorts, rolls her eyes. “Everyone likes John, Harry,” she says, and then she lets go of his wrist and Niall’s, deposits them in front of gated little part of the bar; inside of the fence, there’s thick red padding a foot high and a wild-looking machine, a mechanical bull, and there’s somebody on the other side ordering folks to line up orderly, to place their bets at the counter and collect their winnings, if any at all, at the door.

Harry wrinkles his nose, shakes his head, but before he can get words out, Janie’s asking, “Who’s first?” and dammit, Niall’s never been one to turn down a challenge, come what may.

Harry’s eyes have not left Niall’s ever since the dunce got on the bull, playfully mouthing up the crowd till the lot of them put forth a few tens, a few twenties on how long he can ride, on how long he can’t ride, and — and Niall is captivating, entirely enthralling and endearing and so, so sensual when his teeth curl into his upper lip as he rolls his hips, as he squeezes his thighs, as moves fluidly against the bucking, the undulating, the arching.

And Harry’s mind wonders to bad, bad things; he doesn’t reckon an erection in public is acceptable, and he’s very glad to be hiding his lower half beneath a table Janie scored for them.

Just — oh, God, the image Niall’s painting, the picture he’s drawing: his hips are liquid and smooth, and he’s using the strength of his thighs to keep himself on as he takes the yelled advice from the patrons gathering all around, and he’s gripping the worn rope tight in his left hand, wrist up, and he’s slinging his other gracelessly above his head and he’s got the biggest, goofiest grin on his face as he hair flops, as his hips roll, roll, roll.

Please, please, please.

Jesus wept, Harry would be so good to Niall, would be so good for Niall. He just wants a chance to show himself, to prove himself.

He looks stupid, though, Harry thinks — stupid, and a bit buzzed from the few shots they took before Niall mounted up, but unbelievably fucking sexy, too, and it’s all in the swivel of his hips, all in the grinding of his lower body.

And Harry shivers — it’s hot in the bar, almost sweltering, and he is shivering because he wants to feel those movements, wants to share those movements, wants the chance to experience those movements.
He grunts, clears his throat, straightens his back and puts his hand in his lap; he presses the heel of his palm on the hardness, slacks his jaw and opens his eyes wide as rivulets of white hot sensation coarse through his body at the muted touch.

Janie, sat across from him and nursing a frosty mug of beer, raises a brow. “Everything okay?” she asks, taps her fingernails against the polished wood of the table.

“Yeah,” he says, nods, exhales harshly, heavily. He removes his hand, grips his knee, digs his nails through the denim of his jeans; it’s a pinch of pain that takes his mind off his arousal. “I’m all right.”

“Hmm. The bathroom is down that hallway, by the way.”

Harry thins his lips, nods again, and really, there’s hardly a reason for him to be blushing like a schoolgirl caught kissing on her boyfriend behind the closet doors because Janie’s made it known to him vividly that she’s aware of his unrequited feelings for Niall.

It doesn’t bother him now; Janie doesn’t seem to be worried over it, either.

And so he just continues to stare, continues to allow his brain to run away with dirty thoughts, continues to memorize Niall’s carnal bucks, storing them away in his mind, in the back of his mind for the long, lonely nights that are sure to come (along with him — ha). Niall’s not helping at all, either, because he’s laughing heartily and sparkling from the euphoria, from the fun, from the liquor, and he’s riding the bull, bucking with the metal-and-leather animal as if — as if it’s Harry himself, and —

— and then Niall’s slung off: sudden, forcefully, abrupt, and hard.

So hard.

(And hopefully all night, all morning, all day long.)

Harry has a quick, cognizant thought of warm bodies, wet bodies sliding against one another between the sheets, in the back of the van, and then he pushes up, makes his way quickly to Niall’s side. There’s padding beneath the bull, thick enough that it refutes any possibility of bouncing off the side, and though Harry knows Niall would be okay even if he did fall over onto the hard floor, he’s got himself a hidden agenda that needs to be tended to and Niall’s the best person to help.

When he shoves gently past the last person in his way, apologizing to a short, stocky man for stepping on his boots, Harry sees that Niall hit, face first, and is now curled up in a ball, laughing so hard there’s tears leaking from the corners of his eyes and he’s red, he’s pink, and he looks like an angel, like something God Himself sent down to save Harry.

There’s no way what he’s feeling for Niall could be wrong. There’s no way God would lead Harry down a path that he isn’t meant for.

“I think I may’ve wet myself,” he calls up to Harry amidst the hollering, the yelling, and Harry just shakes his head and grins.

“Idiot,” he says, whispers beneath his breath and offers a hand to Niall, helps haul him up and over the flimsy plastic fence; Niall’s wobbly, probably from both the shots and the adrenaline of the bull ride, but Harry’s fingers are tangled within Niall’s, so tight so tight so tight, and Harry can’t shake the thought out of his head of Niall fingering him open till he’s wide, till he’s wet, till he’s ready to take Niall for the first time. Fuck. “You okay?”

Niall grins toothily, frivolously, and sticks the fingers of his free hand out to prod at Harry’s chest
innocently, but the jolts the touch sends to Harry’s dick are far from angelic, and he thinks, he knows Niall’s aware of his bulging situation.

“Yeah,” Niall answers, wets his lips, flicks his eyes down to Harry’s groin, smiles secretively. *Oh, hell. “Are you?”*

Harry whines in the back of his throat, turns and maneuvers bumpily through the throng of people, dragging a willing Niall behind him; he looks toward the table, tries to catch Janie’s gaze, but there’s a man sat next to her, dressed in cutoff jeans and a leather jacket, *oh*, and he pushes the thought from his mind as he strides down the corridor, as he shoulders open the bathroom door and moves inside, shutting and locking it behind him, and he has his mind set on calming himself down, on talking this through.

Before Harry can speak, though, Niall’s grabbing Harry by the shoulders, spinning and shoving him against the door, and it’s a jolt to his body that takes a bit of his air but he’s never really been able breathe properly around Niall when he’s… when he’s hard.

“Was it me?”

Harry shuts his eyes, nods, whimpers in the back of his throat; he relaxes against the solidness of the door, tips his head, revels in the feel of Niall’s warm breaths against his exposed throat.

“You’ve got to get this under control, Harry,” Niall says, tsks, and he’s chastising, yes, but he isn’t making fun of Harry, isn’t repulsed by Harry, and that — that’s progress. That’s a lot of progress. “You can’t keep gettin’ hard in public like this. It’s not right, Harry.”

Harry inhales, reaches out slowly, settles his hands on the waist of Niall’s jeans; he grips Niall’s shirt in his fingers, tugs till it’s untucked, slides his touch up beneath the fabric so he can feel, so he can relish bare skin on his palm.

“I’m sorry,” Harry says, apologizes; he opens his eyes, sees that Niall is close, so close, and that they’re breathing each other’s air, and if Harry wanted to — if he really, really wanted to, he could kiss Niall now, right now, and he’s only going to be given so many chances before they wither and fade away but he can’t do it, can’t make himself do it. Niall’s here with him right now, touching his shoulders, but that doesn’t mean he wants it. “It wasn’t on purpose.”

“I know.” Niall smiles, steps closer; he moves his hands from Harry’s shoulders, tucks his fingers in the loops of Harry’s jeans and pulls him in, pulls him flush, and they’re chest to chest and groin to groin, and Niall’s not as hard as Harry, no, but he’s… he’s not soft, either. *Oh, my. “Do you trust me?”*

Harry drops his gaze, admires the pinkness, the wetness of Niall’s lips, and he doesn’t have to think about the answer for more than a single second.

“Yeah.” *More than I did. “I do.”*

“Good.” Niall nods, grins larger, and then he’s shifting his stance, bringing the thickness of his thigh up, adjusting Harry’s hips so he’s more or less sat on Niall’s leg, and it’s alleviating, being pressed, being pushed, but he needs friction. And lots of it. “Grind till you come, yeah?”

“Niall!”

“S’fine.” Niall brings one of his hands up, lays his palm against Harry’s cheek, uses the touch as leverage to pull Harry’s face down till his forehead is resting against Niall’s shoulder. “It’s okay. I wouldn’t be offering if it wasn’t. Please, please believe me.”
Harry doesn’t want to — he’s conflicted, confused, and he doesn’t want to, but Niall’s throat smells like spice and leather and sweat and their hearts are beating together, beating as one, and Niall’s fleshy, bare back is Harry’s tether as he shifts his lower body, as he undulates his hips, as he does what Niall told him to do.

(Because he’s a good boy and he’ll do anything to make Niall smile.)

It’s a muted, grainy pleasure, fast and hard and rough and insistent, heavy and hearty; it’s not as good as skin on fabric, as skin on skin, but Niall’s thigh is solid, is unmoving, and Niall’s fingers are combing through Harry’s hair, and his mouth is next to Harry’s ear, and he’s breathing just as hard, just as heavy, and — and Harry moans, bucks, arches, ah-ah-ahs with his release, so sudden and quick and knee-weakening, and Niall lets out a whimper, a whispered groan, and he and Harry come at the same time, shaking and shuddering and shivering, and Harry clenches his eyes shut so tight, so completely that he’s blinded by color.

- Janie’s waiting for them outside of the bathroom door; she’s got a smile on her lips, big and bright, and Harry’s blush isn’t near as noticeable as Niall’s blubbers.

“You two sound like animals,” she says, comments, and Harry thins his lips, hot with humiliation and colored with embarrassment; Niall’s at his side, shoulders touching, and his fingers twitch as they brush Harry’s. “And you’ve definitely made a mess.”

Harry looks down, sees that he’s soiled the front of his britches, and although it isn’t too bad it’s what’s beneath the denim that’s going to cause a problem later on.

“Are we going somewhere?” Niall asks, slants his head, tips his shoulder more solidly against Harry’s, and he’s too embarrassed at being caught to feel anything else at this moment, really.

“Yes,” she says, nods. “But first, a wardrobe change.”

*Goddammit.*

- “I’m having an identity crisis,” Harry says to Janie as he hands her a cup of spiked yellow lemonade; they’re in a concrete building somewhere on the outskirts of the city, and the music is deafening and loud and the people are dressed in leather, in spikes, in ripped clothing, and Harry reckons he looks the part in his ratted tank top and stained bellbottoms. “We got kicked out of a disco bar, more or less, and played ‘round at Cotton-Eyed Joe, and now we’re closing the night with punk.”

Janie laughs, tosses her head back against the wall and cackles like a little kid; Niall’s somewhere in the other side of the building, looking for a bathroom to adjust the discomfort of his fishnet shirt, and Harry wonders how he’s dealing with the pulsations of it all.

“Pick whichever one you want to be.”

“I want to be me.”

She turns, looks up at him; her eyes are dark in the dim light and the leather skirt she’s wearing is a few sizes too short but the memories he’s made with her tonight are already deeply rooted in his mind and she’s his friend, his family. He’ll not treat her as anything less.

“You’ve got to embrace your inner wild child, Harry,” she says, grins, and goodness, she sparkles
like Niall does. “Just be weird and let your mind be the same person your heart is.”

Harry hums, takes a sip of his drink; his liquor is pink, and he’s fairly sure it’s cranberry juice and vodka instead of strawberry lemonade like he thought. “That’s a bit hard for me,” he says, speaks to her, just to her and nobody else. “Course, you already know that.”

She frowns. “I said it was weird, not unheard of,” she replies, moves her body so she’s leaning on her shoulder, facing him head on. “I’m actually all for it. But my older sister, Heidiee — she isn’t. She’s a firm believer that two people of the same sex shouldn’t lay together. And you know what? That’s okay. In the Bible, it says it’s an abomination, and she believes that, and it’s okay. It’s what she believes, just like I believe it’s okay for a man to love another man. She doesn’t judge people for it, doesn’t judge people at all; in the Bible, in some way or another, it says that God will give judgement to all when they die, and she believes that, too, and so she leaves all the judging up to God, and that’s okay ‘cause if you’re a good person, she’ll be your friend. She doesn’t care what color or race or sexuality you are — if you’re a good person, you’re a good person, and she believes that while also believing in God, and, you know, this plague that’s surrounding the religious folk in this nation is idiotic.” She shrugs, and Harry’s as attentive to her now as he’s ever been. “There’s some bad ones in the bunch, yeah, but there’s loads more good ones, I promise. Just ‘cause one egg is rotten doesn’t mean the rest of the bunch are, too.”

Harry chews on his bottom lip, enjoys the feel of heat in his tummy. “Why’d you tell me that?”

“I don’t think you realize that the people who love you won’t care who you’re with, what you’re with, as long as you’re happy.”

Harry swallows, hard, and his eyes burn, and he opens his mouth to speak, to say something, but Niall’s got a hand on his hip, turns him around, asks, “Wanna dance?” and Harry nods, grabs Janie by the wrist as the three of them move onto the dancefloor a step below, and they laugh and they sing and they scream at the top of their lungs to songs they don’t know the lyrics to, jumping and swinging and bumping, and Harry feels at peace, at total ease with himself as he slings one arm around Janie’s waist and the other on Niall’s shoulders.

Because this is who he is, and this is who he is supposed to be, and it’s beautiful.
As it happens, ‘hitting the hay’ is a literal term in Janie’s mind, and Harry and Niall are dressing down to their boxers and socks in the wide-open loft of a barn a stone’s throw away from the main house on the property just as the dark navy sky begins to flirt with the lightness of the sun rising in the east, and there’s a bed big enough for two, maybe, and there’s a dresser and a window, kind of, and a big fan that Harry flicks on the rusty knob and it’s got one setting — fuckin’ high — and he stumbles in the line of the air and falls over next to Niall, ignoring the itchiness of the threadbare blanket on his back and the worry in the corner of his mind of waking up with a rat on his stomach.

He doesn’t think that would make a very good story.

“D’you have fun?” Niall asks in the night, in the early-morning blueness of pale dawn; they’re both lying on their backs, barely touching because of the heat, because of the humidity, and Harry wonders how much it’ll take to barter Janie into letting him have a shower later on, wonders if she’s got an itinerary set up for the duration of their stay.

He nods, stares up at the wooden beams in the loft. They’re big, thick, heavy, would crush him, the both of them, if they were to fall. “Tons,” he replies, shuts his eyes, yawns hugely and stretches his legs, pops the joints in his ankles and curls in on himself. “Janie’s crazy as hell. I don’t think there’s such a thing as a bad idea for her.”

He doesn’t tell Niall that he likes Janie, doesn’t tell Niall he thinks Janie is going to change the world in her own way.

Niall puffs out a chuckle, a laugh in the darkness, in the heat, and Harry grins in the night, too. “She’s definitely one of a kind, ain’t she?” he muses, nudges the back of Harry’s hand with his knuckles, hard and calloused but soft and gentle, too. “She never runs out of surprises.”

“He’s got enough of those that she’d put Gem to shame, I’m afraid,” Niall jokes, and it’s funny, and it’s true, too, probably, but Harry doesn’t laugh, doesn’t speak, opts to instead just… just feel Niall’s touch, Niall’s presence. It’s so peaceful, especially when Niall isn’t panicking, isn’t freaking out — especially when Niall is the one to initiate the contact. “What’s on your mind, Harry?”

Harry doesn’t think, doesn’t hesitate, doesn’t wish to breed some sort of insecurity inside of Niall when he’s got absolutely nothing to be ashamed of. “You,” he replies, and it goes without saying, really, that Harry’s stuck on Niall’s actions from early, caught up on “grind on me till you come,” and oh God, if he continues to think about Niall’s noises, about Niall’s pants, about the wetness of come on the front of Niall’s jeans, Harry’s going to be hard and raging, ready to go go go. “I’m thinking about you.”

He inhales, wonders what Niall’s thinking, too, and if Niall’s found answers, found closure in the Bible that he reads late late late at night when he thinks Harry’s sleeping and why he feels as if he has to hide something like that from Harry, he’ll never know.
“Aren’t you always?” he asks, teases, and it’s good-natured and — and so very them, so very real, so very uplifting in the prettiest, purest and most raw of ways.

Harry shuts his eyes. “Why’d you start a fight, Niall?” he asks, soft and slow and so very smooth in the darkness they’re in; he’s been wondering that on and off for a few hours, but the act in the bathroom, the grinding and the coming, kind of stole most of his attention. “What caused it?”

“I saw a man trying to drug his date by putting a pill in her drink, and I wasn’t — I wasn’t going to let that happen, you know, and so I swung out, but the guy had a few friends that I didn’t count on and they jumped on me and that’s what you and Janie ran in to.” He sighs, exhales; his breath, his air tickles at the sweaty skin stuck to Harry’s temple and Harry feels loose and languid. “I didn’t want something bad to happen to her, and I tried my best.”

“You did great. You really helped her.”

Niall shivers. “You think so?” he asks, and gosh, but he’s so insecure sometimes and Harry doesn’t know why, doesn’t know how a person like Niall can ever think less of himself, can ever be self-conscious. But he is, and Harry wants to understand why, wants to help Niall understand himself.

“You really think so?”

Of course.

Harry nods, smiles in the dark, wonders what fixed the change in Niall. He doesn’t worry about it, though, doesn’t see the point in shattering his heart more than it already is because he’s strong, he is, and he doesn’t need to be reminded time and time and time again that love is battlefield, that it hurts and it destroys and it angers, but that it also soothes and builds and promises.

Faith, hope, love — the last is the greatest thing God created.

Love wins. Always.

He just… he just doesn’t love Niall like that. Yet.

He doesn’t trust Niall, either. He doesn’t, not like he used to, and that… that was a lot. Harry will still follow Niall anywhere, will still take a bullet for Niall if a situation called for it, proverbial or not, but — but he won’t do anything for Niall anymore, maybe not ever again.

He’s doing good, though, gaining back Harry’s trust. Niall is. It reminds Harry of how they were, of how they used to be.

And maybe, just maybe, things will be okay between them in the end. Harry knows summer doesn’t last, knows that two summers aren’t ever the same, but… but maybe this is the summer that every summer afterward is compared to, against. Maybe this is the summer he’s going to remember long after the chill of winter sets in, taking away all the colors of freedom.

“S’okay, Harry,” Niall says, eases Harry’s apprehension; he turns, tilts on his side, throws a leg over Harry’s, ignores the stickiness of their hot skin and cuddles in, cuddles close, and Harry’s heated but he’s burning on the inside, and his chest feels big, so full and so large and so heavy and he wants to relieve it, wants to kick off the weight, but he can’t because it’s Niall on him, Niall with him, and he doesn’t wish to get rid of it at all. “I wanted it, too. Don’t worry ‘cause it’s okay. It’s all okay.”

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Janie wakes them at eight o’clock in the morning, a few hours later, and the sun is high and hot already, shining through the loft window; Harry’s got a burn on his calves where the rays have hit
his legs, and he groans, murmurs something beneath his breath, curls in and around Niall.

“Does she ever fuckin’ sleep?” Niall asks, sneers, and he’s groaning, too, making all sorts of unnecessary sounds that seem really, really necessary at the moment. “I’ve only been sleeping for two damn hours.”

Harry whines, opens his eyes; it’s bright in the loft, very bright and very hot and very steamy, too, because he and Niall are touching, touching, dressed in their boxers, and Janie is standing over them, wearing ripped blue jeans and some sort of faded red shirt with cutoff sleeves that show off her arms, and they’re kind of big and all the way tan, and her dark hair is braided down her back and she’s wearing a hat with a wide brim, and the smile no her face is large, dammit, and how somebody can look so clean, so fresh, so radiating after only having gotten a few, three at the most, hours of sleep is beyond him.

“Up and at ‘em, boys,” she says, and she’s got something in her hands, holy shit, and she raises it up, and Harry realizes it’s a bucket of water before it’s too late; she dumps it, tips it over onto the bed, soaks Harry and Niall both, and it’s a rush of chilled water, icy and cold cold cold, and Niall lets out a yell, shocked and frozen, and Harry jerks, tries to miss the waterfall, but falls over and off the side of the bed, slamming his tailbone against the floor and the back of his head on some sort of dresser he didn’t notice last night, didn’t notice earlier, and Niall’s cussing up a storm, throwing in words that Harry’s fairly sure he’s not heard before, makes him turn red, and through it all, Janie’s laughing — like, bent over, hands on knees, shaking shoulders laughing, and it’s loud and it’s obnoxious and Harry’s hit, slammed with all sorts of realizations, and he likes how she doesn’t care, likes how she cares, likes how she doesn’t take anything seriously, likes how she takes everything seriously.

She’s a contradiction. Living, walking, breathing, smiling, screaming — she’s somebody you see once in a lifetime, if you’re lucky, if you’re blessed. And Harry reckons he’s blessed doubly, because Janie is Janie and Niall is Niall, and — and they’re the same, kind of, in the way that they’re naturally themselves, in the way that they don’t care, in the way that they’re kind and open and vulnerable and strong, in the way that they share their joy with whoever, whenever and however.

And yeah, Harry’s blessed. Completely, wholly, entirely; it isn’t just Niall, it isn’t just Janie — it’s Gemma and it’s Louis and it’s Liam, it’s his mum and it’s his estranged dad, it’s even Maura and Greg and Steve. It’s everyone. Ten, twenty, thirty — he’s a thousand times more blessed than he ever thought possible.

They’re right, all the people who’ve told him that God works in mysterious ways. They’re right.

“Gets hot early this time of the year,” she says, and if that’s her excuse for dumping water on them — if that’s her excuse for throwing icy liquid on them, he kind of wants to hit her, kind of wants to thank her. It is scorching already, humid and breathtakingly steamy.

“What’s that got to do with us?” Niall asks, and Harry blinks, wipes at a few stray drops of water on his lashes before they dry and clump together.

“The two of you are going to help me finish up all my chores,” she replies, and Harry grunts, pushes himself up off the floor and fixes his boxers, adjusts the little slit so his dick isn’t peeking out. He’s fairly sure Janie isn’t in the mood for an eyeful. “Feeding, watering, picking, fixin’ a few quick things here and there — all that shit. The little’uns get to do the cleaning today.”

Niall sighs, stands off the bed; he’s wearing briefs, Harry thinks, and they’re short on his legs, barely an inch below the curve of his bum, and — and oh God, he’s rear is plump and perky, kinda, and Harry reckons it would be the most perfect fit for his hands, and if he didn’t have morning wood before he’s definitely got it now, oh dear, but Niall does, too, and it’s hard for Harry to take his eyes
off Niall’s body, off Niall’s slanting and rolling sloping and rising, raising, and gosh, he’s so pretty, so beautiful.

It throws Harry for a loop, blows his mind every single time.

“Can we have breakfast first?” Harry asks, yawns, scratches his tummy; last night, between the disco club and the honky tonk saloon, they were able to grab a bite to eat, hambone beans and cornmeal okra and fried potatoes and a bowl of cold, cold pineapples, and while it was a fulfilling meal with all sorts of protein, it’s wore off and Harry’s stomach is growling. “’m wiltin’ ’way.”

Janie smiles, slants her head; a wispy piece of hair falls out of her braid and the air from the fan catches it, throws it around. “I quite like the accent you’ve got yourself,” she muses, and she’s too endearing for her own good, really, since she can make Niall laugh like nobody else, like only Harry can, and he isn’t worried that Niall and Janie are attracted to one another, isn’t worried that Niall and Janie have feelings for one another because it was Niall and Harry who rutted against each other in the bathroom and came, came, came. He’s got nothing to worry about — and if he does? Oh, well. Janie’s one person who Harry knows would make Niall happy, and that’s all that matters in the long run. “Mama’s washed your clothes, and they’re hangin’ in the laundry room. You’ve got thirty minutes to dress and grab some cheese grits and cinnamon rolls in the house, and then I’ll treat the two of you to lunch at my grandma’s diner in the city before we go check in on your van. Sound good?”

Harry looks over at Niall, sees that Niall’s eyes are low on his body, on his chest, and it makes his cheeks heat, makes his tummy flush, and Niall must notice it, too, because he raises his gaze and meets Harry’s shy, sheepish smile with one of his own, big and goofy and affectionate.

And Harry thinks Niall’s right — it’s all going to be okay.

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Harry scratches his head, purses his lips, stands off to the side while Janie weaves in and out, in and out through the shop, around cars and behind workers and over spread-open toolboxes with wrenches here and screwdrivers there; against the wall, there’s several cherry pickers, smeared with so much grease and oil and grit it’s quite hard to see the color, and there’s music playing in the place, all around, and Harry recognizes it as KISS, wonders what other surprises this sleepy, sleepy town outside of Oklahoma City has to offer.

He likes it. The place, the town, the people, the tender placidity — he likes it all, can’t help but feel at home and as far out of his comfort zone as possible. Everything’s so… slow. And hot, heated, heavy. Peaceful, in a way that there’s no such thing as rushing.

“I like it here,” Niall says, turns to look at him; the two of them are red-faced and pink-skinned, hot and sweaty, so sweaty, and Niall smells like dust and grass and Harry smells like creek water and pig shit, and he’s just glad they didn’t have to move the hay on the fields behind the house, knows how — for lack of a better word — suckish it is. And also, fuckin’ hay fever, man. It’s shit. “Everything’s so easy, so slow, so much different from LA. And the food — oh, the food.”

Harry smiles, tips their shoulders together; Harry ripped off the sleeves of his shirt and Niall’s got his rolled up, so it’s hot skin on equally as hot skin and it makes Harry burn hotter. “It’s nice.” He nods, crosses his arms, turns his head to meet Niall’s blue, blue eyes. “Wouldn’t mind stayin’ here for a while. It feels like a great place to just… stop and breathe, take a break. I like that.”

“Yeah.” Niall smiles, small and soft and sensitive, and — and something’s changed, something has shifted, and Harry isn’t sure, isn’t sure when, isn’t sure why and how and where, but it has,
something big and something great and something momentous, and it’s a good thing, he’s hoping it’s a good thing, and when Niall looks at him like that, so open and easy and simple, Harry’s sure. Sure it’s good, sure it’s great. He just isn’t sure what. “Maybe.”

“Do you —”

“Charlie says the motor will be finished tonight,” Janie announces, cuts Harry off, and he isn’t mad, isn’t upset, would rather have this conversation somewhere else, somewhere private. “I reckon when he’s got the manpower on hand and the tools, he can get anything done that he wants as long as he sets his mind to it.”

Niall nods. “When will we be able to head out?”

“You’re already sick of me?” Janie asks, pouts, and Harry smiles when she winks, when she throws her head back and laughs. Niall guffaws, too, and Harry’s hit again with the stunning realization of how blessed he is. “He says he’ll put the motor in first thing tomorrow morning, so… ‘bout ten, maybe noon. He’s not fit to handle if he hasn’t had five cups of coffee, and then he only answers in grunts and groans.”

Harry chuckles, brings his hand up to wipe at the itchy hair on his forehead. “Sounds like Gem,” he says, muses to himself.

“Your sister?”

Harry swivels his gaze, meets Niall’s eyes. “Just how much have you told her about me, Niall?”

With a lopsided grin, higher on one side and lower on the other, Niall shrugs, reaches out, wraps his arm around Harry’s waist and pulls him in, pulls him close. “Everything.” he replies, answers, and things come together at that moment, click into place, and the smile on Janie’s face, wise and all-knowing, lets him know he’s correct.

The crisp, clean, clear green water ripples when Niall lets go of the knotted rope with a holler, opening up wide and taking him under, and Harry laughs, shuts his eyes, wipes the droplets of creek off his face so he can see, so he isn’t blind.

High above them, trees on either side form a thick canopy of green, green leaves; sunlight shines through, makes the water gimmer as it crepitates along, and reflects all the scenery around, using the surface as a canvas to paint the beauty of the world. It smells fishy, scaly, kind of like dirt and kind of like water, green water, but Niall’s breaking the surface in the next moment and his brown hair is adhered to his face and he’s grinning, so big and so bright and so brilliant and so beautiful, and it’s cool and it’s deep, and Harry’s floating, bobbing, enjoying the chill of the shadowed creek as it knocks off the heat, knocks off the hotness of the summer.

“I’d say that was an eight and half,” Janie says, jokes, and she’s laid up on the bank, wearing a pair of dark purple underwear and a bright green bra, and by modern standards she’s plump, she’s thick, she’s fat, as much as he hates that word for all the times Gemma was slandered by her pitiful ex-boyfriend, with some here and some there and some all around, but Harry doesn’t see her rolls and doesn’t see her angles and doesn’t see her extra layers because he’s too busy mirroring her smile, too busy nodding his head, too busy enjoying the ease with which she carries herself, too busy relishing the way she makes him feel — normal, total, whole, complete. She doesn’t make him wonder if he’s less for being attracted to a man, doesn’t make Niall think there’s something wrong with him for being the object of a man’s attraction. “I’d have given you a ten, but you didn’t do a flip, and that
costs you. Harry’s still in the lead.”

“Oh, fuck you and your damn rules!” Niall curses, yells, hits at the water, but he’s smiling, treading closer toward Harry till their legs are rubbing, kind of, and Harry can see the ripples of Niall’s body below the surface, likes the way Niall’s in his element. “It’s not my fault Harry’s a contortionist. Kid ought to be in the fuckin’ circus with the way he can bend, could prob’ly blow himself if he really wanted.”

And — oh, the thought of actually trying to… to blow himself, to suck himself off in front of Niall makes his eyes cross.

Harry frowns, kicks Niall beneath the water. “Hey,” he says, whines, draws the word out. “Be nice to me.”

Niall rolls his eyes. “Or what?”

And — and, “This!” and Harry kicks up, pushes up, wraps his wet arms around Niall’s slick neck, around Niall’s lean shoulders, and under they go, bubbling breaths and mumbling words and tangling limbs, and Niall’s hands are knotted in Harry’s hair and Harry’s fingers are curled around the skin of Niall’s fleshy hips, of Niall’s love handles, and the water’s clear but shadowed, and Harry only sees Niall when he leans in close, when he puts their lips together.

It’s a weird touch, a strange sensation; Harry feels more water than he does skin, feels more barriers than he does yields, and they’re up on the surface in the next second, bobbing fitfully, going under and popping right back up, angling their heads to stay together, to not drown, and then it’s hot and wet, lips on lips, noses bumping noses as they breathe, as they inhale, and Harry’s eyes are open, and Niall’s are, too, and it’s green like the creek and blue like the sky and all around it’s bright, all around it’s quiet, and Harry never thought he would get this chance, never thought he would get this experience.

But he has. He has, and it’s Niall — it’s Niall’s doings, Niall’s actions, and when he pulls back, when Niall pulls back, there’s a smile on his lips, lips Harry’s kissed now, oh my God, and Harry licks his mouth, captures Niall’s taste on his tongue, and he can’t help but feel weak, but feel lax when he swallows their amalgamated flavor, wonders how it would feel to lick into Niall’s mouth.

“Niall?”

Niall nods, releases the touch he has on Harry’s hair, trails his fingers along Harry’s shoulders till they’re beneath the water and touching his body, touching his skin, scratching along his chest and curling around the waistband of his boxers. “Yeah,” he says, answers, breathless and thick. His smile is never ending. “It’s okay, Harry.”

“Now that is definitely a ten,” Janie says, voice cutting through the tension, through the quiet, and Niall laughs, turns red in the face, leans forward and puts his forehead against Harry’s shoulder, mumbling something as they sink, sink, sink, low and slow and languid and smooth, and lace together beneath the surface in a hug that goes deeper than history, longer than the test of time.
Harry smiles, looks down at the ground, fingers at the loose threading on the well-washed, well-worn black t-shirt Janie loaned him; he and Niall are sat in the back of the truck next to the creek, dangling their legs and watching the clouds, while Janie changes into dry clothes in the front, side by side but not touching, not talking.

There’s ants on the ground. Little tiny, black things crawling, rushing to and fro, gathering supplies and bringing it all back to their queen, to their reason of living. Small fuckers hurt when they sting, but Harry’s not got much of a problem with them.

“You’re being awful quiet,” Niall says, muses, and knocks his arm out, hits his elbow against Harry’s. The heat between them is somewhere on the line of too much and not nearly enough.

“What’s on your mind, Harry?”

Harry grins, face pink, and looks up through the canopy of the trees, blinks his eyes as the setting rays of the sun blinds him dazzingly, beautifully; the clouds are fluffy and fat, and they make Harry feel at ease. “Asking questions you already know the answer to has never been attractive on somebody as intelligent as you,” he replies, bites his bottom lip to hold in the toothy smile, lazy and sated and — and happier than he’s been in what feels like forever. So many things are going right, and he’s afraid that they’ll take a wrong turn, yes, but right now they’ve not and he isn’t going to let these moments pass him by “You. I’m thinking about you. You’re always on my mind.”

“You think I’m intelligent?”

Harry’s smile widens and his face heats, goes from pansy to maroon to deep, deep crimson. “Out of everything I just said, all you heard was that?” he asks, teases, and he wants to turn his head, wants to meet Niall’s eyes, but he’s afraid — he’s afraid if he does, it’ll break the spell, shatter the illusion, and he doesn’t want to wake up from the dream, from this dream. “And yeah, I do. I think you’re intelligent. Smart. Extremely.”

“Thank you.” Niall chuckles, low and easy, beneath his breath; he reaches out, grabs Harry’s chin between his fingers and lifts his face, his gaze, and their eyes meet and hold, green and blue, and Harry’s terrified but he’s so at peace at the same time, too, and the contradictions, the give-and-take, the incredulity of it all has him soaring, has him falling, and it’s all okay as long as Niall’s there to catch him at the bottom. “Thank you for thinking I’m smart. Thank you for believing in me.”

“I — you’re welcome.” Always. Harry’s grown up with a mother who supports him, with a sister who accepts him, with an estranged father who dotes on him, and he knows, he knows, Niall’s not had the precious love, not had the sensitive experience, and it makes him appreciate, makes him respect, makes him remember to not take the things given to him for granted, but it also makes him think — he can give Niall what he’s missing. Not all of it, of course, but enough; enough that Niall won’t feel empty, enough that Niall won’t be standoffish, enough that Niall won’t live the rest of his life starved for the attention, for the affection, for the airy gratification of being cherished. “You kissed me, Niall.”
Niall nods, smiles, and it’s all kinds of mountains moving and skies splitting and trees falling and water splashing over onto the land. “I did.”

“Why?”

Niall’s smile fades, kind of, and his touch on Harry’s chin falls. “I’m not sure,” he replies, and it hurts — the answer, the expression, the distance in his words, the way he’s withdrawn from Harry’s open invitation to be colorfully himself — of course it does, but Harry appreciates the honesty, appreciates the way Niall’s being as true with him as he can. It’s — progress, is what it is, and it’s good, it is, no matter how explicitly horrible it stings. “Are you mad at me?”

Harry wets his lips, scratches his brow, wipes a bit of snot off his nostril (wonders why his nose always gives him hell when he gets water up it, curses all that is when Niall wrinkles his brow in disgust), and says, “No, I’m not,” and it’s the truth, and he’s always wondered why the words truth and trust are so closely related, how they correlate so importantly, and he thinks he’s got the answer now; you can’t have one without the other, and maybe the reason Niall wasn’t honest before is because he didn’t trust himself, didn’t trust Harry, and it all makes a little bit more sense than it did before. “I really — I’m really happy that you can be honest with me.”

“Me too.” Niall smiles, hard and thin-lipped. “There’s… a lot that I need to tell you, but I don’t — I can’t right now. I hope you can understand that. And that’s not your fault, Harry, I swear it’s not. I just…” He trails off, shakes his head, curses under his breath; Harry’s chest expands, and the love in his heart for Niall is a mess of colors, of blooming loyalty. “Time. I need time. As much as you’re willing to give me. To think, to… think some more.” He stops, smiles, reaches for Harry’s hand, interlaces their fingers. “I can’t explain to you what’s going on in my head because I don’t understand it, either, but I will. I will when… when I know, when I feel like I can. I’ll tell you everything. Okay?”

“Okay.” Harry nods, smiles, and it’s small but it’s real, so real, and he feels light, feels weightless, feels like the mess of emotions bubbling in his heart have finally relaxed and spread to the rest of his body, and he can breathe. “I trust you.”

And he does. Completely, entirely, wholly — he trusts Niall in a way he’s never trusted Niall before.

Niall’s eyes widen, so blue it’s hard to believe they’re real and Harry’s lost in the endlessness of them. “That means a lot to me,” he says, readjusts the grip he has on Harry’s hand, tangles their fingers tighter, deeper, and Harry has to wonder — does Niall notice how they fit into one another’s spaces so easily, so completely; does Niall notice how Harry is one thing and he himself is the other and yet they can come together in so many ways that won’t work with anyone else? “I did so much to you… I messed up so much, so many times with you, and I’m sorry for it all. I am, every single second that I made you feel less about yourself. I’m sorry. And the fact that you can trust me again, after all that I put you through ‘cause of how scared I was, ‘cause I didn’t want to admit to myself that you felt something for me — God, Harry, that makes me feel like I can do anything. You’ve forgiven me, and that makes me feel like I can rule the world.”

“Niall —”

“You make me feel like I can do anything,” Niall says, cuts Harry off, and he leans forward, puts his lips to Harry’s forehead, slaters on a kiss that’s cold-lipped and fat, juicy, and Harry just kind of melts, just kind of falls into Niall and brings his free hand up, grips the collar of the moth-eaten shirt Niall’s got on and uses the tether as an anchor because Niall’s a ship and Harry’s the hopeless romantic who’s fallen over the side for being too clumsy while watching the colors of the sunrise on the morning after he realized how much life is worth living regardless of what the world around him thinks, expects, forces.
Harry sighs, tips his head back, spreads his arms out wide, takes a deep, deep breath; he’s in the backseat of Janie’s car, all long limbs and big feet and awkward angles that just don’t fit right in the small space, and Niall and Janie are up front, and the windows are down and it’s hot, even at half past nine it’s still so hot, and the wind is blowing inside the cab, tangling Harry’s hair and tossing Janie’s curls and fluffing the tufts sticking out beneath the baseball hat Niall’s got on, and the lights shining off from the dashboard are green, light green, and they color both Niall and Janie so prettily, so beautifully, so delicately, and Harry’s at home, breathing in fresh air and feeling the humidity on his skin.

California’s never felt like home. Sure, it’s been a temporary place, a sanctuary to live, but — but it isn’t home. All the people, all the noise, all the lights, all the colors — he loves it, loves it as much as the next person, but it’s not home, not somewhere he’s going to stay forever.

He likes slow. He likes easy, simple. He likes placidity and peace and precious tranquility. He likes people waving at him on the side of the road and music playing in a crowded mechanic’s shop and well-cooked meals at the end of the day and swimming in a creek to knock off the stickiness of salty sweat from his body and little kids hanging off his shoulders as they ignore their chores and going to sleep to the sound of singing crickets and driving around in cars with people he adores, with people he doesn’t think he could live happily without.

That’s home. That’s what home feels like.

Easy smiles, simple touches, teasing jibes, jubilant pats on the back and basking in the moonlight and magnifying the careful relationships one person has for another and amicable loyalty and loving gestures — that’s home. Looking at the person next to you, looking at the person in front of you and knowing that they will be there when you close your eyes, knowing that they will be there when the everlasting sun above wakes you up the next morning — that’s it, that’s home, and that’s what Harry wants.


He likes soft colors. Green like the grass surrounding the barn he slept in, blue like Niall’s eyes, purple like the flowers lining the sides of the road, pink like Niall’s lips, gold like the wings of the butterfly that landed on his finger, red like the shirt of his Niall’s wearing, black like the sky full of stars above him, orange like the paint Niall’s got smeared all over his hands.

He likes that. He likes Niall. Niall’s home.

“What’s on your mind?”

Harry fixes his head, meets Niall’s eyes in the rearview mirror; his face is streaked with green, and it makes Harry bite his bottom lip, makes Harry smile as if he’s a king and Niall’s his best knight and they’re the two that are going to inherit the world when all is said and done.

“Everything,” he replies, pronounces each letter in the word with thick fondness, licks his lips when he sees that Niall’s pansy pink mouth stretch into a smile of epic proportions. “I’m thinking about everything.”

Janie hits a few buttons, turns the radio down; the words of Jerry Lee Lewis, of all people, fade into the background, and Harry taps his fingers on the leather headrests to the beat, wonders if it’s too late to take his mum up on the offer of having her stack of records she’s got hidden in the top of her closet.
“Not having any regrets, are you?” Janie asks, raises her brow in the mirror, and her hair is loose and wavy, wispy, and she’s wearing a yellow sundress with short sleeves and white trimming, and Harry thinks she would be a nice thing for somebody to come back to, hopes she finds the person who is a balance of need and want.

“Nope.” He shakes his head, chuckles, wipes a hand through his sweat-dampened hair and relishes the way Niall’s enthralling smile grows, grows, grows. “None at all.”

“I lied,” Harry says, whispers, squeezes his eyes shut as he grips the shoulders of the two seats in front of him, holding on as the car slides to the side, faster than he ever thought possible. “I lied! I fuckin’ lied!”

There’s a loud noise, a thunder of metal on bark, of aluminum splintering wood and shattering plastic thinned by the heat, and then Niall’s falling back into the vehicle, laughing animatedly, high with pink giddiness and glimmering with blue excitement. His eyes are wide, bright, dazzling, and they’re being bad, doing bad things, but fuck if Niall doesn’t look like an angel when he’s playing at being a demon.

“What’d you lie about?” Janie asks, laughs at the top of her lungs, and the music is loud but she’s louder, always, and when Niall joins in, cackling at the utter destruction of property, Harry’s reminded again — even the devil himself would have his hands full with the two of them, with Niall and Janie by themselves, together be damned.

They’re the epitome of hard to handle, and — and, well, Harry thinks he’s handling things rather acceptably, for the most part.

His mum would be proud of him if she knew how against this he was. Honest. She’s always prided herself on being able to show her kids right from wrong, of teaching her kids how to distinguish good from bad, and Harry would make her proud at this very moment.

(Which reminds him — he ought to give her a call again, let her know what’s happening. It’s been a few days, and maybe he can get Niall to call his brother, too, though he isn’t crossing his fingers, reckons Niall will ring Greg up when he wants to and doesn’t think he’s in a position to push any more than he already has.)

“I lied about regretting!” Harry replies, yells, and really, it’s the only way he can heard in the boisterousness of the cab, reckons sooner or later they’re going to get stopped, going to get pulled over for playing the radio too loud before they’re brought in for speeding. “I regret getting into this vehicle with the two of you!”

“Oh, Harry, what’s wrong?” Niall asks, condescending and a bit too shallow for Harry’s liking, and Harry gives him a look, hard and calculative and borderline scared and appalled as Janie takes the next corner on two wheels, if that. “We’re just havin’ a bit of fun, is all. We aren’t doing anything wrong.”

“You aren’t doing anything wrong?” Harry repeats, squeaks, wonders if it’s too late to start digging under the seat for the belts Janie said were shoved beneath from carpooling the little kids back and forth. “You’re literally smashing mailboxes with a fuckin’ baseball bat — I’m fairly sure destruction of property is illegal as hell!”

Janie giggles. “C’mon, Harry, live a little,” she says, teases, and Harry’s living enough, thank you very much, but the craziness the two of them are exerting in the tiny cab of the car is sure to put
Harry in an early grave. “We’re just havin’ fun, like Niall said. There’s nothing wrong with that. And if it makes you feel any better, all these people we’re fuckin’ with — they aren’t very good people, and yeah, maybe smashing their mailboxes is a little uncalled for, but they definitely deserve something for being assholes all the damn time.”

“That doesn’t make me feel better,” he says, shakes his head, wrinkles his nose. “Isn’t God supposed to be the one who distributes punishments?”

“I like to think God gives that special power to people,” she replies, then adds, with a smirk, “Besides, what goes around comes around, and I reckon I’m just giving it a little push.”

Harry balks, blinks in disbelief. “You’re fucking insane,” he muses, murmurs to himself, but he thinks she hears him, isn’t sure if it’s a good or bad thing that she’s got ears like a hawk. “You’re absolutely crazy.”

“ Took you long enough to realize that.” She shrugs, grins, leans over and grabs something out of the floorboard, raises up, hands it over the seat and drops it into Harry’s hands. It’s a bowling ball, all black and heavy and laden in his lap. “Now, get up here and throw this out the window and quit complaining about the unfairness of the world, will ya?”

And he does as she says — gripes, mumbles, complains as he does, but still.

He leans up, puts the ball down in the seat; first his torso, angled to the left where he’s slanted delectably across Niall, whose fingers are on Harry’s bare shoulders and dislocating his focus, and with a push he’s over the seat, sat haphazardly in Niall’s lap.

“Hi,” he says, grins, adjusts his lower half so he isn’t crushing Niall’s thighs, aligns their groins in a way that makes his eyes cross. “Is this okay?”

Niall laughs, rolls his eyes, nods. “Of course it is,” he replies, moves his fingers from Harry’s shoulders to Harry’s hips, keeps him there, keeps him still, and they’ve been this close before, really, for completely different reasons, and while this is intimate and kind of sexy, the warm fuzzies Harry’s feeling in the pit of his stomach aren’t rabid with sexual frustration anymore. “Just don’t hit me with the ball, yeah?”

Harry nods, blushes. “I’ll try not to,” he replies, teases, and Niall grins, crinkles his nose; Harry grabs the ball, leans up, presses just that much closer to Niall, and then he’s throwing the thing out the window, hoping it lands where it’s supposed to.

It doesn’t.

_Dammit._

And the sound of shattered glass is reverberating in the quiet noise of night behind them; Harry’s eyes are wide and Niall’s mouth is open and Janie’s speechless, and then there’s screaming, a lot a lot a lot, and Harry looks at Janie, prays that she knows what to do, and she slams her foot on the gas so hard Harry flies forward, knocks into Niall, and they’re zooming down the street faster than the speed of sound and Harry focuses on the steady thud-thud-thud of Niall’s heart beneath his ear.

“I need a drink.”

Janie nods, mumbles, “Me too,” and turns off the highway, into the parking lot of a neon-colored convenience store. She puts the car in park, opens the door, looks at Harry, says, “You can drive,”
and gives him a wink, a smile as she gets out of the vehicle, and he nods, moves off Niall’s lap and into her seat, shutting the door and putting his hands on the wheel, gets a feel of the machine he’s in.

It isn’t loud, isn’t fiery with power; it’s a low mumble of passion, of burning desire, and it idles pleasantly, calm and simple, and Harry’s always liked the easiness of quiet opposed to the difficulty of noise, really.

“She’s going to put us in an early grave,” Niall says after a moment of comfortable silence. He moves over, scoots into the middle, leaves his seat for Janie and takes his spot to Harry’s right, against Harry’s shoulder. “I swear, I’ve never met another person like her.”

Harry smiles, tips his forehead against the steering wheel, watches the gages flutter as the car idles. “I have,” he replies, and he reckons Niall realizes just what he’s talking about, just what he’s getting at when he sucks in a tight breath of astonishment.

“Harry —”

“It’s true.” He turns his head, gives Niall a grin of pure adoration. “I promise you it’s true.”

Niall turns red, the prettiest shade Harry’s ever seen.

A few moments later, Janie’s coming back, sliding into the passenger seat; she’s got three six packs of bottles, clanking together in the sacks, puts them at her feet, and when she raises her head to give Harry a smile, to give him the signal, she’s cut off by the telltale sounds of a bullet being pumped into the chamber of a shotgun right outside the car.

(And Harry reckons he would have shit himself if he could have, if Niall didn’t dig his nails into Harry’s thigh.)

He turns his head, looks out the window; standing in front of him is a short man with a big tummy and graying beard and thick arms. He looks mean, looks mad, and the gun casually held in his arm is pointed at the ground, for the most part, but his finger is on the trigger and Harry’s kind of paralyzed.

“Can we do anything for you, sir?” Niall asks, voice calm and steady, and Harry lets out a breath, reaches for Niall’s hand, holds him tight.

“Yes, you can,” the man says, slow and accented. “You can tell me which one of you dropped a bowling ball right into the back glass of my son’s car.”

Harry freezes, feels the numbness of being caught set in, and he opens his mouth to reply, to answer the scary man with a shotgun, but before he can Janie’s leaning over Niall, saying, “That would be me, Dick,” and shifting the car into gear, grabbing Harry’s knee and pushing down, and he gets the idea, hits the gas as hard as he can.

And they’re off, fast fast fast, and the man is thrown for a loop, too, falls over and drops his gun, and the weapon goes off, shoots beneath the car and catches the front of plastic trash bin on the side of the road, and Harry’s shaking and Niall’s screaming and Janie’s swearing, and there’s only going to be so many times he’s shot at before he’s actually shot, he reckons.

(He’ll probably shit his pants then, won’t he?)
Okay, this is a shitty chapter, but I've not updated in a week (YIKES) and I have a three-day weekend, so I'm hoping to have AT LEAST ONE MORE CHAPTER BY MONDAY. Maybe two, idk yet. Wish me luck, and I hope you all enjoy your weekend. :)
For the sake of my ever-lovin' sanity, let's say that Friday is now my updating day, okay? I think that works out well for me. Thank you all for being so supportive and understanding about my college. You're all amazing, beautiful people, and I'm really very lucky.

It takes a moment for Harry to calm down, to slow his racing heart and settle his outrageous breathing and soothe his jumping nerves and sniff out the fear in the pit of his stomach, in the back of his mind; he and Niall and Janie are bunched up together in the front seat of her car, shoulder to shoulder and thigh to thigh, and Niall’s hand is on the inside of Harry’s leg and Janie’s got the knee of Niall’s jeans in her hands and they’re quiet, so quiet, probably too scared out of their asses to say anything.

And what needs to be said, anyway? All that Harry wants to say can be summed up impeccably in four short words — I told you so, I told you so, I told you so.

(He likes to think that he isn’t one to rub being right in somebody’s face, but he fact is that he really, really is. However, he’s quite smart at choosing which time to do so, and he knows this isn’t a good moment to open his mouth.)

He did, though. Told them so, that is. He really, honestly, truly did; he’s all for having fun, all for blowing off steam, all for going out with a bang instead of a whimper of ease, but not at the expense of others. And, really, it’s his fault, more or less — he’s the one who allowed himself to be talked into the ugliness of destroying someone’s property, he’s the one who took the bowling ball from Janie’s hands, he’s the one who crawled over the back of the seat and settled into Niall’s lap and tossed the damn thing out of the window, he’s the one who hit the car and he’s the one who drove off and he’s the one who brought on a near assault and he’s the one who almost, almost, got the three of them killed.

But he didn’t. Nobody’s died on this road trip, on this impromptu cruise through the states to the greatest concert he’s sure he’ll ever attend, and he’s very satisfied with that statistic.

Yet.

(He tries to not think how morbid, how desolating the idea of a death on this trip would be. It’s already been kind of upsetting, kind of shitty, and while everything’s okay no, more or less, he’s afraid Niall’s still leading him on, afraid Niall’s still just as confused as he was before — if not more — and yeah, he’s sort of basking in the greatness of it all at the moment, but he knows, he knows, everything can change in the blink of an eye and he doesn’t want to get hurt, doesn’t want to hurt.)

(It still slithers into his mind like a funky snake in the middle of a green, lush garden, though, and he
can’t help it — has to shiver, has to move, has to let out the insanity of it all in some way or another.)

At least he’s not crying, at least he’s not screaming, at least he’s not throwing a raging fit, at least he’s not letting his useless temper get the best of him.

(At least he’s not shitting his pants like he thought he would earlier, reckons he ought to be a little thankful that he’s put on a bit of weight since they left and fits better in his jeans now.)

“Is everyone okay?” Janie asks, and it’s tense in the car; the air is tight, strung from end to end with no play in the middle to budge, to swing, and Harry feels heavy, feels weighted, wonders if it’s Niall’s touch on the inside of his thigh or if it’s Janie’s quivering lip that has him feeling as if he’s tons and tons and tons. “Nobody’s… hurt, are they?”

Niall shakes his head, gives both Harry and Janie a little smile of relief, of alleviated triumph, and he’s quiet, reserved. “No,” he says, answers for himself, for Harry, for Janie, for all three of them. “I don’t think anybody is hurt.”

Harry wrinkles his nose, eases his foot off the gas as he zooms past houses, past fields, past buildings, past people strolling on down the sidewalks and past streetlamps that flicker in the night and music spilling out of clubs.

He doesn’t think he’s been here yet. He and Niall came in through the south, through Norman and tiny farm towns, and Janie and her clan live off over to the east; they’ve been driving around for a while, no less than two hours, but Oklahoma City is rather large and he’s fairly sure one can be on the road for an entire day not touch at every place, every stop, every monumental area that screams memories and the makings of moments that are going to last lifetimes after everybody’s all gone.

They’re in the clear now, out of the woods now. Maybe.

He hopes, prays, and God’s not let him down yet.

“I feel like we’ve all learned a valuable lesson,” Harry says, shaky and scratchy, and he thinks he hears, swears he hears Niall murmur under his breath, “Fuck me, not again with this,” but he pays no mind to it as he continues, as he explains. “And it’s that the destruction of property is not only illegal but could get you killed if you mess with the wrong person and there’s loads more acceptable ways to have fun without all but signing our death certificate.”

Janie snorts, and — and she doesn’t take anything seriously even when she takes everything seriously, and he can’t understand her, can’t map her, can’t analyze her, can’t tear her apart and read between the lines and fit her pieces right back together, but he can’t do that with Niall, either, and maybe it’s better to just let people alone, to just let people be, and even though he knows that’s probably the right thing, the correct thing, he can’t help it.

He’s always been that way, always loved taking things apart to put them together again; maybe not as they were before, entirely, but bigger and better and different, the same but also so variegated, constructing them with the view he has of them regardless of the persuasions and thoughts of the world around.

He can’t do that with Niall. He can’t do that with Janie.

He can’t even do it with himself.

And it’s hard, really, to realize that something you’ve thought for years is wrong, is fake, isn’t true. It’s a learning experience, though, and he’s never been one to shy away from a challenge, wonders if that makes him smart or stupid, idiotic or iconic.
(He’d make the shittiest superhero, fuck, and Niall would probably make the best supervillain since he’s always got his head in comics, and — and really, Harry can’t help but imagine, can’t help but think how utterly perfect a story like that would be for the two of them.)

“I take it that you’re saying Dick is the wrong person?” Janie says, quips, and she’s got a smile on her lips, a devil-may-care grin that has Harry’s heart beating a little bit too fast for his liking.

Harry nods, shrugs his shoulders, tries to ignore the fact that Janie’s hold on him is like Niall’s, though not as deep and not as strong, and it’s kind of weird, too, for him and Niall to have this relationship with a girl they’ve only known for a few days.

He isn’t complaining, though, can’t find it in himself to care. When it comes to affection, there’s no limit on time, and he’s only just now realizing how true that is.

“Kind of goes without saying, doesn’t it?” he asks, teases, turns his head and gives Janie a wink; they’re still in the city, somewhere on the outside, and the lights are neon and the trees are tall and the people are dressed in all sorts of colors and he’s hit again with the realization that this feels more like home than California ever did, and it makes his throat thick thinking about how he and Niall are going to be leaving tomorrow morning to set off, to finish the trip they’ve started with one another.

“I’m not going to forgive you. I hope you know that.”

“Oh, I know,” she says, scoffs, and Niall laughs, easy and soft, soft, soft. “I guess it’s a good thing I didn’t ask you to, then, isn’t it?” She giggles, lays her arm across the back of the seat and puts her hands in Harry’s hair, twines the curls around her fingers and gives a tug, an insistent jerk that has him grinning because Gemma tends to do it to him, too, and if this trip has taught him anything so far it’s how sweet appreciating the little things, the little moments in life is. “Now, pull over, lead foot, and let me drive ‘cause there’s a party out in the boonies I want to go to with the two of you.”

And — in the same way as Niall, really, Harry finds that he can’t tell somebody with magic in their heart like Janie no, wonders how he’s blessed enough to know two people on the same caliber, on the same level, questions what they’re doing with a pitiful little man like him.

The music is loud, the people are bright, the drinks are lavish with all sorts of fruity flavors, the colors are bright with flashes and streaks here and there and all over; there’s so much noise, so much laughter, so much skin, so much beauty, and Harry feels smothered and alive all at once surrounded by one, two, three, four hundred people.

It’s a pasture that they’re in, sort of; the driveway was long and winding, for the most part — and Janie nearly sideswiped a tree on the way in, but she forced Harry and Niall not to tell even though it’s mainly her fault for being distracted — and there’s a large white house to the left, complete with four chimneys and three stories and lights strung up all the way around for illumination, and to the right there’s barns, one two three four five, packed full of people and music and noise, so much noise and so much skin and so much heat and so much liquor and so much fun.

And it smells good, smells nice. There’s electric lines running the length of the pasture, of the place, and there’s shoes slung up here and tied-together beer bottles over there, and Harry’s fairly sure that’s illegal, fairly sure that’s as far away from safe as anything can be, and yeah, it kind of smells like liquor and sex and dirt and sweat, but it’s fresh, too, all green grass and raw ground and pure water and bodies moving, gyrating, rubbing, and Harry loves it.

It’s different. It’s calm, it’s relaxed; there’s no passing cars and no noise complaints and no striving to be seen as somebody you aren’t; Harry feels at ease, at peace, and it’s weird how some “backwater,
boonie town”, as Janie happens to call it, can make him feel this way when the town he’s grown up in hasn’t ever left a lasting expression, but — it’s the people, too, Niall and Janie and the guy over there with the yellow twenty-gallon hat and the girl over here with the purple dreadlocks and the kissing couple pressed up against the tree in flashes of orange and maroon and pink and crimson, and this is good, this is nice, this is better than he ever imagined.

“You feelin’ okay?”

Harry nods, takes a sip of his drink; it’s fruity, not as tart as the lemonade they had last night and as sweet as the apple pie Janie’s mother fed the three of them before they set off for a drive.

“’m good,” he replies, smiles, and to his left Niall’s stood, drinking at his beer and watching as the lightning bugs flutter, fly, flutter and flow with the wind, with the breeze, and they’re green and yellow and orange, and Harry likes the way they look like jewels shining, sparkling in the night air and dancing with a grace Harry’s never seen before. “I’m really good. I’m havin’ a really nice time.”

Niall turns his head, meets Harry’s eyes; he’s still wearing the red shirt, Niall is, and Janie’s got on her yellow sundress, and Harry’s finishing the group off with pink, with blue, with green, with orange, with purple, all streaked here and there across the white flannel he’s wearing, and he isn’t sure if it’s paint or ink or something else but he likes it a lot more than he thought.

“We’ve not done anything yet, Harry,” Niall says, grins, and oh God, his smile has the ability to move mountains and split the skies in two, doesn’t it, oh my gosh, and Harry’s kind of floored at the expressionism, at the utter brilliance of all that he is, of all that Niall is. “We just got here, pretty boy.”

And — oh, that’s a little bit too much, isn’t it, and it makes Harry’s tummy heat, makes his heart soar, makes his soul feel like it’s full, like it’s bursting, like it’s on the verge of splitting in two, like the skies and like the earth and like the universe are all coming together and moving apart.

And it’s beautiful. The destruction, the messiness of trusting somebody to notice you, to take care of you, to treat you after you’ve bared yourself, after you’ve pulled yourself apart and laid all your pieces out for them to see.

It’s nice. It’s… it’s not everything — really, it’s not — and being alone is better than being with somebody who abuses you, somebody who disrespects you, but it’s something to look forward to in the lonely, dark nights. It’s like religion, in a sense: you can’t see it, can’t taste it, can’t touch it, can’t smell it, but you can feel it, and it’s there, it’s there, and it’s uplifting, it’s promising, it’s hope when all feels lost.

“Niall —”

“You two are so adorable it’s borderline disgusting,” Janie says, cuts Harry off, but she’s smiling, at least, rather fond and endearing, and he likes the look on her, likes the freedom he has with her, likes how she’s herself and nobody else and gives him and Niall the liberation to be who they are, who they’re not. “And we’re going to do everything tonight.”

She smiles, and — well, Harry’s not very surprised.

- Janie wasn’t lying, wasn’t joking — the three of them have literally done everything, from chugging beer somewhere in the yard to streaking half-naked through a cornfield to play hide and seek to dancing on the kitchen table with a ton of little toddlers who are supposed to be in bed to zip lining
out of a tree to everything in between, half of which Harry isn’t even sure truly happened because he’s quite the champ when it comes to downing liquor, mind you, but here they are now, golfing empty beer and pop cans off the roof of one of the barns with hockey sticks they found shoved in the back of a rusted, ancient car that had flowers growing in the busted out glass somewhere or another.

“I hope you know I’m not waking up early,” Harry announces, pops his shoulders and lines up; he doesn’t follow hockey, doesn’t play golf, and while there’s a few staggering people down below who are marking where the cans hit, he’s fairly sure his aren’t near as far as they should be and that Niall’s not only beating him but Janie as well. “I mean, you got me up early this morning, and it’s the ass crack of dawn right now, too, and I’m running on three hours of sleep, if that, and I’m goin’ to straight to sleep as soon as we get home.”

*Home.*

Niall lines the shot up, arches his back and holds his hips; he brings down the stick, hits the crushed beer can, and it goes flying, soaring, hitting one of their markers in the head, and it’s funny but it isn’t funny at the same time, really, and Harry wants to make sure the man is okay and Niall’s laughing and Janie’s chortling, and the marker’s holding up his hand, giving them a big thumbs up, and he finds that it’s rather hard to hold his chuckle in, and so he doesn’t.

He lets it go, lets it all go. And there’s so much, so much inside and bunched up, bottled up; he lets go of his inhibitions, of his fears and his shortcomings and his setbacks and his anger, his disappointment, his need to please and his striving desire to be the person everybody expects him to be.

He just… lets it all go.

And it feels good. Freeing, liberating, beautifully transcending and magnificently coming-of-age, and he’s still a kid but he’s also an adult, too, borderline grown up, and he thinks this is good, this is smart, this is something that needs to be done and he isn’t scared of turning the page.

Gemma’s right, and he’s going to live his life however he (fucking) wants to.

He just hopes Niall’s at his side and not behind him, not in front of him.

“So, now that Niall’s slaughtered us at beer golf and your vehicle will be ready to hit the road in the morning.” Janie begins, and Harry looks over his shoulder, sees that she’s sitting down on the roof of the barn with her arms out behind her and her legs crossed in front of her; the wind is blowing, ruffling the trimmings of her dress, and her head is tilted back, watching the stars as the black sky turns to navy blue, and he think she looks every bit the way he feels at the moment and he knows, he knows she’s going to make somebody question everything and nothing all at once one of these days and if there’s ever a person in the world who can take advantage of her free spirit, Harry would like to meet them to shake their hand. Or run away. “What’s next for the two of you?”

Harry smiles, scratches the back of his head; his shirt sleeves are rolled up to his elbows and his hair
is being held back by a hat he found somewhere or another, and it’s quite easy to meet Niall’s eyes in
the darkness of the pre-dawn light because he’s shining like a lighthouse on the coast and Harry’s the
ship full of hungry sailors that’s rushing into port.

“We’re going to do whatever we want,” he says, Harry says, and Niall nods, grins. “And I think
that’s the best thing to do.”

- They fall into the bed in the loft a few hours later, half-dressed in their boxers; a small storm rolled in,
and it’s drizzling outside, and with rain came a temperature drop, and while it’s still too hot to be
stretching under the blankets that are folded at the foot Harry finds that it’s rather easy, rather
comfortable to roll and fit himself into Niall’s side.

“I had fun today,” he says, murmurs, reckons Niall’s going to ask him because he’s always asking
Harry things now, searching for consent and acceptance, and it’s weird, yes it is, but it isn’t entirely
annoying, either, and he likes it. “Janie’s growing on me, ‘minds me of Gem.”

Niall nods, brings his arm up, puts his hand in Harry’s hair and brushes through the sweaty snarls;
there’s no humidity, no heat, and the action makes Harry shiver even as he’s hot all over. “I know
what you mean,” he says, shifts, throws one leg over Harry’s and moves, snuggles close, makes
himself comfortable. “She’s… she’s something. Great. Something really great. I’m going to miss
her.”

“We can came back,” Harry suggests, tips his head up, clips Niall in the chin; he blushes, turns red
and pink, and Niall must feel the flush against his skin because he chuckles, tucks Harry in closer. “I
mean, on our way back, we can, like, stop back by here and spend a few days before we head home,
I guess. If — if you want, if she wants.”

“I think she would.” Niall nods, firm and decisive. “I think she likes us. I think she… I think she sees
something in us she hasn’t ever seen before and it makes her want to understand a thing she’s never
going to understand.”

Harry blinks, sighs, shuts his eyes. “And what do you want?” he asks, wriggles close, lays his cheek
on Niall’s chest, on Niall’s heart, and he isn’t reading too much into this, really, reckons that Niall’s
only kissed him once and they’ve not spoke about it since earlier and he’s in no position to push, no
position to pull, and he wants consent without coercion, without persuasion.

He wants it to be real, wants it to be as true as the feelings he’s got.

But then Niall answers, “You,” so soft and so smooth and so sensitive, and Harry’s stiffening,
shivering, and Niall saying, “You’re kind of all I want,” and it’s too much, too much, and Harry’s
up and over and on top of Niall before he knows what he’s doing, before he knows what either of
them are doing, and his lips are on Niall’s and Niall’s got his mouth open, his tongue tangled with
Harry’s, and his nails are digging into Harry’s thighs and Harry’s murmuring, whimpering, and —
and the best thing, really, is that Niall’s not recoiling, not pushing Harry away, not acting as if this is
wrong.

Niall’s acting as if this is right.
oklahoma breakdown

tell me you love me if it’s true
i don’t want no one, baby, if i can’t have you

― Stoney LaRue, ‘Oklahoma Breakdown’

Niall’s hands, pressed and calloused and hot, so warm they almost sting, move to Harry’s waist, cup Harry’s flesh love handles and hold, mold, roll the layer of thickness in his palm; his nails are blunt, semi-sharp, and they dig into Harry’s skin, make him open his lips further to let out a breathless moan that reverberates in his chest, and Niall’s tongue darts here, darts there, and he’s licking all around the roof of Harry’s mouth, not leaving a single area untouched, and Harry’s melting, sliding into some sort of conscious where all he can hear and all he can taste and all he can see and all he can smell and all he can touch is Niall.

And this is crazy, so crazy and so wild — because it was only a few days ago that he took the wrong exit, that he drove all the way into the southeastern corner of Montana, that Niall came at him and they fought, they wrestled, they rolled around in the biting gravel, and yeah, Niall apologized and Niall promised and Niall said things are going to be better, are going to get better, and things definitely feel more uplifting, what with Niall’s nails digging into his hips and his own fingers holding Niall’s cheeks, keeping him still and keeping him there, and everything that’s happened in between, but things can change with a blink of an eye, with the sigh of a breath, and Harry’s kind of weary, kind of wary, kind of weak, and he doesn’t think he can be blamed for feeling that way because it’s been done to him entirely more than he thinks is fair.

He pulls back, opens his eyes; there’s a thick string of saliva that follows his retreating lips, clinging to the corner of Niall’s red, pink, wet mouth, and it breaks, snaps in two when Harry draws in a hoarse, harsh breath, and it feels more physical than it should be, as if the bridge between the two of them is cracked right down the middle.

“Niall,” he says, starts, leans away; it’s dark, but the dawn is pale, simple, and it’s enough for him to see Niall’s cerulean eyes, for him to see Niall’s maroon nose, for him to see Niall’s rosy cheeks, for him to see Niall’s crimson lips, and it’s art, all of it is art, and he just doesn’t understand how something so perfect can be so imperfect. “Niall, what is this?”

But then he remembers — the way you think about a person isn’t actually the way they really are, and Niall may be the greatest thing in Harry’s mind but that doesn’t mean he is the greatest thing.

Niall smiles, wets his lips, and his tongue — it’s a sinful thing, is what it is, a sinful instrument used for nefarious and infernal doings, and Harry’s always been told that sinning is what you do when God isn’t enough for you, but he doesn’t think that’s true, knows it isn’t true because the big man wouldn’t have given Harry his best friend, wouldn’t have planted the seed of love in Harry’s heart for his best friend.

God doesn’t make mistakes, and He works in mysterious ways. Harry trusts the paths, the roads that have been laid out before him, knows that everything that’s been thrown at him is only to make him stronger, only to make him smarter.

After all, God doesn’t ever put anything on your shoulders that you can’t handle, and this — Harry can handle Niall’s rejection even if he thinks it’s impossible.

*He can.*
But, if the roles were reversed, if it was Niall pining fruitlessly after Harry, he knows — Harry knows Niall wouldn’t be able to handle it.

(And he knows he wouldn’t be able to tell Niall no.)

“We’re kissing,” Niall replies, smiles, and — it’s “we’re kissing” and not “you’re kissing me” and the thing is, that’s a big big big difference that settles deeply, dauntingly in the pit of Harry’s stomach, and he’s swelling so huge and so large and Niall’s the pin, the needle that’s going to pop him, that’s supposed to pop him, and he kind of can’t wait to deflate because he doesn’t like feeling so full. “Can’t you see that?”

*Can’t you see it?*

Harry leans away, sits up; his inner thighs are hugging Niall’s outer thighs, and Niall’s got his legs spread and Harry’s are spread more, for the most part, stretching to keep himself perched on Niall’s hips, and they’re in this position, on top and under one another, and they’re in this situation, two young men who are battling each other and each other’s emotions, and yeah, Harry can see it.

He can see it all.

But that doesn’t mean he likes it, reckons it’s the ugliest picture painted he’s ever looked at before.

“I — I can see it,” Harry says, stutters; his lips are wet and his cheeks are flushed and he’s hot all over, steaming all over, wonders if there’s smoke coming from his ears. The drizzling rain outside, nothing more than a pitter-patter against the tin roof of the loft, melodic and gentle, echoes the beats of his heart: steady, calm, easy. There’s no reason to panic, no reason to overreact; this isn’t the first time he’s been rejected by Niall and he’s sure it isn’t going to be the last, either. “I just don’t understand it.”

Niall slants his head, moves one hand from Harry’s hip and up his side slowly, languidly, drawing circles on Harry’s sweaty skin till he’s got Harry’s shoulder gripped in his palm. “What don’t you understand?” he asks, soft and — and gentle, tender, and this is new, this is definitely new, and Harry’s so used to being rejected, so used to being told no in the meanest, ugliest, nastiest ways, that it kind of throws him for a loop for a moment, makes him question and question and question just what it is that has changed.

He hasn’t noticed a thing.

“All of it,” he replies, blinks. “Why are you doing this to me, Niall?”

Niall’s nostrils flare and he drops both hands, finds Harry’s, interlaces their fingers loosely, comfortably, and Harry tries not to think about the way that they fit so well together but he can’t, but he does, and it’s the only thought in his mind and he just — what would it be like if they actually came together with one another? Would they fit, would they mold in the same way they do right now?

“I’m not going to lie to you, Harry — I’m not going to lie to you ever again,” he says, slow and methodic, and Harry’s afraid because he knows Niall, because he knows Niall’s had this planned out, and for how long he isn’t sure, but he knows. He knows. And he isn’t exactly sure how to take, how to understand that realization. “I don’t want to go back to how we were ‘cause that scared me, ‘cause that taught me I can’t live my life without you by my side. We’ve been together for so long, grown together for so many years, and not having you is like — s’like not having part of my life, not having part of me. I don’t want to lose you.”
This isn’t fair. This isn’t fair at all.

Niall smiles, pained and — and sad, and it makes Harry’s throat squeeze. “I’m not gonna lay here under you and tell you that I feel the same way for you because I don’t,” he continues, and the words hurt — they hurt, they burn, they scald deep, but Harry appreciates the honesty even if his chest is on fire from another rejection. Again, again, again. “But I can’t say that I’m not curious. I can’t say that I’m not curious as to how something between you and I could work out. And, fuck, Harry, it may make me a bad person for wanting something with you when I don’t feel the same way you do, but I — I’m curious and I want to try. I want to see what it’s like.”

Harry frowns, blinks, swallows around the thick lump in his throat and moves off, moves away, reckons it’s better to be by himself instead of in the arms of a man who doesn’t want him for nothing more than — than curiosity, than experience.

“You aren’t making sense, Niall,” he says, slips off the bed and stands, brings his arms up to his chest and holds his elbows, cups his elbows. Protective, defensive, lost — that’s how he feels, and he’s gotten so good at swallowing his tears that he does so without acknowledgement. “You aren’t making any sense to me at all.”

“I know I’m not.” Niall sighs, shuts his eyes, wipes at his face; he turns his head, raises his gaze to meet Harry’s, and there’s a blissfully unaware smile on his lips that makes Harry’s heart pound and stop all at once because he has no fucking clue what’s going on, has no fucking clue what’s going to happen. “Take a walk with me and I’ll explain everything as much as I can.”

Harry finds that he’s nodding, that he’s saying yes to Niall’s request before Niall’s even finished speaking, and that’s not a good thing. He knows that’s not a good thing.

But maybe it is a good thing, that Harry will give Niall anything, because they’re sitting on a splinter-infested wooden dock somewhere on Janie’s property, surrounded by trees on one side and clear pastures on the other, and their jeans are rolled up to their knees as their feet swings back and forth, back and forth, kicking in the lukewarm water and sending ripples all the way across the pond that shine, that glimmer in the blueness of a new day.

And Niall’s not stopped talking. At all. About anything.

And Harry loves the sound of his voice, loves the way it feels when his letters swirl into words of beauty — and it’s not like, not affection, not loyalty, not admiration. It’s all sorts of things rolled up into one, so many and so many and so many, and Harry — he’s fallen. He’s fallen so hard, and he’s got bruises on his knees and cuts on his elbows from the landing, from catching himself, and he’s bloody and he’s battered and he’s beaten, but Niall’s smile is bright and alive and brilliant and cohesive, keeping him together even when he kind of wants to fall apart, and it’s okay, he’s okay, they’re okay, everything’s going to be okay.

Harry’s in love with Niall — Niall, who’s living in the shadow of his brother and struggling with the teachings of his mother; Niall, who’s considered less because of the people he’s came from and who’s also so much more than he’s ever given credit for; Niall, who’ll laugh at the clouds in the sky and cry when songs are sad and smile when he sees an elderly couple holdings hands and rage when his morals are questions and fights when his friends are threatened and loves with his heart, with his whole heart.
Yeah. Yeah, Harry’s in love with that boy — with that man.

And it’s just so easy, so simple, so natural for him to admit.

But it scares Harry. Being in love with somebody as earth-shattering as Niall, with somebody as great as Niall — it’s scary. Not because he’s particularly frightening, not because he’s physically stronger, not because he’s emotionally unstable; he isn’t afraid of Niall’s intellect, of Niall’s talent, of Niall’s history, of Niall’s temper.

Harry’s scared of the power Niall has over him, has always had over him — because Niall’s a hero trying not to be a hero, because Niall’s a powder keg holding the flame to light his own fuse.

That’s scary.

“You’re staring.”

Harry blinks, taken out of his reverie. “You noticed?”

Niall nods, smiles, and it’s small and tiny, soft and tender, and it’s kind of the prettiest thing Harry’s seen in his entire life. “I might have noticed,” he says, replies, and it’s a joke, it’s a jibe, but it’s good-natured and — and it really, really makes Harry happy to know that he and Niall are still the same as they were, that he and Niall are able to stay the same as they were. “You do that a lot. Stare, I mean. You watch me, but I think that’s okay because I watch you, too, even though you’re too busy watching me to notice me watching you.” He stops, and his grin grows; he reaches out, pushes a curl out of Harry’s face, lays his palm against Harry’s cheek in the sweetest way. “And you blush a lot, too.”

“Oh.” Harry swallows, and his cheeks heat, turn from pink to red, hot red, and Niall smiles, laughs because he feels the rush of blood beneath Harry’s skin and Harry really likes how Niall’s not running away from him. “Well, I can’t help it very much.”

“Don’t help it. Blushing, I mean. Don’t help it if you don’t want to. I think it’s sweet.”

Harry finds Niall’s eyes, and they’re blue, so blue, deep as the ocean and daunting as the forest, and Harry gets lost, gets crazy, gets wild, and it’s the best time of his life. “Oh.”

Niall just smiles, just shakes his head and scoots close, presses their arms together and their thighs together and their bodies together. “And I’m really happy that I can still make you turn red,” he says, whispers, and there’s a shift, a layer being removed from Niall’s wall of repression: he likes the little things, loves the little things, and that’s something Harry didn’t know. Harry wonders if Niall knows that it’s the little things added together that makes the big picture. “I’m really happy that I can make you feel things besides hurt.”

Oh.

And Niall doesn’t get it — Niall just doesn’t get it at all. Everybody, everything makes Harry feel, makes Harry feel something, but nobody, nothing has ever been able to make Harry feel so much at one time, in one setting. Everything that Niall makes him feel is doubled, tripled, quadrupled, and it’s all magnified, all sensitized, and it’s the best and it’s the worst because his body, Harry’s body grows all sorts of reactive nerve endings, and they’re physical and they’re emotional and they’re mental, and Harry wants to cry with sadness and wants to laugh with joy, and he thinks, he knows that’s what love is.

When somebody can make you feel like you’re on top of the world, when somebody can make you feel like you’re six feet under, it’s love. When somebody can bring out the best in you, when
somebody can bring out the worst in you, it’s love.

It’s love.

“You were supposed to explain everything to me,” Harry says, musters the courage to speak, and he’s glad he isn’t spilling his thoughts, glad he isn’t speaking his mind because the realization that he’s in love with Niall, to him, is like going home because he knew it was coming, because he knew it was only a matter of time before he began to fall, but if Niall were to be aware it would rattle his world and he can’t handle much more than Harry’s already given him. No matter what it looks like, Harry’s stronger than Niall. “Can you… try to let me in?”

Niall sucks his bottom lip into his mouth, bites down on the plump thing before releasing it. “Mum taught me not to trust,” he says, begins, and then it kind of all starts to fall out, words and phrases and sentences that make sense, that don’t make sense, and Harry swallows everything, takes it in and keeps it there. “Mum taught me not to trust anyone, not to fall in love with anyone ‘cause it makes you weak, ‘cause it makes you defenseless, and I know she loves me — I know her and Greg both love me — but when I look at you, when I see you with Anne and Gem, I know everything isn’t fine and I know that I’m normal, that I’m never going to be normal no matter what, and that it’s my mum’s fault and my brother’s fault, and I can’t…”

He stops, trails off, and Harry blinks, moves his hand to grab Niall’s, to interlace their fingers. “You don’t have to go on if you don’t want to,” he says, whispers, and he needs to reassure Niall, needs Niall to know that he doesn’t ever have to do anything he doesn’t want to because he’s afraid, he’s scared that Niall’s been forced to do a lot he hasn’t wanted.

But Niall shakes his head, smiles, and — and he’s always been stubborn, and Harry ought to have known that Niall isn’t going to stop now that he’s got started.

“I can’t believe you when you say that you care for me, when you say that you want to be with me ‘cause I’m just — I’m just a bad person, Harry. I’m just a really, really bad person. I hurt people and I make people cry — I made you cry, for fuck’s sake, and I love my mum, yeah, but I hate her, too. I hate her so fucking much sometimes because she’s the reason that I’m the way I am now, and I’m lucky to have her but I hate her, Harry. I hate her for the person she’s raised me to be because I don’t like it. I don’t like myself. And it’s hard to let people see you at your worst, it is, but fuck, Harry, seeing somebody at their worst is just as bad, and I — I’ve seen you at that point. I’ve seen you give up, and it’s hard. It was hard for me. And I don’t ever want you to see me be the person everyone always says I am because it will hurt you more than anything ever will.”

It hits Harry, then, and it’s kind of something he ought to have known from the start, from the very beginning, and he feels borderline stupid, almost idiotic for not realizing, for not understanding. Niall’s fucked up and Harry’s fucked, that’s how it’s always been, and — and Harry is the one thing in Niall’s life that he’s always wanted, that he’s always craved, and it isn’t Niall being mean, isn’t Niall being ugly, isn’t Niall being disgusted at Harry for… for falling for him, for falling with him.

Niall’s scared. Just as much as Harry, if not more. Niall’s scared because Harry is the one thing, the one great thing in his life that’s there, that’s been there when no one else in the world ever was, and Harry’s always showered Niall with affection and acceptance and admiration, stuff he’s never gotten in his home, in his own home, and so to compensate for being abused, for being neglected, more or less, Niall’s made Harry his home, made Harry the place he runs to when his physical home isn’t so much of a home anymore.

And it must have shook Niall up, must have rattled Niall deep when Harry began to feel something more, began to feel something else, because there’s a possibility, a very large probability that this — that Harry’s emotions and Niall’s reluctance, Niall’s limited knowledge on how to be, on how to be
with somebody, is going to tear them apart.

Harry understands it now. It was never Niall being mean, being rude, being hateful — it was never Niall rejecting him, never Niall not caring for him. It was Niall being scared, and it was Niall rejecting himself, too.

He doesn’t have to now, though. He doesn’t ever have to reject himself again because he deserves everything he wants, and Harry swears in his mind, in his heart that he’s going to give Niall anything he could ever ask for.

And all Harry can ask is, “Can I kiss you?” and Niall just laughs, just rolls his eyes, just puts the negativity away, but he nods, but he says yes, and he’s leaning forward to fix the distance, laying his mouth across Harry’s in a way that’s never been done before.

And there’s so much Harry wants to tell Niall, so much Harry wants to promise Niall, so much Harry wants to say to Niall — and it’s all jumbled words, garbled sentences, skewered thoughts in his mind, really, and he can’t make sense of it, can’t take this and take that and string it into coherent reassurances, and he always reckoned, always assumed that Niall knew, that Niall knew how deep their relationship goes and how far it will reach into the future, and it’s kind of a shock to realize, to be told that he didn’t, that he doesn’t, that he’s not got enough faith in what they have with one another to do anything good.

But all of that falls out of his mind when Niall starts pushing Harry back, starts pushing Harry down against the wood of the dock, and he’s hit with an abrupt fright of déjà vu, of being rejected, but then he realizes — Niall’s got his hands shoved beneath Harry’s shirt and Niall’s got his tongue flicking at the corners of Harry’s mouth and Niall’s got one of his knees parting both of Harry’s thighs and Niall’s got his heart, got his mind, got his body held by Harry, by the person most qualified in the world to take care of something so special, something so great, and this isn’t rejection.

This isn’t rejection at all.

This is… this is understanding. This is tearing yourself open, this is baring your heart; Harry’s seen Niall naked before, of course he has, but this is the first time he’s ever seen Niall naked, free and stripped of his walls, and it’s just as frightening as it is uplifting, just as horrifying as it is inspiring.

But it’s okay. It is. Harry’s not sure if Niall feels the same way he does, if Niall will ever feel the same way he does, and the thing is — that’s okay. It is. It hurts now, and it’ll never not hurt, but it’s okay. And everything’s going to be okay, too, because life is about taking and giving, about sacrificing and accepting, and that is the basis, the foundation for his and Niall’s relationship.

Nothing’s going to change because everything’s already changed, and the reality of the world isn’t all sunshine and butterflies — reality is drizzling rain with spotty clouds and gray-blue skies with the sun peeking out here and there, and that’s what this is, what life is.

Niall moves, shifts, brings his knee up to graze lightly against Harry’s groin and he cries out, pulls away, turns his head and drags in air, gasps and breathes, breathes, breathes; Niall’s lips are curled into a grin, into a smile, and Harry can feel Niall laugh against his throat, against the hot skin of the hollow between his collarbones, and he’s hit all of a sudden, hard and terrifyingly exciting, that he would rather love Niall and not be loved back than leave Niall to fend for himself.

Harry is Niall’s hero, and maybe the flame that Niall’s holding to a fuse isn’t his ignition at all. Maybe it’s Harry’s.

Maybe Niall is Harry’s destruction; maybe they’re going to be the reason one another blow up in the
long run.

But that’s okay. It’s okay because — “I don’t want anyone if I can’t have you.”
thunder road

well, the night’s busting open
these two lanes will take us anywhere
we got one last chance to make it real

— Bruce Springsteen, ‘Thunder Road’

Harry puts his hands on the flat wood, pushes himself up and out of the water and onto the dock, soaked and drenched and animatedly happy; Niall’s beside him in the next moment, dripping wet in nothing but his boxers, nothing but his briefs, and they’re sticking to his flesh like a second skin, oh God, and he’s got little trails of liquid all over his body, rivers and creeks and ponds and oceans and lakes, and Harry’s taken back, jerked back to the time in the shower when he fingered himself, when he broke down and cried for himself, for Niall, for everything and everyone.

And it brings a smile to his face. The ugly memory, the odd way with which things were done — it brings a smile to his face because he knows, he knows he’s better from it, knows Niall’s better from it, knows he and Niall are better from it.

Why wouldn’t he smile? Things were bad, and they’re still not the best, but — but they’re better, they really are, and why wouldn’t he smile? Why would you run away, why would you turn away from something that makes you smile when smiles can end wars and bring peace to all of those who were fighting the battles?

Why?

He sighs, flops backward, spreads his arms out wide and dangles his feet in the water; after their kiss — kisses — Niall suggested they take a dip in the pond, and really, it was the best idea Harry reckons he’s ever heard because he was hot and Niall was hot, too, and Harry’s underwear was sticky with precum and Niall’s neck was streaked with viscid spit and they were sweating hard, breathing hard, and Niall’s smile was just radiant, just opiating, and Harry can’t tell Niall no.

Ever.

He just can’t do it. He just can’t tell Niall no.

“Your hair’s gotten so long,” Niall says in the quiet of the morning; Harry turns his head, tips his gaze, sees that Niall’s backlight by the rising sun and he looks like an angel with the smile of a demon and Harry’s never been happier to fall into the pits of darkness before in his life. “It’s about as long as your sisters, isn’t it?”

Harry’s brows furrow. “I’ve not really noticed,” he replies, brings his hand up and runs his fingers through his wet, tangled hair; there’s lots of snarls and he combs them out, winces when one tugs a bit too hard and stings his scalp, and he really hasn’t noticed, for the most part. He just missed an appointment to get it trimmed, and then kept ditching out for some reason or another. “It just… kind of happened, s’all. Didn’t really think about getting it cut all through school.”

He had better things to do — like passing.

“And now?”

“I don’t know,” Harry answers, shrugs, blinks, slants his head so he’s looking directly into the sun and not at Niall’s blue, blue eyes because they still scare him even though they put him at peace all in
the same motion. “Why? Do you not like it?”

Niall smiles, shakes his head, reaches out and runs his fingers through Harry’s hair, too, grips the long thickness and uses it as a tether to pull Harry up, to pull Harry closer so they’re face to face, skin to skin. “I like it if you like it,” he replies, and he and Harry are close, so close, breathing one another’s air, and Niall’s lips are swollen and pink and Harry’s got a few purple bruises skirting up and down his chest, and he reckons he could do this forever, you know, be spotted in all the pretty colors of care as long as it’s with Niall. “And I think you like it. I think you like having your hair pulled.”

With that said, Niall pulls Harry’s hair, roughly tips his head back; Harry’s mouth falls open and, “Oh, God, please,” falls out just before Niall’s got his lips on Harry’s, and they’re kissing again, but it’s slow and it’s soft and it’s sensual, and Harry’s so hot that he’s melting all over himself, all over Niall. Niall takes his time, teases his tongue around the corners of Harry’s mouth and when he finally, finally, slips it inside to curl around Harry’s, it’s a rush to Harry’s heart and he reaches for Niall as if he would otherwise drown, holds on to Niall’s shoulders as he falls.

He’s fairly sure he’s never going to stop. Falling, that is.

And he isn’t really worried with landing, either. He can hit hard and break every bone in his body, but a pain like that will never compare to how it feels when your heart is cracked, broken, and if Harry can handle that, he can handle anything.

*Bring it.*

Niall lays him down on the dock again, careful and gentle, and looms up, leans over; he’s so easy, so fluid with everything he does, with everything he’s doing to Harry, and it throws Harry for a loop, makes him wonder and question and demand because he’s seen Niall treat people like this before, yes, but there’s something different, something off about it now, and Harry isn’t sure *why*.

Just why is Niall doing this if he doesn’t feel the same for Harry?

But he doesn’t have time to ask the questions that’s icing around his heart, that’s freezing over his hot blood, because Niall’s smiling, laughing, and he’s smearing the chuckles across Harry’s lips and cheeks and jaw and throat, painting yellow joy and happiness along the purple of Harry’s suckled bruises, and Harry’s giggling, too, even as the sun’s shining in his eyes and blinding him, not allowing him to stare up into the face of the man he’s in love with, and he reckons that it’s okay for him to enjoy this at the moment before something happens that tears them apart again.

Because it will. Happen, that is. Harry’s not that lucky, not that blessed, and he knows to appreciate the good but respect the bad, as well.

He just hopes it doesn’t happen any time soon. He wants to enjoy this greatness before it runs out.

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Harry’s got his boots in his hand, dangling from his fingers, and he’s stepping high in the dew-covered grass as it swishes between his toes; the bottoms of his pants are wet and cold on his legs, and the sun is at his back, barely risen and already a hot, insistent thing, and Niall’s to his side, to his left, and he’s got his shirt slung over his shoulder with his shoes off and this is good, this feels good.

Walking through the grass, dodging the ever-present ant hill there or mole hole here, is nice and good and all sorts of gratifying and peaceful — Harry reckons taking a walk through nature, through the beauty of the untainted world, is exactly what is recommended to knock the rust right off his soul.
And he didn’t know he had so much.

“What are you thinkin’ ‘bout, H?” Niall asks, slurs, and they’ve been up for the entire night, holy shit, and they’re only going on a few hours of sleep, yes, and Harry doesn’t feel tired, has never felt more alive, and he knows he’s going to crash soon but oh God, this liberation in his heart and soul and body is almost like a drug and he’s craving it all the time now that he’s had a taste, a tiny sampling. “You’ve got this look on your face. Makes me wonder where you go in your head sometimes ‘cause I can never follow you there.”

Harry smiles, shrugs, looks away from Niall’s beaming effervescence. Niall’s just — he’s just so pure, okay, and he’s fucked up, but Harry’s fucked in return, and they make a perfect match, kind of, whether it be romantic or platonic or familial, because Niall’s the epitome of innocence and raw faith and loyalty, and he’s got so many walls, so many layers Harry can’t wait to break down, can’t wait to peel away, and Harry’s the realist, the opportunist, the one who’s going to shatter Niall to pieces but help build him up all over again.

Maybe.

And he’s appreciative that he’s got this chance — that he’s got this sparkling opportunity to prove to Niall that the colors in his eyes match the colors in Harry’s soul, that the flowers in Niall’s mind match the flowers in Harry’s heart, and if you believe in soul mates, maybe they’re each other’s one and only, maybe they’ve found each other against all odds.

But maybe they aren’t. Maybe they’re just two people who’ve met at the wrong time, who’ve found something in one another that they aren’t ready to let go of, and perhaps their respective soul mates are alone, walking around and searching, looking, hunting for them, and Harry hopes they find happiness, hopes they find joy in the way that he is now because this is it, this is all that he wants, and he might change his mind tomorrow or the next day or he might not ever, but that’s the beauty of love, though — the desperation, the lengths one would go to keep the hope of love alive is beautiful.

It’s human in the most scattering, frightening way; hope is a good thing — look at what it’s brought, what it’s created: whole civilizations, whole countries, whole worlds, and with those, with more, comes the bad, as well — but it’s also the worst thing, too, because hope breeds desperation and desperation breeds fear and fear breeds destruction.

Like Sherman’s March to the Sea in Georgia, like Hitler in Germany, like Napoleon’s invasion of Moscow in Russia, like the two of them, like Harry and Niall — hope, desperation, fear, destruction. It’s history, and it’s repeated; again and again and again.

Self-destruction is the worst, though, and Harry’s been lucky enough to not see it as of yet.

(He reckons Niall’s the closest one to self-destructing between the two of them, wonders what it would be like to have to pick up Niall’s pieces knowing there’s a possibility neither will be able to put them all back together the way they were again.)

Not everyone gets to have this, not everyone gets to experience this — this liberation, this blessing, this chance to be who he is and be with the person he wants so brightly, so brilliantly. He almost didn’t, but he’s been given the opportunity, and he isn’t going to let it go, isn’t going to let it slip through his fingers. He’s going to hold on as tight as he can for as long as he can.

And he hopes Niall’s got the strength and the willpower to hold Harry back just as long, just as tight.

(If he doesn’t, though, Harry reckons he’s got enough for him and Niall to both share, and, you know what, that’s what love is, too, kind of: having what your partner, what your lover doesn’t. It’s
a nice, relaxing thought to have; one that sort of soothes the waves in his soul and the quakes in his heart into small palpitations of low tides and gentle shakes.)

“I’m not sure how to put it into words,” he answers, wets his lips; they’re kind of sore and swollen, sensitive from the kisses he pressed on Niall and the kisses Niall slathered all over him, but he likes the tenderness because it means he can be free in all the ways that count. “It’s got a lot to do with Sherman and Napoleon and Hitler, too.”

Niall makes a face, screws his expression into one of soured regret. “I don’t think I want to follow you into that,” he says, jokes, smiles. “But I mean — I’d follow you into war, Harry. I would. Always. But Harry? The mind is the greatest battlefield of all, and sometimes it scares me when you go away because I never know if you’re going to come back the same as you are now.”

What about the heart?

It’s just the bloodiest.

“Where’d you hear that?”

“My mum,” Niall answers, gives Harry a ghost of a smile; he leans over, puts his lips to Harry’s temple to soothe the wrinkles he’s got on his forehead, and Harry’s kind of put off because he had no idea he was frowning. “It’s one of the few things she’s said that I kind of liked.”

Oh.

Harry wonders if Maura’s ever told Niall that she loves him, and then, just as sudden as that thought came, his heart is being squeezed and he’s coughing, and he wants to go back in time, wants to scream and yell and rage at Maura, wants to force it into her head that Niall and Greg deserve so much more than this distant, distracted love she’s giving them, oh God, and he just wants the best for Niall. He just really wants to see Niall happy.

“You two haven’t slept, have you?”

Harry startles, stutters, and he tears his eyes off Niall’s face, levels his gaze straight; in front of them, Janie’s stood in a white nightgown that reaches her knees with a collar that’s hanging a bit off her shoulders and baring her collarbones, all sorts of sleepy and disgruntled and slight and disheveled. Gosh, she’s beautiful. In that sort of radiant, natural kind of way, you know, where everything’s really fuzzy but also really clear at the same time? Like a picture faded with age and colored with time, with exposure, with years and years and years of taking it out of the album and holding it up high to show all the memories that were made. She’s all curve, all softness, all plump and ripe and thick, and she’s beautiful. Not in the same way Niall is, of course — but there’s no two beauties the same, mind you, and Harry likes the distinction because no two people in the world are the same — but beautiful nonetheless. Absolutely stunning.

“No,” Niall answers for the both of them, shakes his head and gives her a lopsided smile, which she returns slowly, languidly. She looks so beat, so spent with crazy brown hair and purple bags under her big green eyes; Harry’s never seen her like this, out of energy and rubbing at her face till she’s red with exhaustion. “You look like you haven’t slept, though, either.”

She smiles. “I ‘aven’t,” she says, slurs, but her grin — it’s so big and so bright, and he’s hit, Harry’s hit all over again just how special this girl already is to him. Wow. Because a little bit of extra time must have been spent on her. “I tried to go to sleep, but the rain kept me up, and then when it quit I just gave up and made some coffee for the two of you to take on the road when you leave out.”
Harry walks forward, slings his arm around her shoulders and pulls her in, pulls her close; she still
smells like florals, all musky and spicy and home-like, and it’s a scent he’s forever going to treasure,
forever going to smile at in remembrance as the years pass by quicker than anyone ever expected
whenever he’s able to stop and stand and stare and catch a whiff that defined him for a few special
days.

(Even though they nearly got shot. Again.)

He’ll never forget it. He’ll be old and gray on a front porch somewhere, someplace, and he’ll never
ever ever forget the memories he’s made with a crazy little seventeen-year-old young woman from
Oklahoma.

(Yeah — seventeen. Harry was mildly confused, too.)

“Why couldn’t you sleep?” he asks, quiet and soft; it’s still daylight, and the sun is soft as it shines
through the fog wafting off the pond he and Niall recently climbed out of and he doesn’t want to be
loud for fear he’ll break the precious peace.

She sighs, turns her face, buries her head in his chest. “I don’t want you to go,” she says, whispers,
smears across his bare skin; he takes his eyes off of her hair, meets Niall’s gaze, and it’s all sorts of
bittersweet sadness and reluctance to say goodbye because he’s had the time of his life here and he
kind of doesn’t want to go but he knows he has to. “I’m gonna miss the two of you so much.”

_Dammit._

“Oh, Janie.” Niall moves forward, takes up residence on her other side; he wraps his arm around her
waist, pulls both her and Harry into his body and tucks his chin on top of her head, rests his lips
against Harry’s shoulder. “If you start cryin’ out here, you know Harry and me will, too, and it’s not
the prettiest thing to see the two of us bawl our eyes out, I promise.”

“But —”

“So none of that sad, teary-eyed shit today, yeah?” Niall cuts her off, and he’s got a way with words,
doesn’t he? Harry snorts, rolls his eyes, but hell if Niall doesn’t have it all together when he and Janie
don’t. “We had a good time, and the fact that we can stand right here and say goodbye to each other
means we’ve won a little bit more than a hell of a lot of other people, don’t you think? So don’t be
sad, okay? Be happy.”

She scoffs, laughs, pulls away from Harry and pinches Niall’s bicep; he squeals, swats her touch
away, jumps back, and yeah, Harry reckons he’s going to miss this, too — he’s going to miss the
smoothness, the easiness, the laziness of life outside of the lights, outside of the colors of the city
where everything is so quiet it’s possible to hear time as it passes by.

And the people. He’s going to miss the people most of all.

“We’ll come back,” Harry says, loud enough for it to kind of echo in the bit of free space they’re in,
and Janie beams and Niall’s glowing in a way Harry’s never seen before, and this is as close to
perfection as he reckons life on earth can get.

—

“What is this place?” Harry asks as he steps across a rickety, broken bridge; there’s a hole here and
another over there, and the boards Niall’s stepping on are squeaking, protesting rather profusely, and
he’s fairly sure he’s cracked one internally and that just isn’t safe at all. “You’ve not taken us out
here to kills us, have you?”
Janie laughs, holds the skirt of her nightgown up as she hops off the bridge, lands in the wet grass in front of them with no shoes and a big grin on her pretty face as she clutches the bag she’s got in her hand at her side.

“Of course not,” she says, and she’s got this smile — that smile; you know the one, see it on people’s face every day when they’re radiating joy and happiness — but she’s being serious, Harry thinks, and he reckons he can trust her, reasons she’s not let him down yet in any ways that count. “This is something my granddad started years ago when he was my age, and I want to show it to the both of you.”

Niall grunts. “Well, what —”

And then he stops speaking, just like that, and looks up, as does Harry, and looming in front of them, sticky from fog and colored dark with age and bending in the wrong places, is a wooden water tower. It’s circular, kind of, standing on four angled legs; the railing is wood and broken in places, hanging by a thread, and there’s holes in the tower, preventing the ability to hold water. The words painted across the front are so smeared and slurred Harry can’t read them, can’t make them out; he wonders how old this is, how many pairs of eyes have seen this as time passed.

He can see all sorts of names, though, painted in red and blue and green and pink and yellow and orange, and some of them are old and some of them are fresh; some are in groups and others are lonesome, by themselves, but they’re all beautiful, all gorgeous in a completely horrendous sort of way with art, with drawings and sprayed on marks all over, too, and it’s just so colorful and unique and raw, and there’s memories all over the place, all over this field, and Harry wants to know, has to know why something like this would affect him so much.

Gosh.

“What is this?” Harry asks, turns to Janie. “What is that?”

Janie smiles. “When my great-grandfather went to fight in the war in Germany, he left behind a wife and a lot of little kids runnin’ ‘round,” she begins, and Harry tilts his head, sucks in his breath. “My grandad was the oldest, and the only boy, too, and there was so much going on, you know, and they couldn’t go to school, didn’t have time or funds, so he’d take his younger sisters out here and show them how to write and how to read by painting on the water tower ‘cause his eyes have never been that great and that’s what his dad did for him. The first words they could read and write were their parents’ names. And it just kind of stuck, you know, painting on the water tower kind of stayed around even after my great-grandfather came back with one leg and partial blindness.”

“Janie —”

“I want the two of you paint on it, too,” she says, cuts Niall off; she digs in her bag, pulls out a can of spray paint, and it’s red, sort of, bright and very noticeable and eye-catching. “Anything you want.

And — and Niall just kind of grabs the can out of her hand, and it makes her laugh, you know, because Janie is the happiest person in the whole fucking world and she’s got nothing to gain but everything to lose, and he jogs toward the tower, takes the lid off the can and shakes it hard; he holds it up, aims it just right, and begins.

And Harry waits with baited breath, wonders what Niall’s writing; Janie moves closer to him, slips her hand in his, and both of their breaths release gently when Niall finishes, when Niall steps away and they can read what he’s painted in crooked strokes.

Harry + Niall
**Summer of ’75**

*Oh, God.*

“Niall?”

Niall smiles, so soft and so slow, and his shirt is flapping in the wind, unbuttoned as usual, and there’s a bit of residual redness on his chest and he looks so pretty, so becoming in a way Harry’s never thought was real.

“Your turn.”

And Harry reckons Janie deserves a space, too.

-

Janie sighs, sniffles, wraps her arms around Harry’s waist and pulls him in, holds him tight. “I’m gonna miss you,” she says, slurs into his chest, and he nods, pats her hair and grips her hip just as tight, just as strong, because he’s going to miss her, too. “A lot. I didn’t think — I’m glad to have been able to know the two of you.”

“We feel the same.” He combs his fingers through her hair, pulls away, leans down and puts a kiss on her wrinkled forehead, soothes the worry there. “But you’ve got nothing to cry over, you know, ‘cause we’re coming back, Janie. Right?”

He turns his head, meets Niall’s eyes, and he’s standing next to him, next to them, arms crossed with a tiny grin on his face; he’s got blue jeans and an orange shirt with a red hat, and he’s mismatched but so is Harry, kind of, with his pink and green and yellow, and Janie rounds them off with purple and white and gold, and they don’t look half as good as they feel.

Niall nods, says, “Yeah,” and tangles his fingers with Harry’s behind their backs, out of sight and out of mind with the barest hint of a truly happy smile on his face.
Harry sighs, squints his eyes, reaches blindly for the sunglasses lying on the console; they’re kind of old, scratched here from Louis being a fucking dick one night and crooked there from Liam falling out of the window with them on while trying to catch the attention of his girlfriend at the time, and one of the edges cuts annoyingly into his skin, makes him wince every time he hits a hole — which is a lot, mind you, because they’re still in Oklahoma, for the most part, and there’s hills and mountains and rivers and lakes and uncharted territory on either side of them and he’s fairly sure he saw a bear a few miles back — but he reckons that’s better than having to deal with the high, high sun in his face.

He and Niall left out of Oklahoma City two hours ago, after an emotional goodbye with Janie who made both Harry and Niall promise to stop back by her place on their way home, on their way back, and the thing is — it was easy to make, to swear to, to promise her that yes, they’ll be back and yes, they’ll stay for a few days and yes, they’ll never forget her or the wildness of life, of living she took the two of them on.

Janie’s not family and she’s not romantic, either, but — but gosh, she’s a weird little star that must have fallen from the sky when it got too full that has had one of the biggest impacts on his life and he kind of likes the crater she’s left in his heart, in his stomach. She laughs a lot, smiles a lot, rages a lot, speaks a lot, runs a lot, sings a lot, lives a lot. Harry’s sure she cries a lot, too, which is a given when you’re passionate, when you’re emotional, when you’re wired to care about everything, about it all; as person who lets their thoughts, their emotions run free and wild without any reluctance or restraint, you have to be strong enough to deal with what comes back at you, and she is. Strong, that is. She really is.

She’s not impatient, either, per se, but she’s not one to wait — she goes, and she goes and she goes because she doesn’t have time to wait, because she knows that life is short and that what is today isn’t always going to be guaranteed tomorrow and appreciation is almost as important as fighting for happiness. Harry adores her, cares for her, dotes on her so heavily and so completely that he’s got her on a pedestal as high as his sister, as high as his mother, as high as Niall.

The time he’s spent with her, the time he’s spent with Niall and her, and all the little moments and the little words and the little touches and the little smiles and the little things of life — he’s never going to forget it.

He’ll be old and gray, sitting on a porch somewhere he hopes has a great fucking view of the sunset because he loves the way it blinks, sleepy and lazy and exhausted, right before it ducks behind the horizon, and he’ll be watching his kids, his grandkids, his great grandkids run around in a yard, in a big yard full of green grass with all sorts of yellow and purple flowers that they pick and bring back to him to set on every single windowsill in his house, in his home, and he’ll look away for a moment, catch sight of something colorful, something in the distance or something up close, and remember, recall Niall’s easy smiles and Janie’s total acceptance and all that they did and his change, his growth, his lift into the person he is now, into the person he always wanted to be, and he’ll just grin, just shake his head and snort, probably mutter something under his breath about the lack of sleep, about the wardrobe changes, about the water tower, and — and he prays the person sat next to him

running on empty

i look around for the friends that i used to turn to
looking into their eyes, i see them running too

— Jackson Browne, ‘Running On Empty’
has eyes the color of the sky on the edge of daylight, prays the person sat next to him will give him a special grin full of peace and love and acknowledgement because they know and because they’re feeling, remembering the same thing.

They say you only care when it’s gone, only realize what you had when you don’t have it anymore, and maybe they’re right.

But maybe they’re also wrong, too.

He takes his foot off the gas, slows down a bit; on either side of him there are trees, all sorts of green, dark and light and somewhere in between, and he’s only met a few cars on the interstate, one two three, and turns his head, wets his lips, takes a look at Niall.

Niall’s sleeping easily, soundly, pressed up against the windowpane; he’s got that red hat of his that Janie gave him pulled down, pulled low over his head to fend off the beating sun and he’s got his shirt off — of course he’s got his shirt off, he’s always got his shirt off; Harry definitely isn’t complaining, though — and his jeans are rolled up to his calves and his skin is kind of sweaty, kind of wet from the perspiration, and he’s glowing like stars, glowing like Roman candles shot at the moon on the Fourth of July, full of fire and spark.

And it’s just — Niall’s not perfect. Oh, God, he’s probably one of the most imperfect and flawed people Harry’s ever met. He’s got awful habits, like leaving the toothpaste lid off and not matching his socks and sleeping sideways across the bed and coloring outside of the lines, and he gets mad a lot, gets mad easy and mostly over nothing at all; he fights too much and he curses too much, and sometimes he makes the wrong decisions and never learns from his mistake, never learns from others’ mistakes.

But he’s also ran across the street to help an elderly woman pick up her dropped groceries in the pouring rain and he’s also taken the blame for some of Louis’s stunts to keep Louis out of trouble; he’s sneaked his food during lunch onto the plate of a kid who needed it more than him and went off in the middle of the night to pick up a girl from a party somewhere in a few towns over when she was scared and stayed after school to help tutor the little children with their math homework.

And they all looked up to him like he was a hero.

_He is._

Niall’s a good guy. He’s got his bad habits, as does everyone, but he’s so shiny and sparkly and simmering with the flame, with the desire to do better than was done to him, and he’s a good guy with the best intentions in the world to help.

“What’re you staring at me for?” Niall asks, all sorts of sleepy and tired; he moves, adjusts the cap and turns toward Harry, yawns hugely, and he’s got purple bags under his blue eyes and red marring the color of his cheeks. “You do it all the time. S’like you get so caught up in your own head that you don’t realize what you’re doing.”

_I don’t._

Harry swallows, turns red and maroon and pink and crimson, all the shades, jerks his eyes off of Niall’s face, Niall’s body, Niall’s soul and focuses on the road, on the curves and on the green-colored signs on either side. “Sorry,” he says, muffled and rushed, and he wonders, can’t help his mind from running away with his heart — what’s going to happen now? Between the two of them, now that some stuff has been said and brought into the open, what’s going to happen now? “For starin’, and making you uncomfortable. Sorry.”
“You didn’t make me uncomfortable,” Niall replies, and out of the corner of his eye, Harry catches a grin, a small grin that has Harry’s heart fluttering like the leaves on the trees to his left, to his right. “This is one of those moments when I want to crawl into your mind and make myself at home so I know what you’re thinking all the time.”

“How?”

Niall shrugs, takes his hat off and rubs his head, runs his fingers through his thick brown hair and makes it stand up, all over the place and matted with sweat and grease from a few days without a proper wash.

“It’s hard to put it into words,” he replies, slow and thoughtful, and he’s struggling to put his thoughts into letters, into coherent words, and Harry won’t push him, can’t push him, but he really wants to hear what Niall has to say because Niall’s one of those people who doesn’t say much. “I just… You see things that I don’t think anybody else can, like all the colors, and I want to be able to — to see myself in the way that you see me.”

“I see you the way you are.”

Niall smiles, shakes his head. “You’re right,” he replies, all soft and hurt and smarting from a wound, from an injury that was wrongfully inflicted onto him, deep into his heart and on the outside of his soul and it’s a scar, a spot of dirt that can’t ever be wiped away no matter how hard Harry scrubs. “You see me past all my brother’s shit and my mum’s problems, and I… I’m really, really thankful for that. More than you know right now.” On a whim, all of a sudden, he pushes up and leans over, finds the side of Harry’s face with his lips; it’s an abrupt kiss, and it’s kind of hard and wet, smeared across Harry’s skin, but, oh God, it’s the best one he’s ever been given and he can feel it all over his body. “For you. I’m very thankful for you.”

And they’re wrong. The people who say that you only know what you had when it’s gone? Yeah, they’re wrong.

-“I’ve got to piss.”

Harry wrinkles his nose, reaches out and turns down the radio — Ted Nugent was getting to be a little bit too much, anyway, and he can only handle small doses of him at best — and finds Niall’s face, meets Niall’s eyes in the rearview mirror. He crawled in the back, the very back with the bench seat — where he ate Delilah out while Harry drove with Alma Jean in the front, by the way — about forty-five minutes ago to finish his nap after Harry woke him up to grab a bite to eat and sprawled out like a drunkard, snoozed and snored, and he’s got a red mark on one cheek and a line of white drool on the other side and he looks adorably disgruntled with a wrinkled shirt and his jeans off, thrown somewhere or another.

Goddamn.

“What do you want me to about that?” Harry asks, blinks, tries to… tries to ignore, to avert his eyes from Niall as he moans in pitiful pain, cups his bulge and holds his hand over his crotch — as if that’s going to lessen the discomfort of having to piss.

No. It’s only going to bring discomfort to Harry.

(Not that he really cares, that it really matters; he’s not got nothing to hide now that Niall knows, you know?)
“Let me pee.”

Harry frowns, purses his lips. “We’re literally sat in a line of traffic while a funeral passes,” he says, motions at the cars parked on either side of the road while the hearse and the people heading to the gravesite drive past, slow and languid and mourning the death of their loved one. It’s respectful to pull over and pay your condolences even if you don’t know the person or the people that were affected by the death. “I’m very well not going to be an ass and drive out of line just so you can piss. Besides, it’s your fault — maybe if you wouldn’t have drank all that Coke like I told you not to, you wouldn’t have a full bladder already.”

“‘arry, I can’t hold it,” Niall whines, and his voice goes up a few octaves, a bit shrill, and he lets out a grunt of proper frustration and Harry’s kind of hot imaging some of the sounds Niall would make between the sheets, against the wall, in the backseat, all panted in his ear, in Harry’s ear as he moves and gives and takes. God. “I’m about to piss all over myself.”

Harry takes his eyes off Niall — Niall, who’s sat upright and got his bare legs spread and cupping his groin with both hands through his thin boxers, head tossed back as he whines about having to piss, but if Harry thinks, thinks real hard, he can imagine Niall holding himself for a completely different reason, hopefully out of his clothes and above, under, to the side of Harry — and wrinkles his nose, bites the inside of his cheek to calm himself down from the drifting thoughts in his mind.

It’s not like — it’s not like he and Niall are official, are anything more than best friends. That’s all they are — best friends — as of right now, and Niall’s kissed him and he’s kissed Niall and they’ve done… things… but Harry’s got no right to be thinking of Niall naked and spread and wet, weeping at the tip and sweating at the brow and crying from the mouth, begging Harry to —

“Do something, Harry. Please.”

Oh, Jesus wept.

“There’s some bottles rollin’ ‘round in the back under the seat, I think,” he says, and it’s sort of a whisper, husky and hoarse and full of a rasp he never knew he had; he decides it best to not comment on the fact that Delilah and Alma Jean are the ones who left the beer bottles in the van. “Your best bet’s going in those if you really can’t hold it.”

Niall makes a garbled noise of appreciation, mumbles a ‘thank you’ and reaches for the bottles under his seat; Harry finds that his eyes are glued to the mirror, and it’s slow and sensual, kind of, as Niall angles himself across the seat and — and digs into his boxers, tugs them down and around his thighs, tangled in the thickness, and he’s out, all thick and semi-hard and red, covered in veins that Harry wants to trace with his tongue till he knows them better than the back of his hand.

He shifts, Harry does, and takes his eyes off Niall; he’s hard, more than half, and to ease the ache of emptiness, of looseness, he puts one hand in his lap, digs his fingers into his thigh till he can feels his blunt nails and focuses on the sensation of pain, of self-inflicted discomfort.

But then Niall makes a noise, a sort of sigh of pleasure, and — and Harry’s mouth drops open and he moves his hand across his groin, squeezes and goes cross-eyed from the pleasure, from the burst of muted ecstasy, and he takes a moment to wallow, to relish, to appreciate the gentle ease of touching himself, of gripping and squeezing and palming himself through the loose crotch of his jeans, and he’s too out of it to realize that the caravan to the gravesite is finished and he’s able to go, and he mentally thanks the people behind him when they honk, when they yell something at him out their window.

And he hits the gas, hits the gas a little bit too hard and lurches into a rather deep pothole, and it —
jostles Niall, knocks him around, and somehow, someway Niall falls over, and... and the bottle knocks into him, into the seat, onto him, and sloshes, spills, and Niall screams, curses and yells and drops the glass, and it spreads all over, dampens the carpet in the back.

“Motherfucking hell!”

Niall grabs for a piece of fabric — a shirt — and drops it on the wet spot, presses down and presses hard; he’s got a nasty, screwed up looks on his face, and it’s not funny, this situation is not funny at all, but Niall’s got his boxers around his knees now and they’re tripping him up, keeping his mobility limited, and hell if Harry doesn’t bust out in quiet chuckles, in brilliant guffaws, and it takes a moment, a short moment, but then Niall’s joining him, too, and they’re laughing for as long and as loud as they can because if this is the only problem they’re going to have to deal with on the way to Atlanta, it isn’t going to be so bad.

It takes a few moments, but Harry’s able to locate the nearest camping grounds with a showering facility with the help of a group of locals that were sat outside of a gas station on a bench, and he pulls into the lot quickly and Niall’s out of the van with an armload of clothes before Harry’s even got the van parked and off.

He turns off the engine, takes the keys out of the ignition and tosses them in the console; he steps out, stretches his arms up high and sucks in a large breath, relishes the feeling of his muscles stretching and sliding. They’re surrounded by deep, dark, dense woods on either side, green and brown that filters the setting sun beautifully, magnificently, shining rays of golden fingers all over, and the lot is large and kept, clean and tidy, and they’re the only ones here, he and Niall, and he likes the crickets as they sing a song that’s quickly becoming Harry’s favorite.

“You comin’?”

Harry’s torn out of his mind at Niall’s question, turns from the woods and faces Niall. “Nope,” he replies, shakes his head, offers Niall a small smile as he scratches his temple, as he ignores the way Niall’s stood in nothing but his boxers. “You’ve got piss all over you, so you can go in first. I’ll clean up what you weren’t able to while you’re washing off.”

“We can do that later,” Niall says, scoffs, rolls his eyes and strides forward; he grabs Harry’s hand and takes off, drags him toward the long, single-story concrete building. “I’ve got enough clothes for you, too, and it isn’t like we’ve never showered together before.”

But we’ve never showered together like this.

Harry swallows his words, though, reckons he shouldn’t protest when he — when he really doesn’t want to protest at all.

Niall shoulders the heavy metal door open, walks in and pulls Harry along, too, and he kicks it shut, turns the silver lock. Harry looks around, notices that there’s a row of showers on each side separated by a thin plastic curtain, and it’s clean, for the most part, and it smells like lemons even though he’s fairly sure the small exit in front of him leads to the restroom portion of the building.

“Strip,” Niall says, commands, and he’s just got this voice, okay, and it’s deep and it’s dark sometimes, so mysterious in a way that throws Harry for all sorts of loops.

“What?”

Niall laughs, walks into the room and sets his clothes — their clothes — on the long metal bench in
the middle; he keeps his back to Harry and stands straight, stands tall, and then puts his fingers in the waist of his boxers, pushes them down and off and into a puddle of fabric at his feet, and his bum is kind of small, for the most part, but it’s plump and thick and heavy, it seems, and a few shades lighter than the rest of his body, and it makes Harry want to cry and want to laugh even though he knows he’s about to go insane.

Fuck.

In the best way possible, though.

“You still aren’t naked,” Niall muses, chuckles, and he turns around, bares his front to Harry, and he’s long and thick and the hair around his groin and on the tops of his thighs matches that on his head. He stops in front of Harry, puts his hands on Harry’s shoulders and drags them across Harry’s clavicle, begins to fiddle with the buttons of his shirt, and Harry freezes, sucks in a breath at the hotness of their proximity and it makes Niall frown, makes Niall stop. “You aren’t uncomfortable, are you?”

And he’s not. Not a lot, for the most part. Niall’s right — this isn’t the first time they’ve showered together, isn’t the first time they’ve seen one another naked, and it’s probably not going to be the last, either, if the two of them keep up this game they’re playing, this fire they’re stoking, and he’s got nothing to be afraid of.

Niall said he was going to try, promised he was going to try, and he’s earned enough of Harry’s trust lately for Harry to know that Niall won’t hurt him like he did before.

Intentionally, at least.

Niall’s never paid much attention to Harry’s love handles, to Harry’s extra layer of skin on his tummy and on his back and on his thighs and on his shoulders; he’s poked fun at Harry’s freckles a time or two, says that they look like ticks, like dirt, and even washed Harry’s hair, washed Harry’s body for him when he was too drunk to do much of anything, and there’s really not a reason to be scared at all because this is the easiest mountain to climb compared to all the others.

This is Niall. This is Niall, and it’s always going to be Niall, too, and he doesn’t have to be self-conscious, doesn’t have to be insecure or scared or put off by the fact that Niall’s seeing him naked because Niall likes his mind, seems to enjoy the way it works, and a body is nothing more than a vessel to sail you through his life and on into the next.

“No,” he answers, shakes his head. “I’m not.”

He leans over, leans in, puts his mouth to Niall’s in a chaste, simple kiss; Niall slings one arm around Harry’s shoulders, and it’s bare skin on bare skin, fuck, while the other finishes working with the buttons on Harry’s shirt before they fall, before they undo the snap of Harry’s jeans and drag his zipper down, and they groan, both of them, and Harry licks into Niall’s mouth as he brings his other hand up to curl into Harry’s hair and hold on tight.

And he’s stood there in the middle of a rest stop showering room with his shirt undone and his jeans unsnapped, and Niall’s naked, bare and bare, and he doesn’t know what’s about to happen, can’t tell the future, but he’s ready for anything, for everything that’s about to be thrown at him, and he thinks, he knows when he can feel Niall’s smile against his lips that Niall’s prepared for it all, too.
The water is kind of cool against Harry’s back; it makes him shiver, makes him shudder in delight at the feeling of ease on his shoulders, on his skin. Everything’s being washed away — his sins, the dirt of the day, his trespasses, the sweat of the summer. It’s hot outside, hot enough that he kind of wants to go naked for the rest of the day till it cools off, and it feels good, feels nice to be able to wash away the heat, the perspired viscidity that today’s trails have brought on.

He sighs, groans deep in his throat, shuts his eyes, tips his head back, relishes the water as it soaks his hair and runs down, rains down his face and his shoulders and his spine and pools at his feet where it drains beneath the floor.

It feels good to be allowed the liberation to relax, if only for a moment.

There’s a hand in his hair a moment later, knotting in the tresses and the nasty snarls he’s not been able to brush out; it pulls his head straight, pulls him in, and lips are against his, soft and pliant and gentle as they move, as they soothe, as they map and learn and fit perfectly, impeccably.

Harry hisses air through his nose, wraps his arms around Niall’s waist and pulls him in, pulls him close; it’s skin on skin, bare flesh against bare flesh, and he can feel Niall’s hairy chest and Niall’s soft tummy and Niall’s thick thighs and Niall’s half-hard cock, oh dear, against his leg, against his own prick, and it makes him choke, makes his breath get caught in his lungs and he has to tug away, has to open his eyes and draw in breath before he collapses from lack of oxygen.

Niall’s bright blue eyes are wide and open, prompting Harry to look in and hide behind and never leave; his black lashes are matted together from the water, spiky and long, and his brown hair is flat, adhered to his forehead and cheeks and neck, and his face is flushed red, flushed pink, and he’s got a smile on his lips, and it’s little and simple and endearing, enthralling, and Harry feels everything looking at Niall in this moment.

“You’re adorable,” Harry muses, mostly to himself; he brings one of his hands up, runs it through Niall’s hair to knock it out of his big blue eyes, reckons he needs to see the color the sky so he doesn’t get lost in the darkness of hesitation. “You’re so beautiful.”

Niall smiles, small and delicate. “I’m sorry,” he says, apologizes; he tilts his head to the side, moves closer into Harry’s touch, and he’s hesitant but determined, Harry can tell, and it’s admirable, really, how he’s able to overcome his fears with a grin on his face, with a glint in his eyes. Harry can’t do what Niall does; incidentally, Niall can’t do the things Harry can do, either. “I’m sorry for taking so long, and I’m sorry for making you feel less than you are. I’m sorry for all the trouble I put us both through. You’re so much more than that.”

“Niall.”

“And I’m still trying, Harry. I want you to know that I’m still trying to be a better person, a better friend. For you.”

Just a friend?
Harry can respect Niall, though, and Niall said he’s curious and nothing more — and whatever that means, Harry is going to respect it, too, and no matter what sort of relationship stems from this curiosity, he’s going to cherish for the rest of his given days.

“Do it for yourself, Ni,” Harry says, grins, puts his hands on Niall’s shoulders and pulls him under the splattering spray of the showerhead above. It soaks him in a hurry, turns his brown hair black. “Do all of that for yourself.”

“Why?” Niall’s hands soothe through Harry’s hair, fall down and over Harry’s shoulders; his fingers curl and cross and circle around Harry’s bare back, drawing little designs of halfhearted artwork on his skin, on his flesh, and Harry likes it. Oh, God, Harry loves it, loves this, and he’s not sure what it means but he’s going to appreciate it before it goes away because nothing as good as this can last in his world, in Niall’s world, in their world. “You’re the reason I want to change, and you’re the reason I’m trying to be different than I was before. It’s all about you, Harry.”

“Do it for you.” Harry’s not got a plausible reason or a believable doctrine as to why Niall ought to be doing this for himself and nobody else — he just should, and that’s it, and that’s the right thing to do. “And don’t worry about all of that… all of that other stuff, m’kay? About time, I mean. We’ve got — we’ve got plenty of time left.”

On this trip, in this summer, for the rest of their lives.

Niall makes a noise in the back of his throat — Harry’s not sure what it is, not sure where it came from, but he is sure that he likes it, oh God, reckons he can listen to it for days on end — and lurches forward, slams his lips against Harry’s; it’s a rough kiss, all teeth and tongue, and Niall’s got one hand in Harry’s hair while the other is splayed on Harry’s back, and his nails are blunt, digging into the few extra layers of skin Harry’s got stored, and Harry’s breath is hitching and he’s gasping, panting, almost sobbing as Niall licks in his mouth, all over his mouth, not leaving one single area untouched with his wickedness, and he can taste the grilled food from earlier and it’s good, so good and so hot and so defying and everything that Harry’s wanted and he wants to fall to the floor and bring Niall down with him and do everything, accomplish everything that’s swimming around in his mind.

But they’ve got time — they’ve got so much time. And they don’t have to rush. So why do it now? Why rush so hard, so fast that neither of them are able to enjoy the fruits of their labor?

(Harry reckons they’re the sweetest things.)

“Niall,” Harry says, smears against Niall’s mouth; he pulls back, puts his hands on both of Niall’s shoulders to keep him there, to keep him still. “Let’s take it slow, yeah?”

Niall’s eyes sparkle like the stars twinkling above, like the sun’s rays reflecting off a body of crepitating water, and Harry’s whisked back to the time they spent on the dock and everything that it meant. “Okay,” he agrees, nods, smiles — smiles, and it’s big, so big, all sorts of bright and brilliant and blatantly joyful, and Niall is a book, an abundance of pages tied together that’s being written every day, every minute, every second, and Harry’s eating it up, reading the words as soon as they’re marked down, and it’s Harry’s favorite, one that’s dog-eared from revisited memories and has scribbles under some of the sentences because they mean too much to ever forget. “Okay. We’ll go slow as long as that’s what you want.”

Niall is Harry’s favorite book of all time.
Harry smiles, grins, leans in again and puts his lips to Niall’s in a gentle, mouth to mouth kiss; it’s soft and it’s sensitive, barely a pressure, and he uses this touch as a distraction to grab at the sack of shower products Niall’s got hanging on the head. He rifles through, finds the big bottle of shampoo and squeezes a dollop of it into his hand; he rubs his palms together, smears the thick lather on all of his fingers, and then puts it in Niall’s hair, rubs the soap back and forth, back and forth.

It smells like spice, like cinnamon and apples and pumpkin. Kind of. It smells like Halloween, like Thanksgiving, like Christmas — if those were ever given a particular scent.

Niall pulls back, licks at the bridge of saliva that connects their lips, their sticky mouths, and Harry’s knees stutter as he fights to regain his composure. “You’re washin’ my hair,” he says, muses, and his face screws up into a confused, adoring expression, and Harry just nods, just grins, just tries not to melt into a puddle of mush at their feet. “Why are you washing my hair?”

Harry giggles, combs his fingers through Niall’s hair. “So you can wash mine,” he says, laughs, and spikes Niall’s hair, twists and tugs it into the strangest shapes he can think of; he turns the both of them, puts one hand over Niall’s eyes while the other tips his head back and allows the water from the showerhead to beat down, to wash out the soap and the suds and leave him smelling like harvesting season, like all the best holidays wrapped up into one. “It’s just like — just like when we were kids, you know?”

“But we aren’t kids anymore, are we?”

Harry slants his head, drops his hands from Niall’s hair. “No, we aren’t;” he replies, agrees, and he thinks this is it, this is the turn and the change and the leveling up he’s been wondering about — he’s an adult and Niall’s an adult, too, and they’re both aware of this, and they’re not kids anymore, no, and they can’t run and they can’t hide and they can’t pretend, can’t try to be what they aren’t. And part of being an adult, of not being a child anymore, is taking care of your own problems when they come at you, when they knock through your walls and blast your heart and scream, demand your attention. They’re not kids anymore; why act as if they are? “No anymore, we aren’t.”

“It feels good, doesn’t it?” Niall says, muses; he grabs the shampoo, squeezes a large amount of it on top of Harry’s head and then lathers it in, scrubs and scrubs and scrubs. His fingers feel good, feel nice against Harry’s scalp, and he purrs, moves in to the touch, shuts his eyes and relishes the moment, the easy way with which they are with one another in this frozen bit of time. “To not be kids anymore — to be the adults, to be the people we’ve always wanted to be when we were little.”

Harry hums. “I’m not sure there’s much of anything in the world that can feel better than this;” he says, slurs, and it doesn’t make sense to Niall, so he explains, tries to explain, “because we’ve been through a lot these last few days and it — the fact that we’re right here now with each other, showering and washing one another’s hair after everything, feels better than the thought of being an adult and being our own person ever did when I was a little kid.” He stops, opens his eyes, meets Niall’s, and it’s green and blue, forest and ocean, earth and water, and he is everything that Niall isn’t and he doesn’t know if that means they’re good for one another, doesn’t know if that means they’re bad for one another, but they fit in a way he’s never aligned with anyone else before and — and he really likes the way Niall smiles when he looks at Harry, when they look at each other, and something that good can’t be bad. “Don’t you think so?”

Niall thins his lips, narrows his eyes; he combs through Harry’s hair, picks at the snarled knots of today’s trials with tender fingers, patient and steadfast. “Yeah,” he replies, drawls, breathy and fresh, and Harry’s reminded of pretty yellow flowers that grow through the cracks in the sidewalk, of people who instinctively avoid stepping on the little parts of unadulterated nature as they live their lives. “Yeah, I think you’re right.”
That’s Niall. That’s who Niall is. He’s a little yellow flower that’s growing through the cracks in a sidewalk in some big city, in some small town, and Harry is the person who stops, who stares, who stays for a little while as the world rushes on by around them.

“I can’t believe that you like ketchup on your hotdogs. I can’t believe you’re one of those people.”

Niall snorts, rolls his eyes, takes a sharp turn down the aisle full of sweet-smelling bread on either side, all sorts of rolls and muffins and bagels and dough. “And I can’t believe you like mustard on your hotdogs,” is Niall’s clever, unique response — ha; as if — as he tosses a glance over his shoulder at Harry, all blue-eyed and feigning innocence and looking every bit the silent devil he is. “But really, Harry? Mustard? Fuckin’ mustard?”

And they’ve been at it, been at this for a while; ever since Niall grabbed Harry by the wrist and dragged him through the supermarket, behind the metal shopping cart, and toward the condiment aisle, the two of them have been bickering back and forth, fighting and arguing about the fact that Harry prefers mustard while Niall likes ketchup, and really, they’ve known each other for years — years — and one would think that they would be accustomed to, would be used to the one another’s odd quirks and habits.

But they aren’t.

And they’re never going to be, either — which sounds kind of sad, sounds kind of depressing, if you don’t dwell on it, but Harry likes it, loves it, enjoys the fact that he’s known Niall for years, years, and he still doesn’t know every single little tiny detail about Niall, won’t ever know every single little tiny detail about Niall.

That’s okay, though. It really, really is — because Harry has the opportunity, has been given the otherworldly gift of being able to spend today, tomorrow, the rest of his life learning and pilfering and loving and picking through Niall’s little things, Niall’s odds and ends.

And that kind of makes him happy, kind of makes him excited. Not everybody gets to spend their lives — or their foreseeable future, for a better understanding — learning the person they’re falling in love with, and Harry knows that it may not last, this thing between him and Niall, as tentative and unbalanced as it is, but time isn’t going to change the fact that it’s real, that it’s happening, that his dreams are being cashed in for the true thing, and he isn’t going to waste a single second, isn’t going to take for granted this chance, this inexplicably monumental liberation to learn and live and laugh and love.

And love and love and love.

(So much already.)

“You’re fucking disgusting.”

Niall smirks, wrinkles his nose. “You’re fucking stupid.”

“Fuck you!” Harry yells, swears, and there’s an older man in front of them, further into the aisle, that neither of them noticed before, and he turns, gives Harry a pointed look that he tries to sheepishly wave off, timidly smile off, but Niall’s laughing — fucking laughing like a lunatic, and Harry knows never to go to Niall if they have to rob a bank because he’s a shitty accomplice regardless of what Niall says — and he scurries away and to the left, out of sight. Harry sighs, shakes his head, wonders if it’s always going to be like that when people see the two of them together — like, together. “We’re
“Prison?” Niall asks, repeats, and his voice is a few octaves higher than it should be, and it’s... it’s funny and it makes Harry smile, makes Harry grin from ear to ear and it hurts, but it hurts in the best way possible and Harry’s all for this magnificent pain. “What for?”

Gosh.

“For being ourselves.”

And then, before Niall can answer, before Harry can even think, there’s a song coming on over the speakers, and it’s one they’ve heard time and time again — thanks to Louis; Cherry Bomb is his favorite for reasons unknown to the lot of them, but it has a catchy tune so Harry’s not complaining much — and Niall’s grabbing Harry by the wrist, by both wrists, and they’re dancing in the next moment, arms splayed out wide, turning and turning and turning, and they’re going so fast, spinning so fast, and Harry’s confused, hot and cold and black and white, and he’s all the colors, too, of course he is, because Niall’s grin, Niall’s smile, Niall’s ringing laughter in the emptiness of the aisle and it’s otherworldly in its charm, in its raw purity and innocence, and it just... just colors everything.

“What are you doing?” Harry asks; he’s spinning, twirling, side-stepping, tripping on his feet, on Niall’s feet, but he’s not falling because Niall’s got him held tight, held close, and he likes the feeling of safety, of security, of dependable sturdiness. “What the hell are you doing, Niall?”

“We’re dancing!” he answers, drawls out, and Harry can hear it all over his body, in his mind and in his heart and in his body and in his soul, and it’s a song, a chant, one that no one has experienced before. “We’re dancing, Harry!”

Harry smiles, loosens his body, allows Niall to control his movements. “I can see that,” he says, jokes. “But why?”

Niall throws his head back, laughs like a little kid; it rings out, louder than the music and louder than their breath and louder than the beating, than the pounding, than the thud-thud-thud of his heart. “I never got to dance with you at prom,” Niall replies, and Harry’s taken back into the past, for a trip down memory lane, and he remembers all sorts of flashing lights and gyrating bodies and music, the best music ever, and reality that faded into dreams and waking up, washing up, going to church the next morning with the soiled underwear from the night before, and Niall’s right — they didn’t dance with each other. “Sometimes you just have to step out of your comfort zone, H, and there’s nobody in the world I would rather do stupid shit with more than you.”

Ha.

“This is nice, don’t you think?” Niall says, asks; he throws his arm out, the one that isn’t holding his own bottle of beer, and motions to the stillness, to the blackness of the green and brown trees and the brightness of the full moon and flickering stars above. So peaceful, so beautiful, so calm and serene and worthwhile. Harry feels the way the stars make him think. “Just me, you and the moon.”

“And three six packs.”
Niall laughs, chuckles and nods. “And three six packs,” he repeats around his pitched high giggles, nudges his shoulder into Harry’s lazily, sloppily. “We can’t forget about the three six packs, can we?”

“Course not. It’s history — it’s tradition.”

“What?”

Harry blinks, takes his eyes off the stars and turns his head, meets Niall’s blue gaze head on. “To get drunk off our asses,” he replies, smiles, “and say all the words we don’t when we’re sober.”

“What don’t you say?”

Harry shrugs, sighs, turns away and focuses back on the sky, on the stars, on the stretch of uncultivated oblivion that leads to universes, far and wide and bigger, brighter than anything he’s capable of imagining. “I just mean that —” he hiccups, hard, and it hurts, tastes like soured fruit; he sets his beer down on the ground, wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and leans over, leans in, “— that beer and liquor give you courage, give you all sorts of strength and bravery that you didn’t have before. It’s a good thing, but it’s also a bad thing, too.”

“Why?” Niall asks, soft and gentle; one of his hands comes up, travels into Harry’s hair, and he pulls the elastic band out, combs his fingers through the wispy curls and corded waves. “Why do you think that?”

Harry looks at Niall again — really looks at Niall, wonders when Niall started being the center of his universe. “What makes you not think that?”

Niall smiles, smirks, and it’s a pretty sort of grin that’s lopsided, that’s perfect because it’s imperfect. “I’m not that drunk, Harry,” he says, whispers, and his words are flower petals floating on the wind, light and ready to go, ready to be.

“I’m not, either.” Harry blinks, and his gaze falls, lands on Niall’s lips, and they’re wet and pink and thick and red and so ready, so welcoming and so inviting and so much fun. “You’re a lot happier than you used to be.”

Niall huffs. “You make me happy,” he replies, shrugs, acts as if it’s simple, so simple, but it isn’t and Harry’s exploding like supernovas, like hungry black holes. “I can’t promise you that it’s always going to be good with me because it won’t, and you know that. You’ve always known that. But I can promise I’ll try to make you as happy as you make me.”

“Oh.” Harry gulps, taken aback, awestruck and mystified and vulnerably raw. “I really want to kiss you right now.”

Niall uses the leverage he has on the back of Harry’s head to pull him in, to slot their mouths together; he parts his lips, coaxes Harry’s open, too, and delves his tongue inside, finds Harry’s, and they twist and curl and turn and swirl and tangle like the two of them did in the supermarket, dancing off-key and out of control to the Runaways, and Harry makes a noise in the back of his throat, a harsh sound of deliverance, and he lurches forward, wraps his arms around Niall’s neck and scoots in, scoots close, settles himself in Niall’s lap as if it’s his throne, his perch.

And it’s just that for a moment: hands and teeth and fingers and tongue and lips and tasting, touching, trying all the things he’s always wanted to, and Harry’s breathing hard, breathing fast, and Niall’s panting as his spit, as Harry’s spit falls out of the corners of his mouth and down his face and along his throat and across his chest, oh God, and Harry catches the saliva with the pad of his thumb,
uses it as paint to mark artwork on the plains of Niall’s body because Niall’s so beautiful, too beautiful, and Harry’s in love, all hot and cold and calm and unfettered.

Niall pulls back, sucks at the string of saliva that connects them. “Wanna get in the van?” he asks, heavy-lidded and raspy, hoarse and rough, and Harry nods, whimpers, tries to think of a way to get himself back now that he’s just too far gone and discovers that he doesn’t care. He just doesn’t care. “Come on, then. I want to do some things with you.”
paradise by the dashboard light

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

it never felt so good, it never felt so right
and we’re glowing like the metal on the edge of a knife
c’mon, hold on tight
c’mon, hold on tight
though it’s cold and lonely in the deep dark night
i can see paradise by the dashboard light

— Meatloaf, ‘Paradise by the Dashboard Light’

Niall opens the door of the van and hops inside, scoots around till he’s sat upright on the bucket seat and facing out, facing Harry; he’s gentle and easy and slow, so slow and sweet and soft and thoughtful as he reaches out for Harry, as he grabs Harry around the waist, around the fleshy hips and the thick love handles, and his fingers, Niall’s fingers, crawl up beneath the bunched fabric of Harry’s moth-eaten, cutoff gray shirt he’s had since he was sixteen, and Harry shivers, begins to sweat with anticipation, wonders if the heat around him is hotter than the heat between him and Niall.

“I hate this song,” Harry says, muses, brings his hands up and combs his fingers through Niall’s hair; it’s thick and wet with sweat but silky, velvety, smelling of the shampoo they used earlier, and Harry’s skin is swarmed with sharp gooseflesh and Niall must know, must feel the tiny bumps of hot colorful excitement for this, for them, because he’s got a grin on his face that’s brighter than the green dashboard lights. “I mean, I really do hate this song.”

Niall grins, chuckles, slants his head and moves into Harry’s touch as he raises his fingers beneath Harry’s shirt, feeling along the skin as if he’s a callous-handed pirate looking for the treasure that’s going to change his life.

Who concocted the definite belief that treasure is always jewels and gold and diamonds, anyway?

“It’s the Stones,” Niall replies, blinks, languid and indolent, and the moon above shines just right, makes Niall’s long lashes look as if they’re dipped in honey, dipped in gold, and Harry realizes in that moments that Niall is absolutely priceless. “You love the Stones.”

Harry hums, runs his fingers along the hairline on the top of Niall’s neck, dragging his nails across the skin; he drinks in Niall’s shuddering response, licks his lips as Niall spreads his legs, lays his knees over, and pulls Harry into the space, and it’s all hot, all bothered, and Harry’s got flames slithering about his body, highly contagious and heavily layered with desire, with a passion that puts the others to shame.

“Just ‘cause I’m a fan doesn’t mean I like every song.” And that goes for people, too — he likes Niall, adores Niall, loves Niall, and while he’s got his great qualities, his quirky qualities, he’s also got his bad, too. Harry isn’t afraid to not appreciate what he doesn’t like, either; in a way, it’s like an album: one song doesn’t make an album, and one album doesn’t make an artist. He doesn’t have to like every song to be a fan; he doesn’t have to like every quality to be in love. “This was never one I went back to. Too many pianos; not my thing.”

He’s never liked pianos very much, blames it on the fact that Gemma and he were forced to take
lessons between the ages eight and twelve with a woman who smelled like cats and candles.

“Oh, c’mon, H.” Niall blinks, tilts his head back; he pulls Harry in, pulls Harry closer, and Harry’s now kneeling in the vehicle, knee stacked up against some sort of hard edge in the floorboard, and their lips are there, right there, and Harry smells the liquor, the pizza, the chocolate-dipped pretzels on Niall’s breath and it doesn’t bother him at all. “‘She comes in colors everywhere/She combs her hair/She’s like a rainbow/Coming, colors in the air’. It’s quite fitting, I think, since you’re always talkin’ about colors and I can’t stop thinking ‘bout colors. This has always been one of my favorite songs by them.”

Harry puts his hands on Niall’s shoulders, steadies himself awkwardly and a bit lopsided. “Why?” Niall shrugs. “I liked the noise, really, most of all,” he replies, narrows his eyes. “And now it just kind of reminds me of you.”

“It’s about a girl.”

“It’s about a colorful person. They just chose to represent it with a girl.” Niall leans in, puts his lips to Harry’s nose, kisses the tip and leaves his mark, leaves his innocent tattoo on Harry’s skin. “And besides, I don’t want a girl.” He grins — so big, so bright, so brilliant, and Harry can see universes in his eyes, in the way that he sparkles with effervescence and vivacious luminosity. “I just want you, Harry.”

Tension Harry had no idea was building inside of him, between the two of them, seeps out of his body and he relaxes, loosens; his heart pitter-patters into a steady, calm pace, and the gooseflesh on his skin grows, layers, and he hears the crickets singing, hears the radio humming, hears the creek crepitating, hears the buzzing of nature and peace, serenity, tranquility in the highest form.

It must have taken a lot for Niall to say that, for Niall to push past whatever chains are holding him back and jerk free, and while it may be the hardest thing Niall’s ever said it’s really the only thing Harry’s ever wanted to hear.

“Oh, baby.”

Harry lurches forward, slams his lips against Niall’s, and it’s a kiss that’s fierce and ferocious, and it’s closed-mouthed, hard and pressing, and Harry’s got his hands on both of Niall’s cheeks and Niall’s got his fingernails boring into Harry’s fleshy, thick hips, oh my God, and Harry feels heavy, feels so full of — of something; he’s not sure what, not sure where it’s come from, but he likes it, relishes it, can’t get enough of it — and he moves in, topples onto Niall, and the two of them fall to the side, off the seat and into the floorboard, squished between both seats and flaying about.

And it’s a flurry of all sorts of movement, really — Niall’s lips dislodge from Harry’s, drag along his cheek and down the side of his face and into the collar of his shirt, and Harry’s nose knocks into Niall’s forehead and tears burn in his eyes, but he’s laughing, and Niall’s got a hell of a case of the giggles, too, and Harry knows it’s okay, knows that whatever’s going on between the two of them is always going to be okay because they’re interlaced, intertwined, interlocked in every single way.

“You’re going to be the death of me, Harry,” Niall says, muses; his hands splay on Harry’s lower back, tuck up beneath his rising shirt, and Harry likes the press of blunt, wide nails against the little dimples in his skin more than he ever thought possible. “I swear on it. We hurt each other all the time.”

Harry snorts, rolls his eyes, drops his forehead and rests his cheek against Niall’s. “Whatever,” he replies, grunts, and shuts his eyes, takes in a few deep breathes. Niall’s got one of his knees between
both of Harry’s, supporting his bum, and Harry’s got either of his elbows on either side of Niall’s face somehow, someway, and they’re close right now physically, but it’s the mental proximity between the two of them that’s so intimate it’s a silent scream lost in the void, in the black hole around them. Harry raises his head, wets his lips, looks into the ocean-cloudy blue of Niall’s eyes. “Do you want to keep — keep goin’?”

Because Harry will stop. If Niall’s uncomfortable or insecure or — or afraid, scared, frightened of going there and never being able to return, to come back, Harry will stop without a second of hesitation. He wants Niall to enjoy this as much as him; he wants Niall to want this as much as him.

“Yeah.” Niall nods, grins crookedly, and Harry’s over the moon with adoration for Niall’s lopsided smiles, really, no matter how much Niall swears they’re awful. “Yeah, I want to keep going.”

Harry grins, can’t help the blasting sort of smile that breaks across his face. “Okay,” he says, elatedly celebrates in his heart, in his head; he leans in, leans down, and puts his lips to the corner of Niall’s mouth, on the side that’s always lower than the other when he grins, when he laughs, and plants the gentlest, most tender kiss he’s given before. “Let’s get more comfortable, yeah?”

“What, lying on the dirty floor of the van isn’t romantic enough for you?”

Harry snorts, pushes up and stands outside of the van. “Nothing’s romantic with you,” he retorts, and really, he’s telling the truth — well, kind of. And it doesn’t matter, either; Harry doesn’t want romantic, doesn’t want frilly shows of affection. He wants real, and real is apparently fumbling around in the van that he and Niall — and Louis, Liam, Greg, and Gemma, as well — have had sex in on a few occasions, and that’s okay. “And I want to take it slow.”

“Oh.” Niall’s eyes widen as he sits up, as he scrambles around and gets on his knees; he reaches out, grabs Harry’s hand and pulls him in, sits him on the seat and closes the door, locks the door. The front two windows are rolled down a crack and the back is propped an inch open, and the crickets are joining in with the Stones. “I didn’t know that.”

Harry pushes his lips together, puts three of his fingers on Niall’s chin, presses into the dimple there. “I want you,” he says, slow and faint. “And I want to be able to cherish every single moment that I spend with you.”

Because it’s all going to end when we get back home. Right?

“Fucking hell, Harry,” Niall swears, grabs Harry’s cheeks and pulls him in for a harsh kiss; Harry’s lips drop open from the abrupt forcefulness of it all and Niall’s able to slip his tongue inside, to curl and swirl and circle all around Harry’s teeth, Harry’s mouth, and Harry tries his best to keep up, to return the contact, and yes, Niall’s going slow — as slow as one can when they’re devouring someone’s mouth, that is — but Harry wants less of this overwhelming touch and more, more, more of the softness, of the easiness. But he doesn’t have to say anything, doesn’t have time to say anything because Niall’s dropping his hands from Harry’s cheeks, softening his lips against Harry’s, and now their tongues tangle and dance and twine, flicking and firm, and Harry’s breathing hard and Niall’s trying his best to swallow the spit that’s accumulating quickly, making the contact slick and wet and lecherous in its sound, and this — this is what Harry wants: this gentleness, this acknowledgement, this belief that what’s between them, two boys, is the same as what’s between a man and woman.

And it is. If you’re lucky enough to find love — love, the kind that rearranges your heart a little bit more each day you experience it — it doesn’t matter who it’s between, what it’s between. All that matters is that it is, and this — this is. This is so much.
Niall stands up, angles himself downward as to not break the contact between Harry and him, and steps back, pulls Harry along with him; it takes a few tries that involves too much laughing, too much lathering their tongues on each other’s cheeks, but Niall has Harry in the very back of the van and sat down on the bench seat, legs spread wide as Niall settles shakily, sloppily, on his lap, knees on either side and nearly falling off.

Harry turns his head, takes his lips off of Niall’s. “You’re going to fall off, silly boy,” he says, muses, and his voice his rough, hoarse, and there’s a little bit of spit that falls out of the corner of his mouth, tickles his skin as it drips down his neck, and he puts his hands on both of Niall’s upper thighs, grips the meat and pulls, jerks him and settles him close, and somewhere their groins are aligned, perfect and muted through the denim, through the fabric of their underwear, but it makes Harry’s eyes cross nonetheless and he’s floating on some sort of star when Niall bucks, adjusts himself accordingly, comfortably. “Oh, God.”

Niall leans forward, puts his mouth on the tiny dollop and suckles on the hollow of Harry’s throat, and Harry gulps, drops his mouth open and lets out of small cry of shattered relief; his hands turn into fists and he keeps them on Niall’s upper thighs, fights to keep them on Niall’s upper thighs till Niall gives the signal, till Niall lets Harry know that everything’s okay.

“Touch me, Harry,” Niall says, murmurs, smears the words against Harry’s skin as he sucks, as he licks the trail of wetness the line of spit left behind, and Harry wonders how pissed off his mother would be if he came back with Niall’s name tattooed across his heart. “I know you want to.”

“I do — oh, God, I want to touch you more than anything in the world at this moment.” His fists clench harder; his nails dig into his palms and he’s glad they’re too dull to cut skin because that would just disrupt the mood, really, and he doesn’t want that. “But I want it to be okay for you. I want you to want it, too.”

“Silly boy,” Niall chastises, nuzzles his nose into the side of Harry’s face, on the soft — sensitive; oh fuck — skin beneath Harry’s ear. His breath is coming in pants that puff against Harry’s flesh and Harry kind of likes the way it’s dissolving all his fears, all his inhibitions. “I want you just as much as you want me. Can’t you see that?”

No.

“Or do you want me to show you?” Niall asks, leans back; he puts his hands on Harry’s where they’re still balled up on his thigh, undoes the fists and massages the color back into Harry’s palms. “I’d love to do that, you know? I’d love to make you all sweaty and wet, make you beg till the only words that come out of your mouth is how badly you want me.” He smiles, and it’s lascivious but — but understanding, too, and accepting, and Harry’s at a loss he’s never faced before — and he uses the grip he’s got on Harry’s hands to raise his arms up above his head; he shakes his head when Harry tries to put them down, motions for him to keep them there, and Harry does after a moment of suspension. “Do you want me to, Harry?”

Yes, yes, yes. It’s a chant, a hymn, a chorus of caroling in his head that repeats like a broken record.

Harry gulps. “If you want to.”

Niall sighs, shakes his head, trails his fingers down the undersides of Harry’s arms, and it tickles, the touch, and Harry’s body convulses, jumps, and they slot together even better, even closer, and Harry feels a hardness against his lower tummy and he looks down, sees with the help of the dashboard lights and the world of stars above that Niall’s hard, stiff with it — with the want.

He wants this. Oh, God, he wants this as much as Harry, doesn’t he?
Niall chuckles, huffed and exasperated. “I think that’s answer enough,” he jokes — *jokes*, as if this is a laughing matter when Harry’s flying too high to ever be brought down now, and his wings are the color of Niall’s eyes and the color of Niall’s lips and the color of Niall’s soul, all blue and pink and yellow, faint and fresh and pure. “’m goin’ to take your shirt off, m’kay? I want to feel your skin against mine.”

Harry nods, chokes, and Niall laughs, smothers his chuckles with one hand while the other grabs the hem of Harry’s shirt and pulls it up, pulls it over his head and tosses it somewhere to the side, out of the way and forgotten. Niall puts his hands on Harry’s chest, drags his fingertips along the edges and curves and rolls and dimples and surfaces, and Harry sucks in a shivering, shaking breath.

“You okay?” Niall raises his eyes, meets Harry’s.

“Y-Yeah,” Harry replies, stutters, and Niall nods, leans forward and slants their mouths together. It’s a slow kiss, one that Harry deepens when Niall parts his lips just so; he slips his hands around and grips Niall’s ass in the same moment that he moves his tongue inside Niall’s mouth, and it’s a shock, apparently, because Niall makes a noise, lets out a squeal as Harry pulls him in and meshes, flushes their bodies together.

It kind of goes smoothly after that because Niall curls his upper body, arches his torso into Harry’s chest, and Harry’s drawing patterns on the soft, responsive skin just above the waist of Niall’s jeans in time with the flicks of his tongue, and they’re both making noises, all sorts of swallowed moans and pitiful whimpers that echo in the cab of the van, that drown out the music that’s playing and the singing crickets and the flowing creek and — and everything else, really.

It’s them. It’s just them. Not their teachings, not their problems, not their histories, not their families. It’s just them, and just them is the best thing in the world.

Niall swallows Harry’s tongue into his mouth, swirls their muscles together for a moment of hot succulence before pulling away and out of Harry’s grip, settling on the floor on his knees. He blinks, looks up at Harry, and Harry mindlessly puts his hands on Niall’s head for a tether, for a fetter so he doesn’t fly away.

This is too good to leave from.

“What’re you doin’?” he asks, sloppy and slurred; his lips are thick, puffy and swollen, and he knows they’re bright, bright pink, borderline red, and as wet as they’ve ever been.

Niall smiles, all soft and innocent. “I’m going to suck you off,” he says, and he’s got his hands on Harry’s zipper before Harry knows what’s going on, undoing the button and pulling it down, and he coaxes Harry’s bum up, grabs the threading on the sides and pulls the jeans down to his ankles, leaves his tented boxers. “If that’s okay with you.”

For a moment, Harry distances himself from reality and just looks at Niall, shirtless and on his knees in front of Harry while Harry’s got his jeans around his ankles with a cock that’s hard, that’s aching, that’s leaving a wet patch on the front of his boxers and begging, weeping for Niall’s mouth, and it was all of a sudden, really, his erection, having sprung up somewhere between the first kiss and the last one.

And maybe it wasn’t all at once, then. Maybe it was slow, gradual; maybe it was like Niall’s feelings, Niall’s curiosity.

Most importantly, though, it just *is*, and that’s a great feeling.
Harry nods, whimpers, drops his mouth open and sucks in hot, steamy and humid air that burns like a pit of embers ready to be stoked, ready to be brought to life. “Please.”

Niall’s smile grows as he brings one hand up, puts it on the center of Harry’s cock, and — and gosh, the explosion of abstract sensation, the promise of total euphoria knocks Harry off, knocks Harry down, and he twines his fingers in Niall’s hair as he shakes, as he shudders and settles into some sort of trance.

Niall’s slow, methodic as he fondles Harry over his underwear; his eyes are cast down, watching his own ministrations, and Harry is, too, and he hopes Niall’s enjoying this as much as he is, hopes Niall’s getting just as much as he’s giving.

“You’re shaking,” Niall says as he slips his hand down, as he tickles across the tender skin on the inside of Harry’s thigh. He still doesn’t raise his face, still doesn’t meet Harry’s eyes. “Why?”

“’Cause this feels better than anything I could have ever imagined,” Harry answers, laughs breathlessly around the sparkling fireworks that are popping wildly around his vision. “You feel better than anything I could have ever imagined.”

Niall’s silent and thoughtful; he leans in, leans close, and puts his mouth to Harry’s thigh, peppers the flabby flesh with dotted kisses that feel like the flutter of butterfly wings before he closes his mouth around a particular place and begins to suck, begins to suckle and flick his tongue back and forth, back and forth.

And Harry’s seen this before. When Niall’s going down on women, he likes to kiss their thighs, likes to build their receptors and make them edge on the cusp of stupefied elation, and it just kind of simmers in the pit of Harry’s stomach for a moment.

“I’m not a girl, Niall,” he says, hard and edged, and uses the grip he has on Niall’s hair to pull him back, to pull him off. “Don’t suck me off like you eat a pussy.”

Niall blinks, meets Harry’s narrowed eyes with a slow smile. “I’m trying my best, Harry,” he replies, and oh, Harry didn’t — Harry didn’t think, didn’t realize, dammit, and the sad smile on Niall’s hurts Harry’s heart because he knows, because he believes Niall really is trying his best and it’s hard, going from one state of mind to the other, and Harry shouldn’t rush Niall at all. “I promise.”

“’m sorry.” Harry pulls Niall up, puts his lips to Niall’s sweaty cheek. “I’m sorry, Niall.”

Niall hums, nods, and he pets Harry’s thighs, lets him know that it’s okay, that it’s forgiven, and he’s back down on his knees in the next moment with his fingers beneath the waistband of Harry’s boxers and he’s got them pooling around Harry’s ankles just as quick.

The warm, humid air of the cab hits Harry’s prick as it flops up, slams against his tummy with a soft smack of skin on skin, meat on meat, and he hisses, sighs, grips his hands into fists at his sides.

He wets his lips, wonders if they’re going to be chapped tomorrow and if they’ve got any chap stick lying around anywhere. “Suck it,” he says, orders in a whisper that hangs heavy and thick in the air. “Please suck it, Niall.”

Niall flicks his gaze up, meets Harry’s eyes as he brings his hand to settle on Harry’s thigh; he’s close, so close, and he isn’t teasing, per se, but more like — more like learning, mapping out the contours and ridges of Harry’s body in a way he never has before, and Harry feels open and vulnerable and taken care of, too, and he wonders if love is always scary, if love is always settling.

He hopes so. He’s afraid it would be boring if it weren’t.
Niall leans forward languidly, puckers his lips and plants a kiss to the tip; Harry shivers, jolts, and Niall laughs, light and airy, and opens his mouth and ducks his head, flops his tongue out and flattens it against the base of Harry’s cock, drags it up and wets the underside of the shaft minimally, hotly.

“Oh, Niall.”

Once at the top, he sucks the head between his lips, flicks the slit one two three four five times, and then his hands are on Harry’s thighs, needing leverage to keep him down and keep him still, and Harry brings one of his fists to his mouth to muffle his guttural yowls and curls the other in Niall’s hair as everything disperses and comes together around him.

He’s had a blow job before. Not a lot, mind you, but he’s had enough, had plenty to know that it is what it is, in all honesty — lick, suck, lick, suck, fondle the balls a little bit, and it feels good, it feels really good to have someone’s mouth on your cock, and then you come and it’s all over for a moment. And, yes, it feels good to have Niall’s mouth on him, but it’s that — it’s the fact that Niall has his mouth on Harry, that Niall wants this just as much as Harry, that has Harry spreading his legs wider as Niall goes down, goes deeper.

He doesn’t push himself, doesn’t choke or gag himself; he stops when he’s as far down as he’s comfortable going and then starts swirling his tongue around and around and around, dripping spit everywhere, and Harry’s got a vein on the underside that’s one of his most sensitive spots and Niall finds that out, chooses to pay extra special attention to the raised flesh, and he begins to hum a song, a fucking song, and Harry throws his head back and — and comes.

It hits hard, hits out of the blue; his tummy constricts, contracts, and it’s only been a few moments, really, if even that at all, but he’s already hitting his peak and coming in Niall’s mouth, oh fuck, and Harry’s completely shaking with the intensity, with might of his orgasm.

“Oh, God.”

Niall pulls off, wipes up a bit of cum with his thumb and paints the jizz across the sucked mark he left on Harry’s inner thigh before raising up on wobbly, unsteady legs and sitting back down on Harry’s lap, straddling his knee.

He leans forward, puts his lips to Harry’s, and Harry opens his mouth, accepts Niall’s touch with a cry of pressured relief, and he’s shocked to find, to taste his sour spunk as Niall shares the collection of come he’s got on his tongue and it’s dirty, filthy, eating your own jizz out of someone’s mouth, and Harry likes how bad it is, loves how bad it is, and he and Niall swap spit, swap cum, and he puts his hands on Niall’s hips, uses that as leverage to move Niall in a quick undulation on his thigh and then Niall’s coming, too, in his britches, all spasms and shudders and shivers of utter completion with a simple sigh of fulfillment that echoes in Harry’s heart.

The kiss dwindles into easy, lazy pecks here and there as they both calm down, hot and sticky and high on the adrenaline of doing something they aren’t supposed to, and Harry slides his forehead against Niall’s clavicle, puts his lips against Niall’s shoulder.

“Thank you,” he says, whispers, and his words are clear and loud, swimming in the air like rubble from a disaster. “Thank you so much.”

And for what, Harry isn’t sure because it’s a lot of everything rolled up into something big, something large, and Niall needs to know, needs to understand that he isn’t going anywhere and that whatever it is that’s between them is too great to ever let go.

“You’re welcome.” Niall runs his fingers through Harry’s hair, combs out the snarls. “Anytime.”
Harry wonders how long that’s going to be true.

Chapter End Notes

It happened, yay.
Harry thinks he’s got it all figured out, thinks he’s finally able to put two and two together now and come up with the proper answer of four whereas his earlier conclusions haven’t been anything close. He thinks he’s finally done it.

Hopes he’s finally done it, at least, and that’s all he can do at the moment. because this turning tables and going around in circles and lying to each other, to one another, is only succeeding in the both of them losing in the most devastating way possible and Harry isn’t ready to let Niall go.

What’s going to happen to the two of them when Niall realizes he doesn’t need another person to tell him his worth? What’s going to happen to the two of them when Niall finds that love — in all its forms: acceptance, support, loyalty, kindness — is freely given by so many people other than Harry himself? And better, too; there’s only so much he can do. What’s going to happen to the two of them when Niall understands that Harry isn’t enough for him, when Niall understands that there’s better and he deserves better?

There’s not very many things in the world harder than grieving someone who isn’t dead — there’s not very many things in the world more difficult and scarily everlasting than losing someone you thought you would have forever and knowing they’re still down the road, down the block, on the other side of the city.

Harry’s afraid he’s going to have to hurt a little — a lot — more than he has because Niall’s got this impression of him that isn’t true. He isn’t a giant full of love, isn’t a bear full of kindness; he has his bad days, sometimes hates other people, and he’s no king, no saint, no legend who’s going to tell a story that’ll last long after he’s gone. He’s just Harry.

Niall is, though. He’s all of the things Harry isn’t and more — so much more. And he deserves more; Harry can only give him what he wants, what he needs for so long before he’s deciding he desires something else, somebody else, and Harry can’t do anything about that. He has to support Niall no matter who he wishes to seek his happiness with.

And Harry hopes Niall eventually learns and comes to accept the fact that he deserves it all. Every single fucking thinking in the world. The best, the greatest, the most truthful, the most shattering, the most gratifying, the most raw and beautiful and pure love in the entire world. Harry hopes Niall eventually learns and comes to accept the fact that he deserves love. And not only to be loved by others, either, but to also be loved by himself, as well. Harry hopes Niall will be able to look into the reflection of his eyes next week, next month, next year, and think that yes, this is exactly where he wants to be and yes, this is exactly how he wants to be, too, and he’s not going to stop being this person because he loves this person.

Harry hopes Niall can understand how strong and brave and courageous and out of this world with thoughtfulness he really, really is. Harry hopes Niall can accept that he is just as good as anyone. Harry hopes Niall can believe that he deserves nice and caring and loyal and doting to walk in to his life and stay in the way his mother hasn’t, in the way his brother hasn’t.
Niall deserves it all. The whole world, and not on a silver platter, either, but with a pint of beer and a close knit group of friends hanging around. Harry hopes Niall never forgets that he’s worth so much more than the price his mother and brother have unintentionally set upon his head.

It’s the anonymity of it all, though, the tight indifferent distance of it all that’s brought this whole thing about — he and Niall are on the road, are thousands and thousands and thousands away from home, more so each day, and it’s that, it’s the idea that they’re around people who don’t know them and who won’t know them and who are never going to know them that’s sparked this sudden change, this abrupt switch around of Niall’s mindset from repulsed to curious to desiring. He’s only doing this because he knows he isn’t going to be caught, knows he won’t ever be caught. He’s only doing this because he’s confused about what kind of loves there are after having been neglected of the warming affection each child deserves. Niall’s only doing this because they aren’t in California, aren’t at home, aren’t where people know them and can see them and — and will see them, and that’s it, really, this is it. The time they have left on this trip to see the Stones in Atlanta, there and back, is all he has remaining with Niall.

(Harry doesn’t think it’s very appropriate to explain, to go into heavy detail how many unnecessary hours he stayed up after they made each other come, after they helped each other come to find himself at this roundabout conclusion.)

He’s accepted it, accepted that there isn’t going to be any more of them after this trip.

And maybe it’s wrong (Harry would like for it to be, would like so much for what Niall is doing with him to be as real as the sun and as real as the sea and as real as everything else that they can see, that they can’t see, that they know is there without ever having been shown proof — like air, effortless and tangible and distinctively important). Maybe he’s as far off the mark as he’s ever been and maybe Niall really, really feels something for Harry; maybe he’s scared to move forward, to commit himself when his mother has taught him to never love anyone, and maybe Harry’s the person who’s going to help show Niall that love is the best thing in the world. Maybe this is as real as it sometimes feels, as he sometimes thinks.

Right now, though, as the sun climbs up in the sky and bathes the two of them in yellow-white light through the windows of the van and he looks at Niall’s face, examines Niall’s body, sees that he’s curled in on himself and fully dressed, far away, cuddled up in a threadbare blanket he had folded under the seat and snoring, snoozing as if he’s got no worries in the world, Harry can’t help but think he’s hit the nail on the head with this one and that everything the two of them are doing together, everything Niall is doing to Harry is no more than a game.

Still.

“I’m sorry I scare you.”

And he’s lost so much, is still losing so much; sometimes everyone gets to be winners, but sometimes everyone gets to be losers, too, and Harry’s won enough in his life to know that his time to lose is coming faster than he ever thought possible.

Maybe he’s wrong, though. Maybe he’s spent too much time talking out of his ass that he’s taking fiction for fact and fact for fiction and it’s all some sort of fucked up mess that he can’t get himself out of; it’s quite hard to argue with what’s right in front of you, really, and saying the sky isn’t blue when the sky is, in fact, blue, is what it must be like to go crazy.

He reckons he likes the feeling of going crazy more than he likes the feeling of being led on and let down by the one person in the world he thought would never tell him a lie.
It still stands, however, the possibility that he’s wrong.

Yeah? Probably not.

Harry’s still half-awake when Niall finally rouses around a few hours later with stinking breath and dried drool and crusty eyes and a smile that’s just a little bit brighter than the offending sun outside, and he’s only moderately deprived of thoughtful rest when he agrees that yes, ice cream for breakfast in the back of the van sounds like the loveliest thing in the world, of course it does, right after they take another shower in the stalls before heading out for the day because going to sleep with dried cum and sticky spit and thick sweat all over their bodies isn’t nearly as comfortable as it may seem to others and Harry doesn’t like feeling so nasty.

(For more reasons than one.)

And it’s quite the short shower, you know — nothing like the two of them shared yesterday, nothing like the touches and the kisses and the intimacy the two of them shared yesterday while naked, while washing the soapy suds off of each other’s body as they looked at one another in a way they never have before.

It’s unsettling and — and disheartening, too. Harry hates it, but most of it is his fault, and he can’t very well force Niall to feel anything for him.

And it’s only just been yesterday, too, when things settled and rearranged and totally disturbed something inside, something deep inside, and the soapy water that falls into Harry’s eyes when Niall nudges his hip a little bit too hard makes his entire body sting like hellfire and brimstone but he can’t cry, won’t cry, doesn’t cry anymore, and it’s easy, kind of, to hide his bittersweet nostalgia and silent mourning from Niall with a small smile and a dirty curse and a slap on the back that leaves a red mark — and it makes Harry think of how many things he wants to do with Niall in the limited time they have with each other, dammit, and sometimes it’s easy to hide your emotions but other times it isn’t and when he lies to Niall, when he lies to himself he’s only losing more and more and more and he isn’t entirely sure how long he can continue to live like this, all submissive and settling when he knows he deserves more.

Harry deserves a lot, too. Maybe not as much as Niall, never as much as Niall, but he deserves something good if not great.

(The only problem, however, is that Niall is the one great thing Harry doesn’t want to let go of — Niall is the something great that Harry can’t have.)

But Niall kisses him like he knows, like he’s aware, like he’s apologizing for allowing Harry to think the way he is and promising with his body, with his touch, with his gentle way of treating Harry as if he’s the one thing in the world everybody wants.

After they’ve showered and brushed their teeth and got their hair combed and adorned a half-clean pair of clothes — it’s all jeans and boots and t-shirts and flannels with the sleeves cut out now, loose and well-worn through the years, and maybe a stop somewhere for a bit more wouldn’t be a bad idea because Harry’s quite tired of having to wear his socks two or three days at a time — Niall grabs Harry’s hand and pulls him in, pulls him close, whispers a fuzzy, “G’mornin’, Harry,” and smiles, so soft and so fresh and so raw, and leans in, puts his mouth to Harry’s, and it’s a kiss that doesn’t go any further than lips on lips, skin on skin, hands on hands, and Harry doesn’t have any time to dwell on the fact that Niall’s voluntarily doing all the things he’s wanted since this trip started because there’s still a bit of toothpaste on his cheek and he’s scared to give Niall the go-ahead when it comes
to his heart, to his mind, to his soul for fear that’s what his won’t be his for long.

He’s scared. Not in the way that Niall is, no, but still scared, still frightened, still petrified, still just as standoffish and vulnerable and bothered by the fact that everything they’ve fought so hard for can all fall down if one single thing happens and Harry isn’t ready to lose what he’s got built up.

“What’s wrong?” Niall asks when he pulls back; his face is open, confused and curious, and he worries about Harry a lot, if you think about it, and he brings both of his hands up, puts them on Harry’s cheeks, rubs at the dark lavender bags under Harry’s eyes with the pads of his thumbs in a way that makes Harry want to melt into a gooey puddle of love at Niall’s feet. “You didn’t kiss me back.”

“Oh.

“I didn’t?”

Harry didn’t even — didn’t even think. He was too busy thinking to do, and now — now Niall’s got a tiny smile on his face and it’s kind of like the one he wore last night and Harry doesn’t like how he’s got the power, how he’s got the ability to tear Niall down in the same way that Niall does him.

They need to work on that. A lot. ‘Cause all this pain and all this pining needs to be sorted out before the summer is over.

“No,” Niall answers, shakes his head, gives off a halfhearted snort of exasperated amusement. “You didn’t, Harry.” He leans forward, puts his lips against Harry’s forehead in a tender touch. “You aren’t getting sick, are you? This isn’t you coming down with anything, is it?”

Harry shakes his head, brings his hands up, puts his fingers around Niall’s wrists and holds on, holds tight, wonders if it’s possible to send his thoughts to Niall and, if so, how effective it would be on saving the unsalvageable. “I don’t think so,” he replies, gives a smile, leans forward and tucks Niall’s bottom lip between both of his in a quick, succulent kiss that has enough tongue to leave Harry craving having Niall’s mouth on his body again. Oh, my. “I’m okay.”

Niall raises his brow. “You sure?”

No.

He doesn’t say that, though. This is one of those moments in life when you have to tell a little lie to make sure that things don’t fall apart just yet. He learned that from his mum, when she was having divorce papers drawn up years ago. She’s one of the best teachers he’s ever had.

“Positive.”

Niall purses his lips, cradles Harry’s face like — like he’s priceless, like he’s the living embodiment of perfection, of peace, of peculiar kindness and kindred ferocity, and he isn’t. He’s just not. He’s not that good of a person, and it’s uncomfortable, disturbing; Niall sees him as someone he isn’t and he — he sees Niall as someone he isn’t, as well, but someone he’s going to be. Harry’s not going to change in all the wonderful, magnificent ways Niall’s going to.

And it’s sad. It’s sucky. Being left behind by the one person in the whole entire fucking world he would never, ever turn his back on.

It’s okay, though. It has to be, but… but it is okay. He reckons he’s lucky to be able to feel pain at the thought of saying goodbye, reckons he’s found a rare piece of happiness in Niall.
But that’s all he is — lucky. Just lucky.

(It’s all running out, though.)

- Niall leans away from the table, spreads his legs and puts his hands on his tummy, taps the little pudge with his fingers. “I think that may have been the best burger I’ve ever had in my entire life,” he announces, all crooked grin and messy hair and greasy barbeque sauce on the side of his face that Harry wants to wipe off but is afraid of the backlash from such an action. “All the grease and all the cheese and all the meat. So good. So, so good.”

“You full?” Harry asks, crosses his legs beneath the table and picks at his teeth with one of the plastic-wrapped toothpicks the waiter laid down when they were seated. “I am, but, I mean, if you aren’t that’s totally fine ‘cause I can go up there and order you another one if you want me to.”

“Relax, H.” Niall laughs, shuts his eyes, tips his head back and giggles at the ceiling like a little kid. They’re in a bar and grill somewhere in central Arkansas after having driven as much and as long as they could; Niall found the place by asking around as Harry napped in the very back of the van, on the bench seat, and Harry doesn’t think he’s ever had a burger as yummy as the two he just ate. It was all mustard and ketchup, all pickles and onions and lettuce, and he’s got a bit of the grease on the thighs of his jeans but he reckons that’s okay. They’re not good, anyway. “I’m as full as I possibly could be, and if I wanted another I wouldn’t make you go up there and order me one. Besides, you said that lady wouldn’t quit trying to touch you, and I know we aren’t together just yet but you’re my friend above anything else and it won’t be fair of me to put you in a position that you aren’t comfortable with. C’mon, Harry — I’m not that bad of a guy.”

I know.

Harry grins, shakes his head. “Of course you aren’t,” he says, tries to — tries to joke, and he searches his mind for the last time he and Niall actually fucked around with each other like friends, like brothers, and he can’t remember. “You’re the bestest.”

“And don’t you ever fuckin’ forget it,” Niall says, and he’s grinning, joking, and this is good, this is really good, being able to play around with one another even after the events that transpired yesterday, last night, earlier today, and a little bit of Harry’s worry kind of fades, kind of dissipates into air thick with the smell of barbeque and smoke and sweat and liquor, and he’s still scared but he isn’t as put-off by the possibility of losing Niall as much as he was before. “I’m the best person in your life.”

“You’re the king of my world,” Harry replies, nods, thins his lips; Niall’s smile slowly falls off till he’s left with a calculative expression of sincere loyalty. “You know that, though.”

Niall slants his head. “You’ve been acting strange all day,” he says, calls Harry out, and it’s kind of weird, really, being on the receiving end of a confrontation, but he’s kind of proud of Niall and his everlasting strength and how hard he’s fighting to be his own person. “What’s up, Harry?” Beneath the table, he unfolds his feet, reaches out, puts his leg flush against Harry’s; it’s proximity and it’s heat and Harry gulps because the table they’re sat at is tall, is large, and anyone can see them if they were to just look and he doesn’t care what anyone may say but he does care about Niall and that’s not something he wants to think about. “What’s wrong?”

Harry takes a deep breath. “I’m worried.”

“About what?”
“Us.”

Niall swallows so loud Harry can hear it and stands up, rounds the table, reaches out, grabs Harry’s hand and pulls him from his chair, too, and there’s on a look on his face, on Niall’s face that Harry’s never seen before. “I promise you that there isn’t anything you need to worry about when it comes to us, okay?” he says, and there’s conviction, aggressive devotion in his voice. “We haven’t even got to start what you want yet.”

What you want.

Niall doesn’t want Harry in the same way that Harry wants him, does he? This is all confirmation of that assumption.

Harry nods. “If you say so.”

Doesn’t mean I believe you.

“So, please, smile, Harry.” Niall brings his free hand up, puts it on Harry’s shoulder; his shirt is cutoff and old, moth-eaten around the collar, and Niall’s fingers are a bit chilled on his bare skin. “What happened last night isn’t going to change a thing between the two of us, okay? I promise you that. And what’s going to happen tomorrow and the next day and the day after that isn’t going to change a thing, either. You have to believe me.”

“I do.”

He doesn’t, though, but this is one of those instances in life where a little lie will go farther than the truth and Niall’s lost, hurting, and Harry can’t find it in himself to make the weight on Niall’s heart any heavier than it already is.

That’s the thing, though. While Niall says and promises that nothing between them will ever change, he’s kind of right, but he’s also kind of wrong, too, because everything’s already as far away from normal as possible.

“Good.” Niall smiles, squeezes Harry’s shoulder with his hand. “Now, come dance with me so we can burn these burgers off before we go to bed, yeah? They’ve been playing Bruce all night and I’m in the mood to do a little boogying.”

Harry still can’t tell Niall no.

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Niall’s reading his Bible again, and Harry’s pretending to be asleep beside Niall on the bench seat to watch, to examine Niall while he’s at the most ease he’s been in a long time.

He’s got it stuffed into the pocket of one of his bags, and it’s dog-eared and faded and the black leather is fraying at the edges, ripped on certain pages he’s gone back to over the years; he’s got an assortment of different colored pens he uses to mark in the book with, and he does it a lot, you know, making little scribbles and lines here and there and Harry admires the attentive way with which Niall digs deeper and deeper and deeper.

He wonders what conclusions Niall’s drawn, if he’s found peace and solace over the fact that the both of them are male or if he is still searching, still hunting for a reason behind all of this wildness neither predicted when they began this trip. Harry’s not read in his Bible since a few weeks after graduation, but he’s always been of a mind that attending church doesn’t mean you are a devotee and he often feels closer to God while being surrounded by nature, by people, by colors, and Niall’s
thought the same, as well, for as long as Harry can remember.

That doesn’t mean Niall’s never gone to the Bible in times of need, in times of help. He didn’t put the book down when Greg was in the hospital four years ago from fracturing his leg in a serious run-in with LA’s bad side and he slept with it beside him when Maura was having chest problems, and Harry knows all of this because he was right there beside him through it all.

That’s what friends are for, after all.

He just — Harry just wonders if Niall’s looking for help now.

“You aren’t sleeping, are you?”

Harry smiles, shuts his eyes, shakes his head and stretches his arms, curls closer against the frame of the van and stuffs his toes under Niall’s warm thigh. “I woke up a few minutes ago,” he replies, and it’s the truth. “You read it a lot more than you used to.”

Niall nods, finds his thick bookmark and puts it in place, closes the book. “It helps a lot,” he says, slow and faint, fingerling the fading leather. “There’s answers inside to every question you could possibly ask, I think, and it all depends on how it’s accepted and understood by the person reading it.”

“What’ve you learned?”

“I don’t think God made people to mess up as much as they have,” he replies, furrows his brows and bites his bottom lip. “I think he didn’t expect so many mistakes. But I also don’t think our failures make Him love us any less, and I — I don’t think it’s wrong. I don’t think it’s wrong for two men or two women to be in love. I think a sin is a sin, and that the only unforgivable sin is blasphemy of the Holy Ghost. I think God’s given us our own free will, but I also think that every path of our life has been planned out, too. I think the path to heaven is full of sinners and believers.”

Harry blinks; his heart is heavy and his chest is full, contorted into a tight knot of icy hope that burns and freezes all at once. “How’d you figure that out?” he asks, quiet and slow.

“A lot of reading,” Niall answers, puts his book down on the seat in front of them; he turns, gets up on his knees and crawls over the top of Harry, straddles Harry’s hips with his and sits, settles comfortably atop the blanket Harry’s got thrown over his body. “And you. You helped me figure things out a lot, too. Thank you, Harry. So much.”

“I —”

Niall chuckles, leans forward, puts his lips on Harry’s and silences his words, his protests, and Harry’s caught off guard in more ways than one and he lays his hands on Niall’s hips, keeps him there and keeps him close, and this is odd, this perfected reality they’ve got, but Harry doesn’t care anymore about losing, about forgetting, because he has what he wants now, right now, and he’s going to appreciate while he’s able to hold Niall in his arms, when he’s not able to hold Niall in his arms.

That’s all he can do. He just needs to accept that things don’t last and the good is often shadowed by the bad, but right now everything’s going right and while he’s got everything to lose, yes, he hasn’t lost anything yet, and that’s what matters most.
say you love me

have pity, baby
just when i thought it was over
now you got me running, running, running for cover
i'm begging for a little sympathy
and if you use me again, it'll be the end of me

— Fleetwood Mac, ‘Say You Love Me’

He’s wrapped up in a cocoon of arms and heat and legs and simmering body, scalding skin on skin; his hair is all in his face and Niall’s breath smells a little bit rotten as he inhales, as he exhales, and Harry’s back is turned at an odd angle, tight and stretched entirely too far than ever should be possible, really, and Niall’s somehow got his knee shoved up into Harry’s ass and yeah, it’s quite uncomfortable and definitely, definitely a bit too hot, but damn if Niall’s not got Harry’s heart gripped just as tight as he has Harry’s body and Harry doesn’t care that he’s lost so much sleep it’s nearly impossible to count because he’s catching enough rest in this moment, barely lit by the rising sun as it shines just enough light that Harry can make out Niall’s facial features and the thin sheen of sweat on his brow, on his temple, on his jawline makes him more beautiful.

Niall looks like the sun — all warm, all yellow, all out of this world with fire and flame and untouchable, untraceable, impeccably himself. Harry loves it.

(Harry loves Niall. He isn’t exactly sure when or how love turned into love, but it did — oh, God, it did, and Harry isn’t a liar, has never thought of himself as when it really counts, and he’ll say without hesitation that yes, love is the best thing and yes, love is the worst thing. He isn’t afraid to be honest with people — himself and Niall definitely, definitely included.)

He’s still scared. He’s still really, really scared. And everything that Niall’s been saying, everything that Niall’s been trying to say — it’s all what Harry wants to hear, what he appreciates hearing, but it’s not what he needs, isn’t anywhere close to what he needs and he’s only just realizing that himself, too, so he isn’t blaming Niall any.

Could he blame Niall any?

He needs reassurance. He needs acceptance, support. He needs faith, loyalty, assisted navigation. He needs honesty, openness, strength, empowerment. He needs to be released from this high pedestal he’s been put upon against his will and he needs to be trusted with the deepest secrets that tear at Niall’s soul till there’s barely anything left and he needs to know that his feelings are just as valid as they would be should he be a woman and he needs to not have to attempt to explain all the reasons behind this sudden shift and he needs Niall to want Harry as much as Harry wants him.

And he needs Niall to understand that this is okay, that two boys coming together in every way possible is okay and that no matter what sort of situations come out of it is okay, too. Some people won’t accept it, will try to not allow it and shame them, put them down, but those who matter — most of those who matter won’t give a damn as long as both Harry and Niall are happy, and Harry’s fairly sure that’s the only thing he wants from the ones he loves.

Just support, just acceptance, just unconditional love.

(And if Maura and Greg choose to not accept him and Niall, should they ever become a monumentally lasting couple? Well, they weren’t they much for Niall, anyway, were they? What
they’ve failed to give Niall, Harry will fix.)

He needs it. He needs it all.

(He’s never going to have it, though. Not right now, at least, if ever.)

And it’s weird, too, having somebody but not having somebody at the same time, knowing that your feelings aren’t requited and that you’d rather have a broken heart than a broken relationship even if it means that you’re bleeding out late at night when he’s held in your arms and you’re keeping him warm, keeping him safe. It’s weird having to set aside his dreams in favor of not crushing somebody else’s.

He’s settling. Harry’s settling like he never thought, like he never dreamed he would.

But then he looks at Niall, watches the way Niall’s nose twitches as his floppy, sweat-curled hair tickles the tip, just barely with a whisper of a touch, a decidedly darker brown than Harry’s own cherry-flavored curls, and all of his dreams go out the window, go up in smoke, and he realizes that he doesn’t want a life without Niall even if he’s settling, even if he’s not living to the fullest, and, to be honest — a life with Niall isn’t settling at all, as confusing as that sounds. Niall humbles him, keeps him grounded and, no matter how ugly and fucked up it may be, reminds Harry to always, always, appreciate what he’s been given, what he’s been showered with, because not everyone gets to grow up with the love and the affection and the total gratifying acceptance he did.

And that just kind of… just kind of slows him down, makes him open his mind and understand how insanely blessed he truly, truly is, and helps him realize that he really isn’t settling at all.

“Love you, Ni,” he says, whispers, mouths the words against the top of Niall’s head and puts one of his hands in Niall’s hair, drapes the other along Niall’s back as he wiggles, as he gets comfortable and silently asks for a heavy bout of sleep to whisk him away. He’s got a lot of hours to catch up on in a limited amount of time, and right now he kind of wants dreams over reality. “A lot.”

- 

It’s hours later — how many, Harry isn’t sure, but it’s thickly humid inside of the cab now and he’s practically drenched in sweat, his and Niall’s, all wet skin and damp flesh, and the sun is high in the sky, shining on top of the vehicle, and Harry feels like days have passed since the last time he was awake, wonders if it’s possible to stay asleep for more than twelve straights hours consecutively without any heavy narcotics — when there’s a repetitive, insistent knock on the window that drags him out of his deep, deep sleep and tosses him into a bright, splendid reality he isn’t quite sure if he likes.

He rouses about, angry and frowning, and drags his hands through Niall’s hair, scratches at Niall’s scalp to wake him up; Niall grunts, rolls, slides his slick skin against Harry’s, oh my gosh, and they’re both just dressed in a t-shirt and boxers, really, and that’s clothes, it is, but not nearly enough to keep Harry’s mind from all the things he wants to do to Niall, with Niall in the backseat of this damn van.

Fuck.

He just — he just can’t help it. And does it make him a bad person, a bad man to want to… to want to just do everything with Niall? Does it make him a bad person or a bad example or a bad prospect of society to want to crawl into a little hidey-hole and do everything with Niall, with his best friend in the whole wide world and not come out for hours, not come out for days?
Does it — does it make him bad?

(If it does, though, he kind of likes the way it feels to be bad.)

"Wha’ is it, ‘arry?" Niall asks, all stinky breath and sweaty hair and sticky skin and sweet, sweet smiles that give way to lopsided lips and fluttery blue eyes and red-tinted cheeks and a pink, pink nose; he picks himself up, leans away, rubs at his eyes and whines, moans halfheartedly in the back of his throat. “Who’s knockin’?"

Oh, God, Niall’s precious.

Harry blinks, looks down, sees that he’s got a half-hard dick poking through the little slit in his boxers and makes a noise, pitched high and telltale, tell-all, and he wonders if it’s worth attempting to keep what little bit of dignity he has left. It’s one thing waking up with morning wood from a dream, from a seductive illusion to reality that his heart is feeding his mind, but it’s entirely different coming to with that illusion, with that dream of reality here, on your chest and between your legs and against your body, against your heart.

He’s reeling from the wildness, from the born and bred belief of one thing only to have it overturned by another.

Wow.

But — but dammit, too. Dammit because Harry can hardly control himself when he’s around Niall and it doesn’t bother him, doesn’t affect him in the slightest — and why should it, really, when he’s the only person in the whole entire world that it should concern; he is his own person, after all, and it’s up to him how he leads his life and he thinks he’s doing a fairly good job at it — but it is getting out of hand, that’s for sure.

Horribly out of hand.

(Perfectly out of hand.)

And it hits Harry in that instant and he’s kind of miffed, kind of put down — he’s never had Niall in his hands. Oh gosh, he’s never held Niall’s bare ass, never held Niall’s bare thighs, never held Niall’s bare cock in his hands and — and oh gosh, oh God, oh dear, he wants to. He wants to so badly.

But he also wants to hold Niall’s heart and Niall’s trust and Niall’s dreams in his hands, too, and yes, physically closeness is nice and good and amazing and fulfilling, of course it is, Harry won’t ever lie and says it’s not, but mental intimacy is out of this world with all sorts of sensations and shockwaves of electric emotion, as well, and you can’t have one without the other, no, and Harry isn’t sure which he wants more at the moment because they’re both something he wants and something he needs.

Not now, though. Not… not just yet. Soon, maybe — hopefully; he’s praying to God he’ll be able to experience everything he wants, needs before the summer is up, before the trip is up and the time they wasted heading for a concert is shoved behind them in favor of the years they’re going to waste — but not at this exact moment. They’ve got time; it’s only the tenth of July, after all, and the concert isn’t till the thirtieth, anyway. They’ve got time.

Maybe not a lot, but enough. They’ve got enough. Hopefully.

Harry shrugs in answer to Niall’s slurred question, sighs, wipes the sleep from his own eyes and turns his head toward the incessant, annoying knocking, sees that there’s a tall officer with a thick chest and black sunglasses and dark skin and changes his expression, his attitude real quick.
He scrambles around, all long limbs and big hands and unsteady feet, and shoves Niall off, away, and hurtles, hurl himself through the space of the two bucket seats and grabs the knob of the van door, jerks it open and leans back, puts his hand over his eyes to form a visor as he looks up at the intimidating officer.

He’s tall, the officer, with coarse black hair and dark skin and thin lips and a rather large nose; his stomach is thick and his shoulders are broad and his hips are wide and his stance is slightly oppressive, a bit intimidating, and Harry’s been pulled over before, a few times, but he’s never been scared and he’s also never been taken to jail, either, and he isn’t ready for the latter to happen.

He wonders what he’s done wrong, what he and Niall have done wrong.

“G’mornin’, officer,” he says, chokes, tips his head in greeting and tries to be respectful, tries to be as courteous and polite as he can while attempting to hide his erection and ignoring the incessant thrumming of need in the back of his throat, heavy and growing, growing, growing. “How are you today?”

The officer grins, uses a meaty hand to push his sunglasses onto the bridge of his nose so he can meet Harry’s eyes, and it’s water green meeting coffee brown and it’s so dark Harry can see his own reflection, all haphazard and fucked. “It’s two in the afternoon, son,” he replies, and gosh, his voice his deep and thick with an accent, with a twang, and Harry’s reminded of Janie even though they’re in a different state, even though they’re in Arkansas, and his stomach clenches just a little bit and he misses her a lot. “I’m fine, and I thank you for asking. Now, do you mind telling me just what you and your friend are doing in this vehicle? Trespassing is illegal, and this lot is private property.”

“Oh.”

Maybe sleeping in the parking lot of the bar they ate at, they danced at all night long wasn’t the best idea.

In their defense, though, they did have a few shots of tequila and they thought better of driving to find a place to crash, reckoned a short stay in the lot wouldn’t be too bad of a thing. He didn’t count on sleeping till two, though, nor did the thought of trespassing cross his mind, either.

Oops.

“Sorry for that, officer,” Niall says, comes out of absolutely nowhere, and Harry gulps, turns, looks over his shoulder and sees that Niall’s behind him, that Niall’s got there somehow, and they must look a sight, the two of them, dressed in their underwear with sweaty skin and dilated eyes and cheeks as red as the tips of their cocks (What?). “We had a bit to drink last night and it was quite late, and we didn’t think that driving around looking for a place to sleep would be very smart and so we decided we should just stay and crash in the van.”

The officer grunts, crosses his arms and raises a brow; Harry swallows, hard, and if someone is to ever call him a bitch he reckons he can’t get mad because they’re not exactly wrong and he doesn’t like having to lie if it doesn’t make a situation better.

“Did you now?” the big man asks, hums beneath his breath.

Niall nods. “Yes, sir,” he replies, respectful and full of politeness, full of genuine appreciation, and if someone is to ever call Niall anything less than perfect, anything less than a good person, Harry knows damn well that he isn’t going to let an ugly slander like that go and he’s never been one to
fight, never been one to throw down, but he will and that’s something he isn’t afraid of. “We didn’t realize this would be trespassing, and we’re awful sorry for that, but we did what we thought was the best.”

Harry brings one of his hands up, wipes at his face and blinks, tries to clear his vision; Niall’s got a shirt on now, faded and ripped at the armpits and waist, and he’s smiling, Niall is, and Harry wonders if Niall’s just as scared, just as intimidated as he is.

And then he realizes that Niall isn’t, that Niall’s not scared and not intimidated at all. He’s just — he’s just not. For some reason or another, being interrogated by a police officer doesn’t scare Niall in the least.

(Harry wonders how much Niall’s kept from him about the times he and Greg were pulled over back in LA, wonders if it’s better or worse than what he’s thinking.)

(He isn’t exactly sure if he wants to know, though. He’s got a soft heart, and there’s only so much he can take before he’s ready to blow.)

“I see,” the officer says after a moment; Harry tries to stretch, tries to turn his body a bit so he can see the name that’s written across the gold-colored tag on his chest, but the sun is bright and blinding, sort of, and it glints in just the right way to obscure Harry’s vision. “And I suppose the two of you deciding to not drive anywhere after having a few to drink is a good reason to overlook the fact that you’re trespassing, as well.”

Harry lets out a breath, wonders if his heart is loud enough to be heard. “Thank you very much, sir,” he says, and he means it, every last little bit of gratefulness that’s dripping from his words, that’s saturating his voice with alleviated pitches. “Thank you very much.”

The officer nods, waves off Harry’s appreciation with a small, tight-lipped smile. “It’s the least I can do for two smart young men,” he replies, huffs a laugh, and Harry’s thankful the officer believed Niall when he explained their situation because Harry’s not exactly what would have happened if he didn’t. “Besides, the two of you look as hot as the devil’s kitchen, and I know a great river just up the road that’s the best to cool off in. Great swimming hole, deep enough to jump in.”

Niall leans in, leans forward, presses his clothed chest to Harry’s bare back in order to get close, to get in the officer’s atmosphere for a quick conversation about directions and details, and Harry bites his bottom lip, nearly tears through the thick flesh as he realizes that yes, a dip in a chilly lake a few miles outside of town is just what he needs to cool off from the heat, to cool off from the stimulating flame he always feels whenever he’s with Niall.

It doesn’t get much better than this. When he’s allowed to let go and feel, relish, it doesn’t get much better than this.

-“We’re supposed to be swimming, Niall,” Harry says into the hot, wet flesh of Niall’s thick neck as he curves his bum and arches his back, aligning and flushing his body against Niall’s while Niall puts a knee between both of his legs, spreads his thighs salaciously on the ground behind the bush they’ve found and rubs the hardness of the cap against Harry’s groin softly, tantalizing and teasing. “I don’t rightly think a snog behind a bush is gonna cool us down any.”

Niall laughs, chuckles low in his throat, and it’s a purr of elation that rumbles Harry’s parted mouth as he presses fleeting, fast kisses to the deep hollow between Niall’s clavicles, relishing the heat of Niall’s flesh as it burns and seers Harry’s sensitive lips while he’s shivering from the itchy elation of
it all.

“What are you complaining for?”

Harry huffs. “What am I not complaining about?” he retorts, and this is good, this is nice, this is fun, this is real and this is just what Harry’s wanted for so, so long. “I’ve got a tree root trying to cut my ass and there’s ant bites all over my back from when you laid me down on a fuckin’ hill and I’ve got a sunburn all over my body. What’s not to complain about?”

“Me,” Niall replies, teases, and gosh, his voice is deep and so thick, so accented, and it’s weird sometimes, hearing Niall talk because he’s the only person Harry knows from Ireland, but it’s got a weird way of washing over Harry like rain, like fingers of sunlight on his chilled skin after a night of staying up too late and drinking too much and talking too loud, Niall’s voice, and he loves it like he loves Niall and he isn’t sure how he could ever feel this way for someone else. “I think this is a whole lot more fun than swimming. Don’t you think so, too, H?”

*I think you’re talking too much.*

Harry grunts, shifts his hips and bucks, arches, tosses Niall to the side; he hurries to follow, to slide over the slick wetness of Niall’s water-logged body so they’re in the exact position they were just a moment ago, only reversed, and Harry likes the way Niall’s red-pink lips look as he’s staring up at Harry, as he’s trying to find somewhere to put his hands while Harry spreads his legs and settles, fits, slots himself against Niall and rubs, grinds, ruts their crotches together in a slow undulation of hard, heavy pleasure.

“Oh, fuck.”

Niall grabs Harry’s cheek, lurches forward and locks their lips, tangles their tongues, and the kiss is fierce and fast and ferocious, all at once and suddenly, abruptly, and Harry’s arms are giving out beside Niall’s and they curl, roll, cuddle together till Harry isn’t sure who’s hands are where and if Niall’s trying to get his fingers beneath the tight fabric of his boxers and he likes this, loves this.

This is beyond words. This cannot be described with words — *words*, that are meant to label and explain and convey thought, convey cognizance, but Harry’s seen so many people in his life try to find the reason, the definition behind their feelings when they should have just left well enough alone, when they should have just relished the sensation while they still had it.

Harry’s not in any hurry to let this go. You only have what you have when you have it, and he’s not ready to let this go, is in no rush to forget about the feel of Niall on his skin and in his body.

Maybe in a few months, maybe in a few years Harry will be ready, will be unknowingly prepared to deal with the aftermath and repercussions of a broken partnership, of a broken friendship, of a broken brotherhood. Maybe he’ll be ready for what the future holds.

Then again, maybe he won’t be, and it’s *that* — it’s that uncertainty that has him pulling away from Niall’s hungry lips, that has him pushed up and off and sitting on his folded legs on a sharp rock that hurts his bum in the same way that Niall sometimes hurts his heart.

“Is it still curiosity?” he asks, breathless, and brings one hand up to wipe at the amalgamated spit on his lips and he feels like a little kid, like a small teenager having just bared his heart and soul to the person he loves and is now waiting for the response, for the aftermath of such a large announcement. “Is it?”
Niall sighs, leans up, smiles, wets his lips, uses his hands thrown behind him to keep him up, to keep him steady so he can keep his hold on Harry’s gaze. “Is what still curiosity?” he asks, blinks, and he’s got water on his lashes and it’s making them darker, making them stick together and form sharp spikes.

Ouch.

“Back at Janie’s, on the dock, you said — you said you’re curious,” Harry replies, tries to find the words to explain a similar quote that Niall fed him and while it’s only been a few days ago, give or take, a lot has happened and he shouldn’t be solely at fault. “You told me you’re willing to try with me because you’re curious.” He scratches his elbow, picks at a mosquito bite. “Is this still curiosity or do you feel something for me like I do for you?”

Niall slants his head to the side, presses his lips together and gives Harry a tight smile. “It’s only been a few days, Harry,” he answers, so soft and so gentle, and he’s being nice, at least he’s being nice, but there’s no amount of politeness in the world that can dampen the simmering smarting of being proved wrong when you thought you were right in assuming you had someone. “I’ll tell you when it’s not. I promise I’ll tell you when it’s not, but for right now, Harry, it’s still — it’s still all so new. And I’m not you. I can’t do what you do, and I can’t do at the speed that you do, either.”

“I don’t do anything,” Harry replies, scoffs, but he reckons if there was an award for stupidity that he would win it and Niall’s the only person he’ll ever thank. “I really don’t.”

“You do everything.” Niall’s voice is heavy with soft-hearted pressure and Harry’s chest is heavy, tight, and he needs to be popped before he grows and explodes. “You’re perfect. And I adore you. I don’t know how anyone can’t.” He smiles, blinks, reaches out with his foot and slides his toes along Harry’s knee. “But I promised to not lie to you ever again, Harry, and while it’s still curiosity, I want you to know that I think it could be more.”

Harry gulps. “Someday?”

Niall nods, smiles crookedly. “Someday soon.”
tush

i been bad, i been good
dallas, texas, hollywood
i ain’t askin’ for much
i said, lord, take me downtown
i’m just lookin’ for some tush

― ZZ Top, ‘Tush’

“Hey, I remember you.”

Harry startles, stutters, drops his clean shirt on the ground, on the grassy gravel, and curses under his breath, tries to calm his racing heart as he pivots, as he looks at the young man standing in front of him. He’s tall, the man, though shorter than Harry, and brown-skinned, too; he looks Hispanic, kind of, with dark hair and even darker eyes and a thin smile, a bony hand stretched out in a friendly greeting as the sun whimpers away into setting behind him.

He hopes it’s friendly, at least. He isn’t sure, really.

“Hi,” Harry says, wets his lips and reaches out, takes the man’s hand in his and shakes, polite and nice and respectful, and keeps his eyes wide and open; Niall’s somewhere in the woods surrounding the small clearing they’re parked in taking a piss so the cars rushing by on the highway half a mile out won’t get a clean view of his ass and Harry wonders if he could scream loud enough to gather Niall’s attention and just what lengths Niall would go to in an attempt to keep Harry safe. “I’m Harry. I’m not sure if I know you, though.”

The man laughs, throws his head back and giggles, cackles like a little kid, and Harry kind of loses a little bit of the tension that’s been building, that’s been mounting ever since he dropped his shirt a few seconds ago and really, apart from the few people that’s shot at him — because of Niall, mind you — Harry’s never had a problem with strangers, with unknown people approaching him and attempting to begin a harmless conversation. He’s great at talking, easy and charming, and most encounters are harmless, for the most part.

“No, I don’t suppose you do,” the man says, and Harry was right — he’s Hispanic, at least half; the man’s words are heavy with an accent Harry hasn’t heard in a while and it reminds him of the short, chubby friend Gemma brought home a few years ago. She was nice, sweet and intelligent and easy to get along with; she told the best stories, and sometimes Harry would pretend to be in a different country, in a different era, in a different culture when she would tell her tales. “I was the waiter at the bar last night when you and your friend were dancing on the counter and singing to the Stones. I really enjoyed the performance the two of you put on.”

It dawns on Harry then and he nods, scoffs, rolls his eyes and lets out a puffy laugh, too. “Oh, hell.” He shakes his head, takes his hand back, bends down and picks up the red and black flannel that fell to the ground; he’s already got his jeans on, faded and ripped that they are, and he’s just waiting on Niall to finish his business to come back and find his socks. “That wasn’t nearly as entertaining as you’re making it out to be. We probably could’ve done better if we weren’t three sheets to the wind.”

“You’re right — it was more entertaining than I’m making it out to be,” the man replies, laughs, and he’s not stopped chuckling since they met. “I’m Vicente, by the way.”

Harry winces, kind of drops his eyes to the ground; Vicente has a certain curl to his letters when he
speaks, and Harry’s tried to learn Spanish, tried to broaden his linguistic horizons, but the fact is that he has such a hard time remembering the rules for another language and the only reason he passed his final is because Niall whispered the words under his breath behind him and their instructor was quite difficult of hearing.

He’s going to slaughter Vicente’s name.

“But you can call me Vic,” Vicente — Vic — is saying, and Harry lets out a rush of breath, wonders if Vic could see the distress on his face. “Some people have a rough time pronouncing my name, especially ‘round here, and I prefer Vic, anyway. Short and sweet.”

Harry nods, grins, opens his mouth to speak, but the sound of bushes and tree limbs rustling, rutting together catches his and Vic’s attention and they turn, look to the side, watch as Niall emerges from the line of the woods; he’s got his jeans on, too, rolled up to his lower calves and barefoot, grinning as he does up the button and zipper on his pants and he’s the prince of the forest and Harry’s the king of the world.

“Hi,” he says, calls, and he’s got this grin, this smile, and he walks over to Harry, stops when they’re pressed together closely, hotly, and he slides his arm around Harry’s waist, presses his blunt nails into the fleshliness of Harry’s hips and uses that touch, that proximity to pull Harry in and keep him there, keep him still, and he isn’t exactly sure what Niall’s doing, what Niall’s trying to do, but saying that he doesn’t like the clinginess would be a lie he will never dare to tell. “What’s going on?”

Vic’s gaze drops to Niall’s almost possessive, almost dominating, almost solicitous touch on Harry, on Harry’s sunburned skin, and he raises a brow, purses his lips, rocks back on the balls of his feet, but otherwise doesn’t say anything and Harry thinks that’s a small, small victory and he’s proud of winning it, of winning something.

“This is Vic,” Harry answers, introduces Niall to the man in front of them. “He’s from the bar last night. He saw us dancing on the counter.”

Niall’s friendly smile fades, falters a little bit and evens out, makes both corners of his mouth equal, and Harry can read the quiet, silent question Niall’s too nice, too self-sacrificing to ask: what else did he see?

And Harry really wants Niall to realize that what people think of him, that what people think of them doesn’t matter. It just doesn’t matter; living your life trying to make others happy is wasting away the beauty, the gift you’ve been given. Niall only has to worry about making himself happy.

“I’m Niall.” Niall reaches out, takes Vic’s hand in his and shakes, a little bit hard and a little bit rough, and Harry’s browns knit together in confusion because he’s seen Niall like this before, of course he has, but never over him, never for him. He likes it. He’s so big, so large, and Niall makes him feel manageably sizable. “I sure hope you enjoyed the show we put on. We’re actually thinking ‘bout starting a dance team before too long.”

Harry smiles, looks down, pokes at a loose piece of gravel with his bare toe and leans, settles against Niall’s sturdy, secure body.

“You two will definitely go far,” Vic replies, laughs, teases, and Niall does, too, chuckles at the joke, and Harry’s still so, so bewildered at Niall’s grabby show of apparent jealousy — but saying he doesn’t like it would be lying. Harry loves being grabbed, loves being marked with territorial desire, oh God, and he kind of hopes Niall takes this a lot farther than he is right now. “Listen, I just got finished hanging out with my girl and I’m headed back home, and I was wondering if the two of you would want to tag along? You can shower, and I’ve got a bit to smoke, too, if you’re into that. Hell,
I’ve even got some food, too.”

Harry raises his gaze, looks at Niall; it’s been a while since they had any, and while Harry prefers to not smoke he knows Niall does, knows Niall loves it, and Harry’s stomach has been growling for hours, it seems, and this is a decision he leaves up to Niall to make.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?”

They’re in Vic’s bathroom now, upstairs and down the hall and to the left, and it’s somewhat big, somewhat spacious — there’s a shower on the right and a tub on the left and a toilet straight on and twin sinks on either side, colored in light blue and ivory white, and the hot, hot water streaming out of the showerhead is fogging the room up, heating the room up, and Harry’s sweating, perspiring for more reasons than one.

Niall hums, shakes his hips as he undoes his jeans and pushes them to the floor, along with his underwear, and steps out of them, tosses them onto the lid of the toilet; he’s bare now, naked and glorious, and Harry has a hard time concentrating on pulling down the catchy zip of his pants as he obviously, explicitly stares and stares and stares at Niall’s edgy body, at Niall’s broad shoulders and narrow hips and thick thighs and thin calves and — and mouth-watering cock, okay, and Harry isn’t going to say that he doesn’t still like pussy, that he isn’t still turned on by pussy, because he is and he’s sure that’s not ever going to change, but there’s absolutely no body in the world who can hold a candle to the range of emotions, of explosions that erupt in Harry’s body whenever he sees Niall, whenever he’s around Niall.

There’s just nobody like Niall.

“No, I’m not,” Niall replies, stands straight and smiles. “But it’s an idea, you know, and Vic seems nice enough, too.” He walks forward, reaches out, puts his hands on the button and zip of Harry’s jean and undoes them for Harry, bends to his knees and drags Harry’s pants and boxers down at the same time, aiding Harry in stepping out of the puddling fabric. “And your stomach’s been growling for hours. I’ve heard it all day.” He leans forward, puts his face against Harry’s tummy, nuzzles the flesh there before dragging his lips down, his mouth down, and giving the base of Harry’s half-hard prick a kiss, a delicate little touch that makes Harry jump and jolt and jitter as gooseflesh dives all across his skin and his mind skitters to a halt.

This is so tender, so sweet. Niall’s so careful with him, and it’s bittersweet knowing why, understanding the reason behind Niall’s cautious affection.

“Niall?” Harry puts his hands in Niall’s hair, tangles his fingers in the thick darkness and pulls Niall up till they’re chest to chest, thigh to thigh, forehead to forehead. “What are you doing?”

Niall chuckles, takes Harry’s insistent hands out of his hair with a smile and lays them at Harry’s side. “I’m doing whatever I want,” he replies, puts his hands on the lapels of Harry’s unbuttoned shirt and pushes, shoves the fabric off his shoulders, down his arms, onto the floor. “I’m finally doing whatever I want.”

Harry makes a noise in the back of his throat, raises his hands and grips Niall’s ears, keeps him there and keeps him still, and lurches forward, puts his lips on Niall’s, and it’s a kiss that speaks of admiration, that speaks of respect, that speaks of pride at the fact that Niall is finally, finally, doing what he wants, doing what he shouldn’t feel bad for wanting, and the contact, the fiery touch is broken when Niall starts smiling, when Niall starts giggling cutely, adorably, and Harry isn’t sure if he’ll ever stop falling in love with Niall.
He may not have Niall, may not ever have Niall, but Niall has himself, is finding himself, and
Harry’s getting to be part of this self-discovery, and that’s just as good, just as great.

“I’m so proud of you, Niall.”

“Thank you,” Niall replies, grins, and the gratitude, the honest appreciation in his voice makes Harry
melt into a puddle of adoration and he never wants to be whole again if it means that Niall won’t be
filling his cracks. “Now, c’mon. I want to come with you before we go down and eat.”

Harry startles, sure he’s heard Niall wrong, but doesn’t protest as Niall pulls him into the shower and shuts the door, adjusts the head so it’s on them, so it’s on both of them, and
they’re wet with hot water in a second, a short moment, and it’s dripping off of Niall’s lips and Harry
can’t help himself as he grabs Niall’s hair, as he slots their mouths together in another kiss.

This one is decidedly more hot, decidedly more tantalizing and stimulating than the other, though, and
Harry’s fairly sure, definitely positive that he’ll never get used to kissing Niall, that he’ll never
get over kissing Niall because Niall’s lips and Niall’s mouth and Niall’s tongue touch Harry, taste
Harry, tell Harry everything the two of them are too scared, are too frightened to say, and it’s all sorts
of reckless security that makes Harry think too much and not nearly enough at the same time.

It’s more than a kiss, what the two of them do. It’s more than a touch, more than a possible sexual
encounter; there’s depth, there’s hidden meaning, there’s a fall of concussing extremes and when it’s
Niall on him, with him, against him, his landing is leaves and softness and care.

Niall pulls away, smears his lips across Harry’s cheeks. “How much do you weight?” he asks,
whispers, and Harry doesn’t have to imagine the water as Niall’s fingers on his body anymore and he
shivers at the thought, at how far they’ve came in so little time.

“What the fuck?” Harry replies, scoffs, tugs Niall’s hair with his fingers; while he’s not ashamed of
his weight or scared to share it with the world, as all people should be, he is a bit put off by Niall’s
question and wonders what it means, wonder what his size has to do with anything. He knows Niall
doesn’t care about that. “Why do you want to know?”

Instead of answering, Niall puts his big, big hands on the back of Harry’s thighs, bends at the knees
and bucks, lifts Harry up and walks forward, braces Harry’s back against the chilly wall of the
shower and he arches, rushes way from the coldness as he instinctively wraps his legs around Niall’s
waist and grabs, grapples for slick purchase on Niall’s shoulders.

“Don’t drop me!” Harry yells, screeches, and it’s not that far to the ground, really, to the tile, but he’d
rather not have a bruise on the bottom of his bum since he’s got several on the meat of his thighs
already and all of them are Niall’s doing. “Don’t you dare drop me, Niall!”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Niall says, teases, puts his nose against the sharp Adam’s apple on Harry’s
throat and nuzzles, sucks the bump harshly, roughly, and Harry’s quite happy Niall’s got him held up
because he would surely have fallen if he were standing. “Grab my cock and jerk me off, baby, and
I’ll make you come, m’kay?”

Oh, fuck.

If Harry wasn’t hard before he’s definitely raging, definitely leaking, definitely aching for a release
now, all red-tipped and sticky.

He does as Niall said, as Niall demanded, and fishes his hand between their bodies, between their
flush chests and finds the base of Niall’s cock; they’re both wet with water and sweat, and Harry
takes a moment to grip the hilt, to squeeze the hilt, before pulling upward, dragging his dry palm against the dampness of Niall’s prick.

“Your hand feels nice,” Niall says, breathless and already panting, already leaking from the strain of release, and it makes Harry’s movements, makes Harry’s flicks of his wrists easy and fluid, smooth and paced moderately, satisfyingly. “Oh, fuck, you’re gonna make me come before I even get you hard.”

Niall bucks his hips, uses his body to hold Harry up against the wall while one of his hands comes around, finds Harry’s dick; he circles the tip with his thumb and middle finger, tickles the slit with his index, and Harry jumps, lurches from the intense pleasure, out of this world euphoria and the starkness of the feel, of the sensations.

It’s never been this good before.

He and Niall are in a shower together, and Niall’s holding him up and he’s got his legs wrapped around Niall’s body, oh my, and this isn’t the first time they’ve showered together, no, and he hopes it isn’t the last, either, but this is different and this is the turning point, the mark of no return and passed the point of too far gone, and what happens after this — what happens after this effects them as a couple, as two parts of the same whole, and not as Harry and Niall, not as individuals having fun with one another.

This is them — together, one, whole. This is them.

“You still have the bruises,” Niall muses, heavy and hard and hot; he leans forward, tips his forehead against Harry’s, and they share air, share breath, and Harry likes the way his lips drag across Niall’s as they both tug, as they both pull, as they both try to bring one another off quickly, swiftly, satisfyingly. “I didn’t think they’d last this long. I didn’t think I was down there much. Do they hurt?”

Harry shakes his head. “They feel good.”

They remind me of you.

“Good.” Niall slaps his other hand up, smacks Harry’s ass cheek and molds, squeezes the flesh there and Harry squeals, moans at a pitch that’s louder than he’s ever heard from himself before. “Later tonight, when I get you in a bed, I’m going to lay you out and give you more bruises so you’ll still feel me. I want to touch every part of your body.”

Oh, God.

Harry’s body jostles, jerks, and with one more pass of Niall’s thumb over the tip, into the slit, he’s coming, squirting his cum and painting Niall’s chest, painting Niall’s body in the same way that Niall’s painting, coloring his soul and his heart and his mind with all the colors, and his orgasm startles Niall into his, too, and the two of them are an amalgamation of moans, of whimpered screams, of muted grunts of pleasure as they empty themselves on each other.

(Harry can’t help but wonder — will it ever be in each other?)

Niall’s body slumps and his strength gives out; he drops Harry, eases Harry to the wet tile of the shower floor and holds his arms around Harry, keeps him steady as they both fall down from the high they were able to reach with one another.

Harry blinks. “What was that about?” he asks, quiet and soft; his voice is hoarse, kind of, and his body is lax, languid, and he wants to be lazy, wants to do nothing but Niall for the rest of his life.
“Where’d this come from?”

“I told you I’m finally doing everything I want,” Niall replies, shrugs, smiles, and he uses the pad of his thumb to wipe off some of the spunk on his stomach, brings his finger up to spread the creamy jizz across Harry’s lips; he leans forward, puts his mouth on Harry’s and kisses, licks off the cum with his tongue and tickles, teases Harry. “And I really, really want to do you.”

- Full, clean, sated, Harry leans back against the sofa and sighs, crosses his knees in front of him; he’s dressed in his jeans and shirt again, but the legs of the pants are rolled up and the sleeves of the flannel are folded to his elbow, too, and Niall and Vic are sat in front of him, just as satisfied and just as comfortable, and Harry likes the soft, soothing music that’s playing in the back.

It’s Elvis. He can’t make out the song, really, but he knows it’s Elvis, knows the beat and the tune, and it reminds him of his mum, of his dad, and he reckons he ought to ring her and call up him, too, just to check in.

After all, Harry wouldn’t be here without the man, and yes, while their relationship has been strained ever since the divorce, ever since Anne moved out to California, Harry reckons his father doesn’t deserve to be ignored. Gemma says he doesn’t deserve to be ignored, at least, and Gemma never lies to Harry.

“You two ready?” Vic asks, reaches for a small box under the coffee table on the little shelf beneath and pulls it out, sits it on the floor, opens it up, and Harry’s at the right angle to see a stash of weed and a few baggies of pills, of ecstasy, and his stomach curls in displeasure. “I’ve got plenty to go ’round.”

Harry waves off Vic’s invitation. “I’m good,” he replies, shrugs; he doesn’t like smoking the stuff, has never liked the taste or the smell of it, and while he’s tried ecstasy before he’s seen what it does to people and he’s not a fan, Niall’s not a fan. “The two of you can enjoy it, though. I think I’ll just let the food settle.”

Vic shrugs, gives Harry a look with a raised brow. “Suit yourself,” he says, focuses his attention on the box full of goodies; he pulls out the weed, pulls out the pills. “What’s your fancy, Niall?”

“Weed.” Niall scoots close to Harry, flushes their shoulders; he smells good, Niall does, like creek water and spice and earthy air, and Harry’s scent is the same, too, kind of, and it’s quite eye-opening, really — they’ve been spending so much time together lately that they smell like one another. “Pills aren’t my poison. Never liked the damn things.”

“More for me, then.” Vic opens one of the little baggies, reaches in and takes a pill out; he pops it in his mouth, grabs his sweating beer off the table and swallows it down. “You know how to roll your own?”

Niall nods, grabs the packet of weed Vic tosses at him and the paper to roll a smoke, too. “Brother taught me,” he says, elaborates a question that wasn’t asked, and Harry blinks, yawns, sighs, leans his head on Niall’s shoulder and wraps his arms around his tummy, holds his sides and gets comfortable, gets ready for a late afternoon nap. “It’s probably the only useful things he’s taught me.”

Harry thins his lips.

“My momma taught me,” Vic replies, laughs, lays out the paper for his own joint and grabs one of
the bags, pinches a bit out and drops it onto the thin thing. “Best woman I’ve ever met in my life. Reminds me of a rattle snake, I tell ya.”

Harry smiles; he feels the same way about his mum, too.

And he opens his mouth to say so, to tell Vic that he has a special place in his heart for his mother, too, but then the sliding door to the left is opening and an older woman with gray hair and wrinkled skin is stepping in, tall and thin, and she’s got a shotgun in her hand, motherfucking goddammit, and things just kind of go to hell, just kind of go to shit all of a sudden and Harry wonders if he’s allowed to soil his pants yet and if he should be keeping count of encounters like this.

“Vicente!” the woman screams, yells, pumps a bullet into the chamber, and Harry is up in the next second, grabbing Niall around the collar and pulling him along, as well, and they’re darting out of the living room faster than he’s ever ran before. “What the fuck are you doing, boy?”

“Gramma!”

Harry doesn’t stop for his shoes, doesn’t slow down for the door; he barrels through the screen, jerks Niall behind him, hops off the steps and onto the ground and rushes for the van, for the vehicle. He lets go of Niall’s hand, rounds the van, jumps inside; he starts the vehicle, doesn’t wait for Niall to close the door and hits the gas, peels away, and the distant noise of a gun going off is heard behind them but Harry doesn’t care, doesn’t mind as he accelerates down the driveway and onto the asphalt and into the oncoming lane of traffic.

It takes a moment for him to steady the vehicle, and when he does he realizes that he’s shaking, that he’s shivering, that he’s about to hurl up all the food he devoured. “That’s the third time, Niall,” he says, whispers, and now his voice is hoarse for a completely different reason. “That’s the third fucking time, Niall.”

Niall nods, finds his seatbelt and buckles up. “At least it wasn’t the charm,” he replies, tries to joke and tries to tease and his voice is wavering and he’s pale like moonlight, and Harry wants to shove his fist in Niall’s face but he finds that he’s pulling over into an empty lot and kissing Niall senseless because he’s glad that the third time wasn’t the charm, too.
heroes

and we kissed as though nothing would fall

— David Bowie, ‘Heroes’

Louisiana is hot, sweaty, heated, swampy, humid, stinky and the wind is thick with honeysuckle, with a crisp sharpness that proceeds the impending end of summer even though the heat, the memories, the flaming need to do and do and do before the conclusion of liberation will not begin to settle down till October, till the promise of fall erases the sincerity of sunshine and summertime.

Harry doesn’t want to let go of summer any time soon. There’s a nagging feeling he gets, tastes in the back of his throat at the thought of ending this — of ending summer, of ending the trip, of ending the tender relationship he’s found with Niall — and he’s too scared, too sick to the stomach to imagine what it’s going to be like when everything really does cease to be anymore.

So he doesn’t think about it.

He just watches. He’s good at that; better than he ever thought possible, really.

The trees are tall and green, so very green, and they create a thick foliage that’s hard to see through, that’s hard to pick through, but sometimes Harry can get a glimpse of an old plantation home pushed far off, colored warmly and brightly against the nature surrounding it, and Harry wonders if he can convince Niall to stop on the way back so he can have a closer look at the houses.

He likes history. A lot. There’s something about studying the eras, the centuries, the decades; he likes that he’s able to see something, able to watch it unfold in the here and now and think, “Oh, well, that happened so and so years ago, too, kind of,” and one would think that history could be learned from, should be learned from, and often times it is — it really is. People are too busy focusing on the now to draw the conclusion that the reason history is repeating itself is because it has been learned from. But the consequences, the effects and actions after are learned from, as well, and really, it’s all about the corruption and the twisted mind and the skewered hunger, and that’s why history repeats itself.

That’s a conversation, an elaboration for a different time, though; right now, all Harry wants to think about is how stunning Niall looks beside him, hands on the wheel and hair whipping in the wind, as the sun sets in front of them, bathing the both of them in orange and yellow and red, and Harry can’t help but think that the blue of Niall’s eyes reflects the sunset in the same way light flickers off the rippling ocean on a deserted beach in the middle of nowhere, oh my, and Niall’s the biggest work of art Harry’s ever seen and he’s only just now realizing Niall’s effervescence, yes, and the impact of it, too, and it’s got Harry all sorts of nervously joyous

It’s the best, but it’s also the worst, too; he isn’t sure if he should be opiating joy or hiding behind a rock with cowardice fright.

(Maybe both. Probably both.)

“You’re staring at me again.”

Harry smiles, shrugs; his face heats, turns red, but he doesn’t dare take his eyes off Niall because he’s not got a reason to be ashamed, not got a reason to be put off by the fact that he admires Niall, by the fact that Niall stuns him in the best way possible and leaves him breathless in a sense that hurts his heart and colors his soul with sensations. After all, why should he be shamed, be put down for
openly enjoying something that makes him smile, something that makes him happy?

“I don’t care,” he replies, and his grin broadens, gets bigger and bigger and bigger, and one corner of
Niall’s mouth is higher than the other as it always is when they’re around each other and Harry
wishes Niall would look at himself the way Harry looks at him, the way he looks at Harry. “I don’t
care if you don’t care, I mean.”

“I don’t.” Niall shakes his head, takes one hand off the wheel and reaches over; he puts his fingers in
Harry’s hair, brushes through the sweaty strands and scratches Harry’s scalp, and it’s comforting and
familiar and so much has changed but so little has changed, too. “I don’t care at all. I told you I’m
finally doing everything I want, and you should start, too. There’s nothing wrong with it.”

Harry’s breath catches and he’s sweating with a heavy, thick layer of gooseflesh on his body. “You
think so, Ni?” he asks, quiet and careful; Niall’s not going very fast — they’re on a backroad, Harry
thinks, zooming through miles of plantation acreages — and the wind’s floating inside with just
enough power that it steals Harry’s words before Niall can hear them. “You really think so, Niall?”

“I do. I really do think so.” Niall nods, purses his lips; he sticks his tongue out, wets his mouth, and
Harry loves — loves loves loves — how they can talk and how they can talk. It’s refreshing,
uplifting; they’ve been through quite a bit of emotional turmoil lately and the fact that they’re still
able to be themselves with one another is amazing, inspirational. “I don’t think many people do,
though.” Oh. Oh — Niall’s talking about them. Them. The timid smile on his lips is the biggest
giveaway Harry’s ever seen, and it prompts one of his own, too. “I also don’t think those people
matter, either.”

Harry blinks, swallows a bit of his spit before it begins to dribble out of his mouth — he can’t very
well help it, though; when he’s around Niall, when he’s with Niall, it’s sometimes hard to remember
that he himself is an actual person, too.

“Even if it’s your mum and brother?”

Niall nods, grim and stoically determined. “Even if it’s my mum and brother, H,” he replies,
whispers, and it’s quiet but it’s loud at the same time, too, and Harry’s never met anybody with the
freezing ability to say so much with so little.

“Do you mean that?” Harry asks, narrows his eyes and brings his brows together. “How can you say
that and actually mean it, Niall?”

He knows how, though. He knows how Niall can be so cold, knows how Niall can be so distant; he
knows why Niall is so cautious and why Niall is so hard to understand. He knows — but knowing
and understanding are two completely different things. Harry can’t relate to Niall because he’s been
given everything Niall hasn’t. Sometimes he forgets how fortunate he truly, truly is.

“They’ve not been there for me very much,” Niall answers, slow and methodic, and Harry sees that
Niall’s thinking out his words thoroughly, completely before saying them and he’s proud, so very
proud it’s like a pleasurable infection that’s spreading all over his body. “Sometimes I wonder if they
even care about me. I mean, I know they love me — but love and care aren’t the same.” He shrugs,
tightens his hold on Harry’s hair, and Harry reaches up, finds Niall’s hand, takes it out and interlaces
their fingers, holds on for dear life. “The thing is — all my life I’ve tried my hardest to get something
from them that I thought I needed, and now that I have you, now that I know I have you and your
care, I don’t want that anymore.”

“Niall?”
“I don’t want their acceptance or their support or their care. I kind of don’t want them, either.” He shrugs again, finds a way to get his thumb on top of Harry’s hand to caress the skin, to draw half-hearted shapes of adoration. “What right do they have coming into my life when they’ve not been part of it for eighteen years, Harry? Do they have a right?”

Harry blinks again, fights back a yawn; the two of them were awakened at two in the afternoon, but Harry was up later and today’s been quite hellish, for the most part, what with getting shot at for the third time and all, and he’s tired, ready to either pull over and crawl in the back for a snooze or rent a room and burrow under the blankets and sheets till he’s energized enough to take on an army.

“They do.” Harry sets his jaw, firm and tight. “It doesn’t matter if they should, Ni, ’cause they do. They’re still your mum and brother, and they’re still here.”

“It’s so easy for you,” Niall announces, quiet and soft; his words are mean but his tone isn’t, and he’s more awe-struck, more relishing a bit of astonishing wonderment than anything. “Everything is so easy for you, Harry. Everything. Sometimes I get so sad that I’ve not been able to have what you do, but then I look at you and you’ve got it so easy and I just smile and I don’t feel bad anymore.”

“Why?”

Niall smiles, higher on the left than the right, and this is Harry’s favorite. “Because if it would have come down to a choice between you having everything or me having everything and I was supposed to make the decision for us, I’d choose you,” he answers, sloppy and a little bit slurred, rushed and recklessly beautiful in a sense Harry identifies with nature, with wild natural disasters of the most epic proportions. “I’d choose you every time.”

Harry gulps. “Why?”

“’Cause you’re all I need.”

And it’s times like this — like this: when Niall’s got his guard down and he’s open like the petals of a fresh flower, like the wings of a baby butterfly, like the earth splitting in half to relieve a bout of pressure beneath the surface that sends Harry for a whirlwind of emotions because Niall has the ability to love Harry so much, to love Harry so deep, to Harry love so completely without being in love with Harry at all.

“Chips and hot Coke and cheap cake from the lobby isn’t an acceptable supper, Harry,” Niall says, jokes and teases, and Harry licks off a bit of cake icing from his finger before turning, before meeting Niall’s iridescent eyes. “You ought to be ashamed of yourself for not taking care and putting in proper nutrients. You’re a growing young man and you need to stay healthy.”

Harry makes a face, settles for flipping Niall the bird where he’s lying on the bed, sprawled out and half naked, as he chews the crunchy chips before saying, “Fuck off, jackass,” with a pitched high squeak that tattle tells of his crisp, clear amusement of the situation, and Niall’s laughter is the best harmony, the best melody. “Not eating anything isn’t an acceptable supper, either, you nut. Over here preachin’ ‘bout being healthy when you’re the farthest thing from it.”

Niall grunts, snorts, cackles, and Harry’s at the perfect angle — sat at a table directly in front of the bed Niall’s laid out on with spread thighs and naked legs and a mountain of pillows keeping his head up — to see that Niall’s rolling his eyes. Of course he’s rolling his eyes.

“You take care of me like you’re my dad,” Niall quips, muses, and there’s a little bit too much
nostalgia behind his observation to make Harry feel settled, and he finds that he’s rolling the bag of chips up and downing the Coke and tossing the mostly-eaten cake in the trash bin at his feet in favor of walking over, of sitting on the edge of the bed next to Niall’s arms. The damn thing was too sweet to be good, anyway. “I might as well just call you my daddy. We all know you take care of me better than mine ever did.”

Harry takes a deep breath, reaches his fingers out and grabs Niall’s shoulder; the tips are sticky with spit and icing and they make Niall’s skin shine under the lights. “Do you miss your dad?”

Niall blinks. “Do you?”

He scoffs an uninterested, humorless laugh. “Are we supposed to miss our dads?” he asks, and he can’t hide, can’t mask, can’t ignore his emotions the way Niall can. Harry wears his heart on his sleeve and Niall keeps his hidden behind stony layers of a wall thicker than the inches of blood spilled in all the wars of the world. “They’ve not been there. They’re still not here.”

“Your dad’s in England, Harry. Of course he’s not here.” Niall turns his head, coughs to the side for a short second before returning his blue, blue eyes to Harry’s. “I think he would be here with you if he could be, though.”

You don’t know my dad. I don’t even know the man.

“Your dad’s in Ireland,” Harry replies, fast as lightning and more booming than thunder, more disastrous than flooding, more saddening than the total loss of everything you once knew. “And your mum flies out to see him yearly.” She’s foolish to think that you aren’t smart enough to figure that out. “If she can do that, he can come here for you.”

Niall brings his hand up to Harry’s, interlaces their fingers and holds on, holds tight; the two of them don’t talk about their estranged, prodigal fathers very much because of the bitter anger that covers both of their situations. It isn’t as if they could help it — two young boys ripped away from everything they knew at such a tender age in their life and whisked off to a new country, to a new world; they’ve grown up without their fathers for a major portion of their lives and the thought of having the men there, for them or with them or beside them, is just as alien as the hungry need to have them here.

“What are you trying to say, Harry?” Niall asks, smooth and easy. “What’s going on in your pretty head, silly boy?”

Harry’s shoulders shake with the force of his breath. “It’s what you said earlier,” he answers. “They aren’t here, so they don’t matter.”

Niall smiles, wide and goofy. “Do you believe that?”

“I believe no two situations are the same,” Harry begins, tries to find the correct words to explain what he’s thinking, “and that, in both of their cases, the opinions they have don’t matter. What they think, what they want, what they expect — it’s all fucking shit ‘cause they’re not here like you said. They don’t matter.”

Niall’s eyes flicker from Harry’s to his lips, and he burns with a red flush of magnificent pleasure. “But my mum and brother’s opinion matters?” he asks, careful and slow.

“Maybe. Maybe a little bit.” Harry kicks his shoes off, scoots himself up on the bed till his clothed thigh is flush against Niall’s bare skin. “Only because they’re here, though. Only because they can easily fix what they’ve done to you.”
Niall turns over, reaches his free hand up and puts his palm against the hollow skin of Harry’s cheek; hot meets cold and Harry jolts from the touch. “You’re so smart, Harry,” Niall says, muses, and Harry’s fairly sure it’s more to himself than anything. “Is there anything you don’t know?”

Harry wets his lips. “Yeah.” He nods; Niall’s smile is encouragement enough for Harry to continue. “I don’t know what you meant when you said you don’t want anyone if you can’t have me.”

*I don’t know what you want from me.*

“I meant just that,” Niall retorts. “I mean — fuck, Harry, what I feel is really goddamn hard to explain ‘cause you’re so much further ahead in accepting everything than I am, but… but just know that I do. I do feel something for you. I’m not sure what it is and I’m not sure how long it’s going to last, either, but I can’t really find it in me to care because I have it now and I’m not going to let it pass me by like I’ve done before.”

“Gemma told me I should live my life any way I want to,” Harry blurts, and it’s a rush of words that tangle together on his tongue and make him turn red, turn pink, turn all sorts of shades of embarrassment but he isn’t ashamed, can’t ever be ashamed of the fluttering bombs in his chest he gets when he looks at Niall. “She told me it’s the best way.”

Niall smiles, small and bright. “Are you?”

“I’m definitely trying.”

And he thinks Niall is, too.

Niall lays Harry down, tender and smooth; they’re both bare, fresh out of a shared shower, wearing nothing except for their underwear, and Niall knocks his knee into one of Harry’s shins, spreads each of Harry’s legs and moves, fits, slots himself against Harry and they’re so close, so together, so flush Harry isn’t sure where his body ends and Niall’s begins.

“You remind me of a field full of flowers,” he says, Niall says, and Harry wets his lips, makes a noise in the back of his throat as his noodle-like arms come up and wrap around Niall’s neck, keeping him down and keeping him close and he hopes, prays to God that he’s strong enough to hold Niall here. “All the colors of the flowers? They remind me of the colors in your soul. You paint the world in a way I’ve never seen before.”

Harry sighs, moves his hands up, sifts his fingers into Niall’s damp hair; he pushes, pulls Niall down, and their lips meet in a slow, tender kiss that draws Harry’s breath from his lungs in the most heart-wrenching, endearing sort of way. He reckons he can do this — touch Niall, be with Niall, taste Niall, be himself with Niall — for days and never tire of the freedom, of the innocent liberation he feels when he’s with Niall.

It’s difficult to accept, but not at all hard to explain. Whereas Niall’s made Harry a sort of home, Harry has formed Niall into a lighthouse sat atop on a mountain in a peaceful bay that draws him into shore from a hazardous journey on rushing waters — and God, Harry isn’t sure how smart or healthy it is for the both of them to rely on one another so strongly, so heavily, and he really can’t find it in himself to care when it’s the exploding colors behind his lids that match the hues in Niall’s eyes, either.

Harry’s mouth falls open, and Niall’s tongue slips in, slips inside, curls around Harry’s in just the right way to have Harry whimpering, to have Harry writhing beneath the press and push and
pressure of Niall’s body.

Oh, Niall.

Harry opens his eyes, tears his lips away from Niall’s and shivers, shudders as Niall sticks his tongue out to catch the amalgamation of spit that falls out of Harry’s mouth. Never let it be said that Niall wastes the pleasures of life in moments like this.

“I care about you,” he says, rushes to get out; there’s so much more he wants to tell Niall, so much more, but he isn’t sure if this is the time to go about confessing his undying love. And it is undying, mind you — he and Niall are what the poets call half of a connected whole; Niall his Harry’s missing piece. “I care about you so much, Niall.”

“I know.” Niall blinks. “Oh, Harry, I swear to you that I know. I know that you care for me.”

How much? How much do you care for me, Niall?

Harry leans up, puts his lips to Niall’s cheek. “You’re always on my mind,” he continues, whispers, smears the words across Niall’s skin like a tattoo, like a needling of ink in flesh and he wonders if coloring on your skin makes things any more real than they already are. “I think about you and I can’t stop.”

“Do you want to?”

Harry shakes his head. “No.”

“How?” Niall nods once, firm and secure, steadfast in his beliefs. “I don’t want you to stop, either. I never want you to stop.”

This is real. This is real.

They kiss again, sensual and liquid in a sense that Harry feels as if he would drown, as if he would fall into a watery abyss if he doesn’t hold Niall tight, if he doesn’t ravage Niall completely, if he doesn’t suckle Niall wholly. The desperation of his touch, of his need to be touched is just as beautiful as if is destructive; Harry wonders if this is how Achilles and Patroclus felt with one another, so enlivened and totally adhered to each other by their shared history, by their shared heart, by their shared roots of life.

Homosexuality was accepted in Ancient Greece among the heroes of famous literature; why should it not be accepted in today’s world among the civilians of maturing society?

“You shine so bright, Harry,” Niall swears against Harry’s lips, dislodges their mouth and drags his wet tongue down along the sharpness of Harry’s jaw, using his hand to tip Harry’s head back and up for easier, better access. “I don’t know how anyone couldn’t love you.”

Harry gasps. “How?” he asks, demands, puts his hands on Niall’s fleshy hips and grabs hold of the gathering fabric of his underwear. Harry can feel Niall’s smile against the hot, spicy skin of his neck, and a waterfall of sorts crashes through Harry’s barriers. “How do I shine, Niall?”

“You’re remarkable,” Niall replies, pulls away and sits up, pushes himself around till he’s straddling Harry’s hips widely, keeping Harry’s legs closed; it adds to the pressure tightening, coiling above Harry’s groin, and he isn’t ashamed of the fact that his arousal is strengthening with every passing second because Niall’s is, too, and this is right. This is right. “Everything about you is remarkable. Everything, Harry.”
Harry wets his lips, tries to hide the smile on his face and fails — fails spectacularly, but that doesn’t matter because it makes Niall laugh, makes Niall shine, too, and they’re two stars fallen from the sky who are fighting to keep the spark of life, of love they were gifted on the long way down.

They’re going to win.

“Your hair never settles down right here,” Niall muses, and he’s looking at Harry, so open and vulnerable, as he puts his hand on the line of Harry’s hair, touching the tiny collection of little fuzzies there. “It always goes crazy. I’m not sure if I’ve ever told you how much I adore it, how much it makes me smile to see that you aren’t as perfect as I sometimes think you are.”

Harry pricks, on his scalp and on his hips and in his heart, in his soul. “You haven’t,” he says, answers the question Niall didn’t ask. “You haven’t yet.”

But please, oh, please, do it now.

“I should have. I do love it.” Niall tilts his head; I love you. “And this?” His hand moves down, drags across Harry’s bushy brows and thin nose and bumpy lips and pimpled chin and rest on the hollow of Harry’s throat; he presses his thumb in the skin between Harry’s collarbones and Harry bucks, arches with indefinite need at the harsh intrusion of nail on flesh. “Have I told you how much I love this little spot, just right here, too?”

“No.”

“I’m slacking, horribly so.” He continues on the downward descent, scratches his blunt nails softly across Harry’s naked torso, drawing random doodles along the squishy muscles on Harry’s chest and tummy. He’s not defined, not ripped, and that’s okay. Niall seems to like it, anyway. “Your body is so beautiful, so soft. Surely I’ve told you how much I love it.”

Harry’s breath catches. “You haven’t.”

“I do. I do love it so much.” Niall smiles, and the look in his eyes — he’s here but he isn’t here at the same time, and Harry isn’t sure what this means, isn’t sure what anything means, but the gentleness of Niall’s absence makes Harry burn as if he’s on the surface of the sun. “This, though? Have I told you how much I love this?” He moves his hand low, across the plump flesh along the top of Harry’s waistline before settling his fingers into the skin of Harry’s hips. “I have, haven’t I?”

“Yes,” Harry says, nods, turns his head and blinks; he’s heavy-lidded and thick with want, weighted with need and desire and lustful love. “You have.” Not with words, but actions, and they speak louder, anyway. “You have.”

“This, too, then?” Niall asks, wets his lips; he’s got a smile on his mouth, lascivious and lecherous, and his hand moves lower still, beneath the hem of Harry’s underwear and around the base, around the hilt to squeeze and ease. Oh, my. “Surely I haven’t forgotten about this. Tell me I haven’t forgotten about this.”

“No.” Harry shuts his eyes. You haven’t.” Actions speak louder than words, and he kind of thinks Niall knows that now, wonders if this is him proving the theory that speaking is sometimes not needed. “But tell me again.” His eyes open and he’s staring up into Niall’s colorful, colorful soul. “Please tell me again.”

Niall’s hand is ceaseless in the next second and their bare, naked skin touches innocently, lovingly, and it’s a shock of light because when they come, when they both hit that escalated burst of ecstasy given to one another by flesh and palms and lips and tongues, it’s like the light of the sun is pouring
out of the sky and drenching their bodies in dust from the dead stars that have lost the game they’re both trying so hard to win.
She smiled sweetly

Why do my thoughts loom so large on me?
They seem to stay, for day after day
And won’t disappear, I've tried every way
But she smiled sweetly
She smiled sweetly
She smiled sweetly
And says don’t worry

— Rolling Stones, ‘She Smiled Sweetly’

Harry’s warm and surprised when he wakes up the next morning, all hot and sweaty and covered in a layer of drowsy content that makes him feel heavier than the sun, heavier than the sky full of stars, to see Niall laying on top of him, sprawled and spread and simmering, holding himself up by his elbows on either side of Harry’s head, and he’s rubbing his nose against Harry’s, Niall’s rubbing his nose against Harry’s, and it’s simultaneously the most cute and most annoying thing in the whole entire world, really, because this is so familiar but it’s so unfamiliar, too, and Harry wants to break ground and wants to stay in place at the same time.

“Niall?” Harry asks, blinks and hums and blinks again, one and two and three and four and five times, each slower and lazier than the last; his eyes are heavy and matted, clumped and clotted together by his long lashes, and Niall’s a blurry figure racing through the trees above him in his mind that he can’t get rid of no matter how hard he shakes his head. “What’re you doing, Niall?”

Niall smiles, and it’s all sorts of bright and soft and brilliant and sweet and Harry can’t remember a day when he didn’t hunger for Niall’s joy even before he started falling because surely his life was bathed in blacks and whites and ugly, drag grays. “I’m waking you up, silly boy,” he replies, nose still rubbing rubbing rubbing at Harry’s, and his breath stinks and his cheeks have dried drool streaking the red flabbiness and Harry’s skin is greasy and there’s a mean, smarting pimple on his left nostril that hurts with pressure, and Harry doesn’t care about any of that because Niall calls him silly boy and he hopes that means he’s Niall’s silly boy. “You’ve been sleeping for hours. I’ve been up for a few.”

Harry shuts his eyes, purses his lips and hums, wiggles his bum against the bed in a fit to get comfortable with Niall’s weight above him, on him. It’s enticing. “What time is it?” he asks, whispers, and brings his hands up, puts his fingers just beneath the waistband of Niall’s tight boxers; he doesn’t reckon an erection would be the best way to start the day off, but he can’t very well argue with nature and he can count on one hand the number of times he’s woken up without a hard-on in the last five years.

Today’s not any different.

(Today’s different.)

He doesn’t think it matters anymore, though, seeing as the two of them have touched one another in ways that they never have before. What’s an erection mean in the grand scheme of things? Only that Niall gives Harry a hard-on and a heart-on, is all.

“Only nine,” Niall answers, drags his nose from Harry’s and along Harry’s cheek, along Harry’s sharp jaw. “I want to get a head start on today, you know? It’s only the eleventh, but I want to get to Atlanta in enough time to get tickets to the concert and see a bit of the city. LA’s the only experience
I’ve really had, and I don’t want this trip to fly by without doing something.”

*Without doing something?*

They’ve been doing something all the time, been doing something every single night. Maybe not big, maybe not expensive, maybe not bold, maybe not extravagant; Harry likes the soft and silent and smooth and silky nights spent in bed, spent in one another’s arms more than he does nights spent on the bar, in the bar, at the back of the bar grinding on each other’s thighs till they come in their jeans and soil their underwear.

They’re doing a lot; they’re doing plenty. They’re doing enough.

They’re doing all they can.

And it’s enough. For right now, it’s enough. It’s definitely more than enough. There can’t be any rush in this, whatever it is. Steps need to be taken one at a time, slow and thoughtful; rushing will only destroy the castle they’ve built and Harry isn’t strong enough to fight against anymore knights.

“Did you sleep okay?” Harry asks, keeps his eyes shut and turns his face, angles his head, allows Niall a bit more freedom to work with because this feels good and he doesn’t want Niall to stop. “I don’t think I woke up once.” He takes one hand out of Niall’s boxers, drags his fingers roughly along the contours of Niall’s bare back and into Niall’s sweaty, greasy hair; Harry doesn’t care that they’re steamy with hot perspiration or sticky with dried cum or stinky with bad breath because this is real, because this is true, and you can’t have the good without a little bit of bad. “May ‘ave kicked you ’round a bit, but I think that’s it.”

Niall giggles, puts his face into the warm bend of Harry’s neck, where his shoulder meets his throat, and laughs, smears his joy across Harry’s skin in a way that reminds Harry of inky tattoos on sweaty flesh.

“I’ve got a bruise on my hip where you elbowed me last night,” he says, whispers against Harry’s flesh. “It’s pretty nasty. All colored up with black and purple and blue; little bit of yellow and green on the edges, too.” He shrugs, nuzzles into Harry’s body; he uses his knee, spreads Harry’s legs, slots their torsos and lower halves together beautifully, completely, and Harry arches, bucks just a little bit to finish that sultry contact because it’s all he kind of wants at the moment. “I don’t mind it, though. Kind of reminds me of the bruises you’ve got between your thighs that I gave you the other day.”

Harry shivers, opens his eyes; the ceiling is tall and dark, bark brown like a towering pine tree, with intricate designs swirled into the darkness, all gold and ivory and bronze. “I don’t want them to fade, Niall,” he says, and there’s a lot hidden behind his words, too — he doesn’t want the bruises to fade, doesn’t want the time to fade, doesn’t want the summer to fade, doesn’t want the memories to fade, doesn’t want the happiness to fade.

*Ever.*

But it will. And it is. Quicker than he can enjoy it.

“They won’t,” Niall replies, kisses the words onto Harry’s skin and imprints them there, burns them there. “I won’t let them.” He leans up then, puts his face just above Harry’s, and grins. “As long as you want them to be there, I’ll make sure they stay.”

Always. Always, always, always.

Harry blinks, slants his head and stares at Niall’s eyes, stares into Niall’s eyes; they’re beautiful, he’s
beautiful, and Harry feels as if he could never compare but he finds that he doesn’t care because
Niall is his affinity and that’s all that matters.

“Are you gonna kiss me?”

Niall wets his lips. “If you want me to, yeah.”

“I do.”

I always do.

Niall smiles, soft and so small, so little, and leans forward; his lips grab at Harry’s in the most tender,
most gentle kind of way, and Harry brings both of his hands up to curl his fingers into Niall’s hair
and hold him there, hold him still, while Niall’s keeping his balance above Harry on his elbows and
combing across Harry’s forehead with his fingertips and it’s soft, so easy, so careful.

Their breaths both smell awful, disgusting; Niall’s mouth tastes dry and old, and Harry knows his
isn’t much better, but that doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter. Because people are real, because they are
real — bad breath is real, nasty mouth is real, pimples are real, sticky skin is real, greasy hair is real,
sweat is real, body odor is real, the feelings that are swarming like a mess of buzzing bees in the pit
of his stomach is real. It’s all real, and Harry can’t hide from it, won’t hide from it. Ever.

Why hide from it, why run from it? Why choose dreams over reality?

Niall makes a noise in the back of his throat, falls from his elbows and lands on top of Harry, lands
all over Harry and Harry wants him inside, oh God, Harry wants him inside so badly; they’re flush
from head to toe, fitted together like the braids woven in an ornate basket, and Harry’s never thought
of how impeccably perfect they are but he is now, he is now, and it’s soaring him through the sky,
putting him on new heights he’s never reached before.

This is it. This is it. It’s Niall. It always was Niall, and it’s always going to be Niall. Always.

“We need to brush our teeth,” Niall announces, smears against Harry’s lips as he pulls away, as he
pushes himself up to sit on Harry’s hips, comfortable and hard and tall and heavy and everything to
Harry. “We really need to brush our teeth. We taste awful.”

Harry giggles. “We don’t taste near as awful as the pimple on my nose feels, I promise you,” he says,
teases, puts his hands on Niall’s hips and he’s kind of shocked to see that they very closely swallow
up Niall’s love handles. Whoa. He’s never realized he’s this big.

Niall’s lopsided, goofy grin falls from his face. “Oh,” he says, breathes, knits his brows together as
he puts one of his hands on Harry’s face, cups Harry’s cheek. “I’ve never noticed before.”

“Noticed what?”

“You. You, like this.” He moves his hand up, trails his fingertip across Harry’s bushy brows and
tries to smooth them down. “You’re such a man. You look like such a man. You’re not a kid
anymore.”

“We aren’t kids anymore.”

Because Niall’s a man, too. Masculine, hard-edged and mature with muscles, with ridged power;
hairy, thick, heavy, thoughtful in the sense that he’s learning how to be big and not little anymore.
And it’s weird — it’s so very weird and so very hard to transition from child to adult, to move from
little to big, but they’re doing it. They’re doing it, and they’re doing it together.
“It’s just — we’ve grown up together. I’ve not noticed how much you’ve changed ‘cause I’m always by your side.” He smiles, shrugs; Niall’s not the greatest with words, but he is exceptional with getting his thoughts across through actions, through touch and feel.

Harry gulps. “How?”

“You’re harder here. Sharper.” He moves his hand down, drags his fingers across the line of Harry’s jaw; Harry feels fire and flames licking his skin at Niall’s touch. “And bigger, too. You’re bigger everywhere.” His touch moves down, across the thickness of Harry’s throat and the acute protrusions of Harry’s collarbones and to Harry’s chest, right between the space of his hard nipples. “You’re bigger here. Especially here. You can pick me up and hold me tight and I don’t have to worry about hurting you because you’re so big.” He presses down, hard, and moves his hand back up, settles his clenched fist into the hollow of Harry’s throat. “And when you talk, when you explain things to me your voice doesn’t break anymore. You’re deep. Your voice is deep and it makes me shiver because I know what you sound like when you whisper words in my ear at night and I like that. I like that a whole lot.”

Gooseflesh runs across Harry’s skin in the way that children chase after lightning bugs during the nights of summer. “You make me out to be beautiful,” he says, digs his nails into Niall’s flesh; it’s a tether, a fetter that keeps him solidly on the ground. “You make me feel so beautiful.”

He’s not. Harry’s not beautiful at all. His hair is long and greasy, and his nose is straight and pimpled, and his limbs are long and awkward; he’s got rolls on his tummy and a thick layer of skin on his back that gives him a muffin top whenever his jeans are too tight and his thighs have tiny pale pink stretch marks because he grew too quick and this stomach is sort of pudgy, swollen. His ears are small and his lips are large; his eyes aren’t the same size and he’s got a mole to the left of his mouth and he talks too slow, takes too long, curses too much.

None of that matches up with the idea of beauty the world has.

He’s not beautiful. Attractive maybe, and enticing in a strange, untraditional way, but not beautiful — not beautiful like Niall.

It’s okay, though. It is. He’s never cared about how he looks, about how people look at him; all that matters is that he’s satisfied with himself, is that he doesn’t hate himself, and besides, Niall likes his body and likes his face and likes his mind. It’s been proven time and time and time again, and he doesn’t really rely on Niall’s opinion but it means a lot. It means so much.

“I don’t think you should be ashamed of the way you look now,” Niall continues, traces his fingertips across the lean muscles on Harry’s tummy. “Not when you’re around me, at least.” He shrugs, and there’s a blazing inferno in Harry’s stomach; Niall’s eyes are big and bright and deeper than the ocean. “I think you’re beautiful. I don’t think you should worry about the way you look now, at this very second.”

Harry gulps. “How do I look?” he asks, blinks, tries to settle his heart; this and this and this, shifting souls and heavy hearts and magical minds, this and this and this, simple and soft and sweet. “How do you see me?”

“You look like you’re as happy as you could be in this moment,” Niall answers, furrows his brows and wrinkles his nose. “You look like you’ve gone through hell to be the person you are today, and that person is wonderful. You look like a warrior who can take on an entire army and still come out on top without even a scratch.” He shrugs, blinks, and damn, the smile on his face, higher on the left than the right, makes Harry tingle and shiver, and he feels every bit as wonderful as Niall thinks he is. Every bit. “You look like somebody I could spend the rest of my life with.”
Harry grabs Niall around the neck and brings him down; their lips meet in a fierce kiss, and it’s a few more minutes till they coax themselves into getting out of bed to shower and even longer under the spray of the water as they giggle and wash each other and laugh and whisper secrets into one another’s ears.

And this is good. This is so good. This is paradise, pure and raw and innocent and unadulterated; this is them and no one else, never anyone else, and this is so, so good.

Harry hopes it lasts, hopes this feel of explicit joy lasts long after the warmth of summer is gone.

Harry’s got his hair tied at the back of his neck in a loose ponytail and a hat he bought for a quarter at a gas station miles the other way keeping the little flyaway pieces out of his eyes; his sunglasses are clean of the stickiness on the lenses that was spilled and he’s got his shoes off with his bare feet up on the dash and he’s waving his hand out the window, following the waves of the wind, and listening to the radio as Pink Floyd plays, humming along to the instrumentals and whispering the lyrics under his breath when he catches the tune just right.

And Niall’s driving, wearing a bent hat that’s pulled low over his face to fend off the sun they’re driving toward and he’s singing — he’s got the radio on, turned up as far as it’ll go because that’s how he is, that’s who he is, and he’s singing loud, at the top of his lungs and so horrible his voice is cracking from the strain of the notes he’s trying to hit, and Harry can’t stop staring at him.

He can’t stop staring.

Because Niall’s got this thing about him, got this something about him — it’s so bright, so in your face and loud and impossible to ignore no matter how many times you turn away; the sun can’t compare and the stars can’t compare and the moon can’t compare and the entire universe can’t compare to the brilliance. It’s just — it’s just there, and it’s indescribable, and it grabs Harry softly, takes him by the hand and pulls him along, pulls him in, and he doesn’t fight the rush of volcanic flames that lick his body and burn his soul.

He loves it. He loves Niall. He’s in love with Niall.

And sometimes when Niall looks at him, sometimes when Niall speaks to him, he kind of thinks of Niall may be in love with him, too.

And how perfect would that be?

Two kings with ripped up jeans and an affinity for colors finding their castle within one another.

“I like tattoos,” Niall says, whispers in Harry’s ear; Harry’s driving now, after having passed through most of the plantation homes and on into Mississippi, and Niall’s in the backseat, was taking a short nap so he could stay awake for the rest of the evening and drive through the night if they decide to keep going, and now he’s up, sat in the bucket seat behind Harry, and it’s dangerous, very dangerous, for Niall to have his arms wrapped around Harry from behind while Harry’s driving but Harry doesn’t care and Niall doesn’t seem to care, either, and it’s the rush of it all, really, that makes Harry take one of his hands off the wheel and find Niall’s where they’re clasped together at the base of his throat. “I like tattoos a lot. I think we should get tattoos. In Atlanta, before the concert. I’ve still got a lot of money left.”

Harry raises a brow, meets Niall’s eyes in the rearview mirror; it’s fire blue and earth green, different
and the same. “Matching?”

“Fuck no,” Niall replies, snorts, and Harry lets out a laugh that rumbles low in his chest as he puts the blinker on, as he takes a left turn off the interstate and onto a local highway that vibrates bumpily beneath the tires. “That’s fucking stupid.”

Harry laughs, throws his head back against the seat and guffaws; Niall’s chuckling, too, right beside his ear with his chin braced against the shoulder of the seat. “I’m definitely not disagreeing with you on that one, for sure,” he replies, warm and fuzzy and he’s never realized how beautiful the lights coming off the streetlamps were before but he does now, he does now, and they’re pretty, all orange and yellow and white and green. Beautiful. In a dirty sort of way, that is, but still. “What d’you have in mind, then?”

Niall hums in Harry’s ear, and it’s a pulsation on Harry’s shoulder that makes him smile as if he’s just been given the whole world to hold in his hands. “I was thinkin’… I like you. I like your name. I like the way your name rolls off my tongue. I like the way your name looks when I write it on paper. I like the way it feels when I hear your name, whether someone’s saying it or I’m saying it.” He giggles, and Harry’s never had to school himself on — on relaxing, on calming down, on soothing his heart to a steady thud-thud-thud before, but Niall makes him do all sorts of things he’s never had, never wanted to do and he reckons it’s good to get out of his comfort zone every once in a while, as long as Niall’s there with him. “And I think… I think it would make a great tattoo, you know, your name right across my collarbone just above my heart. People will ask, and I’ll get to say your name, and I’ll get to talk about you, too.”

“Why?”

Why are you telling me this? Why are you making my head hurt trying to keep up with your actions? Why are you taking my heart in your hands and rearranging it to fit with yours? Why are you making my skin tingle like there’s snow falling from the sky? Why can I feel the sun in my bones when you look at me? Why is my reality with you better than any dreams I can have of a fabricated partner?

Why, why, why?

Why do you say these things? Why do you do these things? Why do you do this to me?

Why? That’s all Harry wants to know. He just wants to know — why he has to hurt, why he has to suffer, why he has to fight, why he has to barter, why he has to feel bad for wanting to be happy with the person that makes him happy. He just wants to know why.

“’Cause you’re my best friend, silly boy,” Niall answers, and he’s got that name again, that fucking nickname, and Harry’s on fire, going up in a blue blaze of hot flame tat matches the color of Niall’s eyes; he wonders if that’s it, if it’s all he’s going to be to Niall, his best friend. He wonders if that’s enough. And he knows it isn’t, knows it never will be. If he and Niall split after this road trip is over, then that’s it. That’s it. And Niall knows it, too. “And I want to have you with me no matter where I am.”

What does that mean?

Harry meets Niall’s gaze in the rearview mirror again; he isn’t sure how to understand, isn’t sure how to put explanation to the way the streetlights bounce off of Niall’s eyes, but it’s happening in the same way he’s falling in love with Niall, fast and hard and loud and bright, and he doesn’t question it because questioning things, striving to elaborate and reason takes away from the feel, takes away from the experience, and he isn’t going to lose out on any more moments ever again.
Ever again.

He’s going to take them as they are, short or long and bad or good, and he is going to appreciate them, is going to respect them. They’ll never be where they are right now again; Harry hates the fragility but he is not going to try to fix it.

“Let’s stop for the night,” he says, Harry says, and it's kind of a breathless question but it’s posed as a demand and he doesn’t care, he doesn’t care because he just wants to lay down with Niall, in the backseat or in a hotel bed or on the plush grass. “We can sleep in the van, watch the stars. Catch breakfast in the morning at a café and head out again.”

Niall wets his mouth; his tongue brushes against Harry’s earlobe and God, the shivers that wrack his body could surely break the entire world in pieces. “I want to.” He nods. “If you want to.”

And Harry wants to. He wants to so badly.
Harry yawns hugely, loudly, and rubs his eyes hard, fast; they’re heavy and thick, weighted with sleep — or lack thereof, really — and everything that falls into his line of vision is blurred around the edges and obscured in the middle and he doesn’t think it’s possible to go blind from having your eyes open for a long time but he doesn’t want to find out, either, and he hopes Niall’s in the same boat as him on the situation.

It’s three twenty-seven in the morning. The neon green numbers are a little bit blurred, but he can make them out more or less perfectly when he squints, and even though it hurts his eyes he tolerates the annoyance. Niall’s been driving since ten-thirty, since they stopped at a twenty-four hour diner on the side of the road in east-central Mississippi — maybe; Harry kind of ripped the map a while back near the border of Mississippi and Louisiana, and he hasn’t been bothered to buy another yet — that was only a little bit sketchy; they stopped off at a supermarket before it closed, too, and loaded up on snacks and unperishable foods because, after they drove for a while in an attempt to find somewhere decent to stop for the night with no luck, Niall decided he wants to stay on the road through the night in hopes that maybe a hotel will pop up, but it’s been hours and Harry is tired and the bumps are making his head hurt and his bum is numb and he doesn’t want to ask Niall to stop in the middle of a town, of a state they’ve never been so he can step outside the vehicle and stretch his legs, bring a little bit of feeling back into them, and he just wants to stop.

He just wants to stop. And sleep. And eat a little bit, too, because he’s a bottomless pit and the sugar cookies in the backseat are soft enough to melt in his mouth.

He doesn’t say anything, though. The windows are rolled up because the bugs are bad and the smell of cattle pastures reeks of hot manure in the sweltering night and it’s raining just a little bit, too, and he puts his forehead against the glass and sighs, shuts his eyes from the bleariness and relaxes for a moment.

Niall’s been talkative all day. He’s jumped from topic to topic to topic, and it’s really interesting to listen to Niall rave about basketball and chocolate chip ice cream and zoos and Christmas cards with handwritten notes inside that he’s got kept safe in a shoebox under his bed; it’s really eye-opening to hear the stories Niall remembers from Ireland, all the green and open space and love, romantic and familial and platonic, and the freedom and liberation to go, go, go.

He said he wanted to go back. Niall said he wanted to go back to Ireland. Not to live there, not to buy a house and set up his life in his place of origin, no, but to experience his culture and learn about his country, learn about his family, learn about his father. It’s been over a decade since Niall last talked to the man, and while Harry hasn’t seen his father in person in almost the same amount of time, he still talks to his dad — enough to know that the man is remarried with three other kids all below the age of ten and that he’s doing well for himself.

And that’s okay. Harry doesn’t hold any animosity toward his father for moving on and finding love again, finding himself again. His mum has done the same. The reason Harry’s so short with his father is because he’s never made a move to contact him, never made a move or insinuated that he wanted...
more than a long distance phone call every other month with his eldest son.

He never showed an interest in Harry. Or Gemma, for that matter — and not that she needs her dad, not that Harry needs his dad. The two of them have gotten on just fine without one thanks to the resilience of their mother, precious and pure as she is, and Harry isn’t sure if he would change anything if he were given the ability to go back in time.

*Look at me now. I did it without you, Dad.*

All of it. *Everything.* His father should be proud.

He wonders if this is how Niall feels — kind of empty, kind of mad, kind of sympathetic; a little bit lost and a whole lot confused. Is he not good enough at being a son? Is he a letdown to his father? Is he not what the man wanted when he was born, all crying and wailing and red-faced with the gulps of breath he took in?

He wonders if Niall’s scared of never being enough for the man who helped give him life because Harry is. Harry’s more scared than he wants to admit.

And that doesn’t make any sense because Gemma isn’t scared of not being enough, isn’t scared of letting the man down. She’s so tough, so strong — Harry envies her in the same way that the sun envies the moon for all the memories made by its pale light.

But then Harry has to remember — she was old enough. She was old enough, four years older than him, and she remembers why. Why the divorce and move happened. Harry doesn’t. He was never told. He never asked. Gemma told him not to. He listens to her the most out of anyone in his life, even Niall.

He knows it isn’t bad. He hopes it isn’t bad. His mum is a tough, independent, relentless woman; he was raised by a single mother who made it home just in time for dinner when he was a younger child and left the house of a morning just in time to kiss him on the forehead before he caught the bus for school.

It didn’t bother him then. It kind of does now, though, that he’s older — and especially now, especially now with Niall by his side driving down a highway in the middle of a state they’ve never been to before because he knows that what you lose in time cannot ever be made up and he prays that he can do something with himself before his mum grows too old to appreciate all the hard work she put into raising him even if she wasn’t there all the time.

He owes her. He owes her the whole fucking world.

(Gemma just gets an island. The biggest.)

(And Niall? Well, Niall gets *him*, as long as he wants.)

“*You sleeping?***

Harry hums, opens his eyes and turns his head just a little bit; the lights from the dash hit Niall and he’s bathed in neon green, all mysterious and dark and everything Harry wants to have. “*Not yet,*” he replies, shakes his head; Niall’s smile is small and soft in the light, and his hair is wild from the wind. Harry really wants to kiss him right now and taste the hint of rebellion that makes his smile crooked. “*I’m close, though.*”

To a lot of things.
“Thinking, then?” Niall asks, blinks once and then returns his gaze to the road. One of his hands moves from the steering wheel and lands on Harry’s thigh, Harry’s bare thigh — because he was sick of wearing jeans in the humid heat of the south, okay, and boxers sounded comfy — and his fingertips are cold enough to shock a little bit of life into Harry’s system.

“Yeah.” He’s breathless, and he can’t get his hands wrapped around Niall’s wrist fast enough because he’s falling and he needs to not land hard, needs to be let down easy, and Niall’s always had a great way of stopping him before he hits the bottom.

“About what?”

Harry chuckles, lays one of his palms across the top of Niall’s hand and wonders why they fit, why they work so well. “Dad,” he replies, reckons staring at the scabs and scars on Niall’s fingers is better than meeting Niall’s intrusive eyes. “My dad. It’s been a long time.”

“It has.”

“I haven’t called him in a long time,” Harry announces, purses his lips; Gemma’s more available at the college to make long distance calls and while she’s sure to at least talk to the man once a month, Harry’s let himself embrace the fact that he’s never going to be enough and running the phone bill up isn’t worth feeling inadequate. He asks about Harry sometimes, though, his dad. Only sometimes. Harry wishes it were enough, but it isn’t. “I wonder if he misses me. I was never good enough in his eyes, but I still… I still wonder if he misses me like I miss him.”

Niall turns his hand over and interlaces his fingers with Harry’s, and it’s a fierce movement that matches the beats of Harry’s heart, all thump-thump-thump. “Don’t do that, Harry,” Niall says, swears, and there’s so much emotion in his words, hurt and anger and compassion and pure growth, and Harry knows he isn’t alone in feeling this way, knows that he’s never been alone in feeling this way. “Don’t do this to yourself ‘cause I promise you that it’s only going to fuck up the image of him you have in your head more and it’s not worth you feeling as if you aren’t enough. You are. You’re more than enough.”

For who?

Harry snorts, and the smirk on his face is twisted like the memories he has of his father, faded and blurry and distorted from age. “That image is already too fucked up to be repaired.”

The vehicle swerves in the next moment, abrupt and all of a sudden; it skids onto the side of the road, into a gravelly parking lot that leads to some sort of big piece of machinery, and Niall shoves the car in park and takes his other hand off the wheel, reaches out and uses it to grab Harry by the chin to pull him in, kind of rough. “’M gonna make you come for me,” he says, whispers in the neon green darkness right in Harry’s face before their lips are pushed together and Niall’s moving his hand from Harry’s thigh up, slow slow slow, to settle on the soft bulge in Harry’s boxers.

Harry’s body jerks somewhat and his mouth drops open; Niall’s tongue slips inside and licks against Harry’s as Harry’s legs spread wide and his knees knock against the door and the dash in his haste to make this better for the both of them.

Niall squeezes, just a little bit, and Harry’s mouth opens further, opens wider, and Niall’s still kissing him, still trying to kiss him, but Harry’s too busy focusing on his fluttery breathing to keep up with the contact as Niall adds to the pressure, and it’s delicious, so very delicious that Harry isn’t sure how he’s went for so long without it.

He puts his hands on the waist of his boxers, lifts his ass off the seat and shoves the underwear down
to his knees, tangling them in the bend of his legs; Niall’s bare hand closes around the base of Harry’s half-hard cock and he squeezes, wraps his fingers around the hilt and uses pressure to bring Harry to total stiffness before he moves his palm up, dry and loose, and presses the tip of his thumb into Harry’s tender, sensitive slit.

_Holy fuck._

“Niall!” Harry yelps, flays his arms out; one hand grabs the handle of the door and nearly breaks it off while the other finds Niall’s bicep for a strong fetter. He digs his nails in, relishes the hiss of slight pain Niall breathes against his cheek as he moves his palm down, pulling back the foreskin slowly and hotly, so very hot and sensual and lascivious and sexy that Harry’s fairly sure he’s probably going to blow his load all over the place in less than a minute. “Niall, holy shit, baby, what are you doing?”

Niall laughs, puffs the chuckled air against Harry’s cheek. “I’m making you come, silly boy,” he replies, _dammit_, and brings his free hand up, grabs Harry’s chin and turns his face till they’re eye to eye and nearly mouth to mouth. Niall’s breath smells like pizza and sweet cookies, and Harry is aflame with the fire of love for the man in front of him. “Shut up and kiss me, yeah?”

Harry nods, parts his mouth and leans forward; their lips meet, messy and a little bit wet, a little bit rough, a little bit overwhelming with too much teeth and too much tongue, but Niall moans, hums a soft groan of erosive pleasure, and Harry brings both of his hands up to Niall’s cheeks, to cup Niall’s face and hold him there, hold him still as Niall moves his palm up and down, up and down.

It dawns on Harry that this is wrong — this is definitely wrong. Niall’s using the raw physical attraction they have for one another to distract Harry from the perilous thoughts of his father, of their fathers and how they match up in the men’s lives, and it’s not okay to do that — it’s not okay to use something so vulnerable and so open and so pure and so much more than can be explained in words to take his mind off of subjects he needs to start thinking about, but fuck, Niall’s moving his hand so good, so great, so agonizingly slow and soft and sensational, and it’s dry, and it kind of hurts, too, and Harry’s using his tongue to dance with Niall’s, to show Niall what he wants, and he isn’t trying to put elaboration to the reason Niall pulled over so quick to give Harry a swift handie on the side of the road in a town, in a state they’ve never been in before, he isn’t, but he can’t help the fact that he feels as if this is Niall trying to tell Harry that he loves him, that he’ll always love him.

In his fucked up way, that is.

And maybe he does. Maybe Niall really does love Harry — in his own way, in the weird way that he has. And that’s nice, that’s amazing, that’s earth-shattering and sun-breaking and all sorts of other things, it is, but Harry doesn’t want to set himself up for heartbreak and he knows Niall doesn’t love him in the way that he loves Niall, knows Niall won’t ever love him in the way that he loves Niall, and that’s okay.

That’s okay.

It really, really is.

Because he’s got Niall like this — he’s got Niall on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere in a van the both of them have pulled in numerous times and he’s swallowing Niall’s spit and Niall’s singing along with his choked noises and they’re both moving, both thrusting, both kind of fighting for a completion only they can give to each other.

And the thing is — it’s not romantic. Nothing about this is romantic, if you take the time out of your
day and sit down to think about it. It’s not romantic at all.

But Harry doesn’t want romantic. He wants real — he wants Niall’s bad choices and bad decisions and bad words and bad habits and bad actions and bad advice and bad smells and bad attitudes and bad thoughts. He wants all of that, and more, because when you love someone, when you really love someone, you don’t hide their bad qualities from your line of view. Instead, you look at them — and you look at them again, again, again, till you can smile, till you can shrug your shoulders, till you can admit to yourself that, “Yeah, that’s a shitty quality and I don’t really like it, but it’s okay because I like you.”

(Unless that quality is killing. Or, like, anything that can be argued as being illegal and unhealthy. Not brushing your teeth before you go to bed is illegal.)

(Anyway.)

Niall tears his lips from Harry’s, puts them against Harry’s throat. “Are you gonna come, Harry?” he asks, burns the words into Harry’s skin as he starts to move quicker, faster, harder. “You gonna come for me, baby?”

Harry opens his mouth, keens low in the back of his throat; he throws his head back, bangs it against the headrest of the seat, and looks down, sees that Niall’s using the precum as lubrication to make Harry come faster, and it’s a sight to behold, really, the quick flicking of Niall’s hand as he rubs Harry’s cock, vigorous and valiant in his efforts.

“Yeah,” he replies, whines, draws the word out on a high-pitched exhale that echoes at the end. “Yeah, Ni, I’m gonna come. I’m gonna come for you.”

Niall giggles. “Good,” he says, flicks his wrist in just the right way, squeezes just the right way, digs into the slit just the right way, and Harry’s coming in the next second, like that like that like that, and it hits him hard and causes his body to shudder, to stutter; he opens his mouth, shuts his eyes, lets out a squeal of a whimper, and then Niall’s got his mouth on the tip, licking at the jizz and eating it up, eating it all up, and Harry puts one of his hands on the back of Niall’s head, keeps him there as he rides the waves of his orgasm to the shore that’s covered with golden sand the color of yellow that resides in Niall’s blue, blue eyes.

“Ni — Niall?”

Niall laughs again, chuckles into the skin of Harry’s tummy. “Yeah, Harry?” he calls, quiet and easy, and Harry sighs, combs one hand through Niall’s hair while the other reaches for Niall’s face, cups Niall’s cheek, brings him up till they’re eye to eye in the green darkness of the van. “You taste bad, but I’m still gonna eat it all up every time.”

Harry rolls his eyes, laughs at Niall’s words and the blush on his own face and how they’re still them. “You’re an ass,” he says, teases, and runs his fingers through Niall’s greasy hair. “And you made me come just so I would stop thinking about my dad.”

“I did.” Niall nods, unashamed of his choice.

Harry chews on his bottom lip; it’s a little bit sore from Niall’s ferocious kisses, but he kind of likes the pain. “Why?” he asks, blinks, rubs at a little bit of sweat on Niall’s temple. “Why would you do that to me?”

“I didn’t want you to be sad anymore,” Niall replies, leans into Harry’s touch till they’re forehead to forehead. “Your dad doesn’t deserve any sadness you have to give him, and you don’t deserve any
sadness that he makes you have, either, because you are just fine. You are just fine, Harry.”

“So you jerked me off to take my mind off my dad?”

Niall snorts. “When you say it that way, it sounds like a bad thing,” he jokes, teases, and it is bad, really, but it’s not the worst because the worst hasn’t happened and Harry thinks Niall knows that. “I did what came to my mind first. And it worked. It worked, didn’t it?”

Harry licks his lips, tastes Niall’s tongue on his mouth. “It did,” he answers; he’s tired of wasting time thinking about what he doesn’t have when he has enough right now, right at this moment, to keep him happy for the rest of his life. “You did.”

“Good.” Niall hums. “I’m glad.”

He kisses Harry again, all mouth and lips, and Harry finds Niall’s hand, interlaces their fingers and wonders if Niall used Harry for a way to take his mind off of his own father, too, and if he did — well, if he did, Harry can’t find it in him to be mad.

“I’m pretty sure this is illegal.”

Niall shrugs, drops down to the tall grass of the ground and holds his hand up for Harry, beckoning Harry to come along with him. “And you’re probably right,” he says, and Harry reckons this is a win for him, getting Niall to admit that this is a bad idea and all, but he takes Niall’s hand anyway and falls down right beside him on the grass, on the ground, and tucks their fingers together on his lap because Niall doesn’t ask for much and when he does, it’s only for Harry’s presence by his side. Harry can surely give that. “But the sun’s about to come up and I’m tired of driving and the planes are pretty to watch and I want to be peaceful and calm with you for a little while.”

Yeah — yeah, pretty. They’re flying right above their heads, landing about a half mile away on a track that’s lit up with orange and yellow and white, bright and bold and brilliant, and it’s loud, and there’s a lot of air, too, that smacks into the backs of their necks and tips them forward and blows the tall, tall grass around them over, but Harry reckons that Niall is right. The planes are kind of pretty to watch, especially when they’re bathed in the colors of the runway and the dark blue light of early dawn and he has a moment to wonder about the lives of the people on board.

“So you’d rather watch a few planes land and risk getting arrested just because they’re pretty?”

Niall nods, tips his head to the side and lays his temple on Harry’s shoulder; it’s a heavy, solid weight, and Harry smiles and basks in the little bit of colorful joy it plants in his soul. “I think pretty things are worth the risk sometimes,” he says, and Harry wonders what Niall’s definition of pretty is because Harry thinks that all things, thinks that everything is beautiful in its own way and he isn’t naïve or conceited enough to think he himself is pretty. “Besides, rules were meant to be broken, and it’s only illegal —”

“If you get caught,” Harry cuts Niall off, finishes the sentence for him because this isn’t the first and definitely won’t be the last. “Trust me, I know.”

“I do trust you.” Niall scoots a little bit closer, nudges their shoulders together and knocks Harry off balance so horribly that he falls over, falls backward, lands on a rather sharp rock that has him squealing and pressing against Niall more firmly, and then they’re lying on the ground, looking up at the sky, and Harry kind of likes the way the grass tickles at the back of his neck even though his spine is smarting from the impact. “You have to admit that this is peaceful, if only a little bit.”
“It is.” Harry blinks, slow and languid; the sky is darker in this position, midnight blue, but it’s
lightening up rather quickly and he can see enough from the glow of the runway to meet Niall’s eyes
as he leans up above Harry. “It really is.”

Niall smiles. “I like watching planes,” he says, begins, and Harry wonders what sort of truth of
himself that Niall’s about to reveal right now because that seems to be all that he’s been doing lately
and Harry loves it. “I like the fact that they can carry people from one place to another quite easily.
And sometimes I wonder what it would be like if I were to buy a ticket to take me to the other side of
the world and just — just pretend to be normal like the people beside me in the rows.”

Harry unlaces his fingers from Niall’s and brings his hand up to cup Niall’s cheek, to rub at the skin
of Niall’s prickly face; sometimes he pretends Niall’s face is a gathering of paint, and he wants to
smear the lavender bags of sleep deprivation over the pansy pink flush of life and create the prettiest
sunset backlit by the ocean-like color of Niall’s blue, gold, green eyes.

“The other side of the world, eh?” he repeats, smiles up at Niall’s tiny nod. “Any place in
particular?”

“No. Anywhere but here, anywhere but L.A, and I don’t really care as long as I’m with you.” He
shrugs. “Sometimes, I think about what it would be like you and I were to board a plane in the
middle of the night and not land till we’re completely out of money, too. Sometimes I think about
running away with you.”

Harry’s heart seizes, clenches in his chest. “That’s what we’re doing now, Niall.”

“No, it’s not.” Niall shakes his head. “We’re going back, and if you’re going back then you aren’t
really running away.” He leans in, leans down, presses a quick kiss to the tip of Harry’s nose just
because, apparently, and Harry’s pink, too. “One of these days, I just want to run away with you and
never come back.”

“One of these days?”

Niall swallows and he’s close, so close that Harry can count the freckles on his cheeks. “I’ll go away
right now with you if you want to,” he says, wets his lips, and Harry just brings Niall’s face down to
his, slants their lips together again, and it’s smoother this time, gentler this time; Harry can feel in
Niall’s touch all that he’s trying to say, all that he’s not trying to say, and he hopes that Niall can
understand how much he’s appreciated, how much he’s cared for, how much he’s loved even though
they’re discovering themselves as much as they’re discovering each other.

Maybe this is the right time to tell Niall that Harry’s in love with him.

Harry pulls away, wipes at the string of saliva that falls on his cheek and he isn’t disgusted, can’t
ever be disgusted. “Niall?” he breathes, asks, and puts both hands on Niall’s cheeks; his heart is thick
and fast, thud-thud-thud, and he wonders if Niall can hear the pounding and if it’s music to Niall’s
ears like Niall’s breath is to Harry’s. “Niall, I —”

But then there’s a loud yell of, “Hey, you can’t be here!” and it’s followed by the swivel of blue and
red lights and Harry’s heart kind of drops into his stomach because this is not good.
i fought the law

Chapter Notes

Early update because I'm on break?

and the law won

― Bobby Fuller Four, ‘I Fought the Law’

“We could always run.”

Sometimes Niall’s a little bit too fearless, a little bit too out of reach and touch with reality and sense for Harry, and maybe — probably — if they weren’t being approached by one, two, three, four, five officers decked out in their uniforms, brown and tan and black, and backlit by the flashing blue and red lights coming from the three squad cars behind them, parked on the small road Niall left the van on, that he would very well smack Niall upside the head to knock some common cognizance into him.

(And — well, just to clarify a bit of confusion, Harry guesses sometimes he kind of loses his mind when they’re together, too, the two of them, and it’s just them, just the way they seem to be making one another feel lately, and he can’t really fault Niall for being a little unhinged at the moment because it happened to him, still happens to him, will always probably happen to him.)

“No, fuck you,” Harry says, hisses beneath his breath, echoed by Niall’s glorious laughter, and they scramble to their feet; Harry’s knee hits the rock he landed on when Niall pulled him down and he grunts, groans low in his throat, and when he’s standing, wobbly and tired with vision blurred by lack of sleep and an abundance of fluffy hot love swimming around in his heart as he rubs at the smarting bruise on his leg, Niall searches out his hand and finds his palm, interlaces their fingers like the way the strings of their souls are intertwined. Intimate, innocently raw. Forever. “I’m not running, and neither are you. That never works out in favor for anyone. Shut the hell up.”

“That’s a lie,” Niall quips, tips to the side and meshes his shoulder against Harry’s, hard and hot. “Lou and I have gotten away quite a few times on foot. It’s a little bit hard, but you’re pretty quick and you run fast when you’re scared. We could prob’ly pull it off.”

Yeah, Harry’s heard the stories — that’s right: stories. Plural. Louis and Niall are the partiers, bigger than Harry and Liam, respectfully, and the tales they’ve brought back from hours of hanging out, from hours of getting wild with a few friends could fill up as many books as years they have been alive.

It’s cool. Repetitive, sometimes idiotic and always illegal, but cool. Harry thinks it would be fun to read about, whether in the history books or jailbirds.

“Fuck off. I’m not running.”

“You’ve got a lot of anger stored up in your heart, don’t you?” Niall replies, teases, and he’s always the life of the party, always the apple of Harry’s eye, always the person that shines brighter than the goddamn sun and moon and stars and everything else all rolled up into one, fuck, and sometimes
Harry thinks it’s too much but he knows it will never, ever be enough.

Because that’s it — that’s Niall. He’s too much but he’s also never enough, and it’s a repeating cycle of searching and finding and realizing, and searching and finding and realizing, over and over and over.

And maybe it’s a waste of time. Maybe it is. But Harry has his own concept of time, on how the moments and hours and days and weeks and months and years should be spent, and it’s relative, really, and he favors having fun over having abundance, and he would rather have a summer of absolute love with the one person who he cannot imagine ever letting go than spend the rest of his life with someone he has had to settle for who doesn’t interest him in the slightest.

He isn’t quite sure what that says about him. Or Niall, for that matter.

Harry blinks; the lights are bright and blinding, much more so than the soft runway illumination behind them, and he doesn’t like how the calm piece of paradise he and Niall were creating, were nurturing just a moment ago has been disrupted so rudely, so profusely and disrespectfully.

But, then again, the two of them are the ones trespassing on a bout of private property after hours next to a rather busy airport and his irritation at the men doing their job isn’t as justified as he thinks it could be no matter how much he wishes he and Niall could have stayed in the peaceful serenity of telling their dreams to one another and listening, believing, living with each other.

He likes that. He likes that a lot. The ease of just letting the moments pass by as they bathe in the memories that will gather in the backs of their minds and create the stories they tell when they’re old makes Harry wonder if he is the only person in the world who has ever been able to find the meaning of life.

And he still isn’t exactly sure what that is, the meaning of life. He thinks it varies for everyone. He thinks his meaning is to love. He thinks Niall’s meaning is to live. He thinks they fit — he thinks their meanings fit. He thinks Niall is the closest thing to a soulmate, to his soulmate he’s ever going to meet, ever going to be with, and he still isn’t exactly sure if he does believe in that thought.

“Not so much anger, really,” Harry replies, whispers; the officers are closer now, and it’s two females and three males, short and slim and thick and tall and broad, and he’s only a little bit scared because he doesn’t want his mum to find out about this ordeal and Gemma isn’t here to give her worldly advice. “More common sense, if you think about it. You definitely need it.”

“I tend to not think most of the time,” Niall retorts, smooth like the crunchy peanut butter they’ve got tucked under the seat in the van for the cookies to be dipped in, yum, and Harry rolls his eyes because Niall — because of course Niall isn’t taking this seriously. Of course. He never takes anything seriously. “I’m sure you’ve noticed.”

Except for Harry. He always takes Harry seriously. He may be the one thing Niall never pushes aside.

Harry smother a laugh behind the hand that isn’t wrapped up in Niall’s, bringing his palm to his mouth and pressing against the grin because now is not the time to laugh, especially when one of the officers is close enough for Harry to see the stern line of his brow, the firm bend of his frown, the definite outline of silver cuffs glinting from the belt wrapped around his waist.

“Oh, I’ve noticed.” He has. Harry notices everything about Niall — notices the length of his thick brown hair when it catches the sun just right, notices the shimmer of his glowing blue eyes when his gaze turns to meet Harry’s, notices the strength in his fingertips when they skim across Harry’s flesh,
notices the difference in the way he smiles when he’s with strangers and when he’s with people and when he’s with family and when he’s with Harry. And, yeah, Harry notices everything. Everything. He can’t help but not notice. “I’ve definitely noticed. I’ve also realized that you have no regard for the law, either, and that’s just not a good habit to have at all.”

“Eh. They’re just rules, right? They’re meant to be broken. They were made to be broken. The people who made them probably break them a hell of a lot more than either of us ever have.”

Harry sighs. “Not at the expense of our freedom, Niall.” Harry isn’t excited about having to control himself in a jail cell with Niall separated from him by iron bars and people, so many damn people, because he’s gotten too used to waking up with Niall’s head on his shoulder.

He doesn’t like people. Well, he loves people, but it’s just — it’s just that when people are keeping him away from Niall, he doesn’t really like them, if that makes sense. He thinks it does. To him, at least. And maybe Niall — maybe Niall feels this way, too, though not as… not as explicit, strong. Either way, it’s Harry’s business.

(And maybe Niall’s.)

Niall frowns, gosh, and his crooked smile falls from his lips, from his kissed-red lips that are swollen and puffy and colored like the juiciest cherries from Harry’s touches, mouth, and Harry thinks he would do anything to put it back and keep it there forever because it’s so bright and beautiful and part of the reason Harry can smile himself. “Harry —”

He’s cut off by one of the officers, the tall male with slim shoulders and even slender hips, and dark hair and dark skin and dark eyes, too, and he isn’t as tall as Harry and he’s definitely smaller, definitely littler in size and stature. He doesn’t seem to be much older than Harry and Niall, if he is at all.

“Hey! What are the two of you doing here?”

Niall sighs. “You know I’m not running unless you run first,” he says, whispers between the darkness that settles in the space he and Harry are in; the officer has a flashlight in his hand, and it’s pointed at both Harry and Niall, blinding them, and Niall’s eyes are squinty and little but still so, so blue. It’s all oceans and skies and freedom. “We’re in this together. You won’t go down unless I’m there with you.”

It’s simple, so simple, the declaration of loyalty and unending, unconditional truth behind Niall’s easy words, happens all the time in little actions, and Harry wants to fall to his knees, wants to kiss Niall’s feet, wants to worship Niall like the god he is, like the god he’s always been and always meant to be.

Niall is so much more than he believes himself to be — Niall is so much more than the world believes him to be. But Harry sees it, and Harry knows, too, and maybe the world doesn’t matter, maybe none of it matters — Harry’s opinion and Harry’s care and Harry’s love and Harry’s acceptance and Harry’s support — except for the way Niall sees himself.

And maybe Harry can help Niall open his eyes and see, and see, who he really is.

Maybe. He hopes he can. He truly, truly hopes he can. Because, in the end, at the end of the summer, even if he and Niall part ways, and part, like that, he doesn’t want Niall to fall back into the abyss of nothingness he’s fought so damn hard to pull himself from. Harry only wants the best for Niall, even if his best is not going to be good enough.
“Niall —”

“Did you not hear me, young men?” the officer, again, interrupts, and Harry’s getting a little bit too irritated at having to choke off the things he so badly wishes he could just say. “I asked what —”

“We heard you,” Niall replies, cuts the officer off; he’s got a smile, the daring grin that used to make rival basketball teams shiver in their shoes and Harry knows something’s up. “I promise we heard you the first time. And we were trying to do each other till you so very rudely interrupted.”

Harry turns red — like, redder than a blistering sunburn on a patch of skin that has never seen the light of say — and he’s kind of glad that the flashlight is pointed at him, at them in a way that it shadows their faces because he isn’t sure how well he can handle the shame of being caught.

And he’s not ashamed for being caught with Niall, with a male when he himself is a male. No — never. It still bothers Niall, but it’s not miffed Harry since… since that first night, when Niall talked him to an orgasm. He isn’t ashamed of being — homosexual. And is he, really, simply labeled as such even though he still finds himself attracted to women? He still likes them, still loves them. Why does he have to fall into a category?

He’s ashamed because he was caught, because Niall was caught, because he and Niall were caught being intimate, and intimate, with one another. Those moments are for them, and them alone. He’s ashamed to have a private moment of his, of theirs, interrupted.

“What?” the officer — he’s young, so young, with a squeal of a voice that makes Harry kind of laugh. He sounds like he’s still going through puberty.

“Did you not hear what I just said, young man?” Niall asks, repeats, and gosh — fuck, Harry wants to slap him so hard sometimes and his only defense is to bite his bottom lip and live through it. “We were fixing to do each other before we were interrupted. It would be greatly appreciated if we could continue trying to do each other, too. So, if you could kindly leave, it would be really, really great.”

The two women — they’re behind the first man, and the other two males are behind them — react accordingly: one with long black hair and pale skin makes a face, and the other, darker and shorter and thinner, leans over and whispers something into the first lady’s ear.

Hmm. It’s quite funny, really, in a sense — these women seem to be put off by the thought of two men laying together, if not totally disgusted by the idea, and Harry can’t find it in himself to care. And it doesn’t look as if Niall gives a fuck, either.

And that’s good. That is good. That is progress and that is hope and that is a fundamental beginning of growing together as one instead of two. Niall is flowering into a ripe white rose, and Harry is the growing stem full of thorns that’s keeping him above the ocean of weeds.

But, then again, these people are strangers, and Niall’s progress could easily be proven as nothing more than brash obnoxiousness.

Oh.

Harry digs his nails into the top of Niall’s hand, and they aren’t sharp, really, but they’re acute enough to leave some sort of impression, both physical and mental. “Niall,” he says, Harry says, beneath his breath in the same way that he was beneath Niall only moments ago. “Shut the fuck up.”

Niall giggles. “Make me,” he says, and it’s a tempt, a taunt, a threat.

Harry wishes he could. Make Niall shut the fuck up, that is — by fucking. Or… not fucking, per se,
but sex — sex because Harry is in love with Niall but Niall isn’t in love with Harry. So it’s just sex right now, for right now, because they can’t call it making love when the love isn’t mutual.

“We will,” one of the women say, the one with black hair. “This is private property, and the both of you are trespassing.” Her voice is hard, thick; her accent is different than the male’s, not as twang-like or southern, Harry reckons. “We could easily put the two of you in the back of one of the cars and bring you in and book you for trespassing.” She puts her hands to her hips, and she doesn’t need to feign intimidation because she is wildly daunting not unlike his mum and sister. “How does that sound?”

“You could easily pardon our ignorance for not knowing that this was private property and let us go free so we can continue doing each other somewhere else, hopefully in a bed with clean sheets and no rocks,” Niall replies, counters, and Harry forgot about Niall’s smartass comment but now he remembers and it’s worse the second time around, horribly so. “How does that sound?”

One of the male officers, tall and dark, says, “There is a sign that labels this property as private.” The flashlight is taken off of Harry and Niall, shined off to the left and behind him, in front of them, and Harry can see the safety outline of a sign posted right next to their vehicles. Oh. “It’s right there.”

“Forgive me if I didn’t think to look over my surroundings,” Niall quips, and he’s being a dick, being an ass, but he’s so good at that, you know, being a dick and being an ass, and Harry’s not really either, prides gentleness over anger, and maybe that’s why the two of them get on so well, too. “I was too busy trying to get my face between his legs to remember much of anything else.”

“Niall!” Harry screams, and his voice rings out, echoes through the barren field; the officers are stunned, all of them, and Harry’s never felt more shame before in his life — not because he’s being outed, per se, but because he’s being outed in this way. And that’s… that’s not very fair. He’s been patient and understanding with Niall; surely Niall ought to hold Harry in the same regard, surely Niall ought to converse with Harry before their preferences are out in the open. Right? “You can’t — you can’t say stuff like that.”

Niall chuckles. “I just did.”

“But you —”

“That is enough.” The third man steps forward, short and white and chubby, and the black-haired woman is behind him, too, and they’ve both got their cuffs out of their belts, and Harry’s heart and stomach both kind of fall into his ass at that very moment and he thinks that maybe, maybe running wouldn’t be such a bad idea.

And so he does.

He runs.

Which, in hindsight, is the worst idea. Ever. And he does not recommend it, no matter how many times Louis will rave about how well it works.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“I’m running!”

“I can see that!” Niall’s behind him, not far back. “What for?”

“Because you said you wouldn’t run unless I ran first!”
And — and maybe it’s the same as, “I won’t fall unless you fall first.”

Niall’s beside him in the next moment, laughing at the top of his lungs and running fast, running quick; he finds Harry’s hand, interlaces their fingers, and then they’re moving together, as whole and not half, and it’s simply two souls in one body, really, and Harry wonders if he’ll ever be able to leave a mark on the world, wonders how long his stories will be told after his death, after Niall’s death, and if they’ll be recited like Achilles and Patroclus, like the most absolute love story the world has ever saw.

But it doesn’t matter. The legend, the living embodiment of monumental life that most wish to leave behind — it doesn’t matter. What matters is Niall’s hand in his, and the wind racing through his hair, over his skin, and Niall’s melodic and musical laughter, and the rush of blood in his veins and in his ears and in his heart, and the way the whirling blue and red lights behind them paints Niall’s eyes like the night sky on the Fourth of July, Harry’s most favorite holiday.

That’s what matters. The here, the right now, the moment they’re in. It doesn’t matter what you take when you go, or what you leave behind when you go, either, but what you felt when you there.

That’s it. Right there — that’s it.

And he wants to tell Niall so, wants to tell Niall so badly, but then there’s feet pounding behind him, arms wrapping around his waist, and he’s pitching forward, being tackled forward, and his grip on Niall’s hand drags his down, as well, and Harry’s face hits the dirt face, scratches against the bareness of the earth, and Niall slides a bit, topples over, and it hurts, really, the cut and the bruise on his face, and there’s a small bit of blood falling from his temple when he’s turned over and jerked up and put in cuffs.

“Oh,” he says, hisses as he’s tugged by the officer, the black-haired female; he looks over his shoulder, tries to look over his shoulder, and sees that the two male officers are struggling to keep Niall up, to keep Niall in line, and for a moment Harry’s breath catches painfully in his throat because there’s a little bit of blood foaming through the tear in the knee of Niall’s jeans. “Don’t hurt him.” He turns, looks over his other shoulder and meets the officer’s dark, dark eyes. He knows Niall’s a pest greater than anyone, but he’s still the love of Harry’s life, too, and that explains a lot more than Harry himself can even understand. “Please don’t hurt him.”

“We’re not going to hurt him,” she says, gruff and hard and thick. “We aren’t going to hurt either of you, and a warning was all you were going to get till you decided to run.” She huffs, trips a little bit, and he reckons that he could probably help her a lot by picking his own weight up, and so he does. “And it’s illegal to run. I’m too out of breath to read off the codes right now, but I know it’s illegal.”

He sighs. “I know, too,” he replies, but Niall’s glittering, giggling laughter is still able to be heard in the clearing and it opens something within Harry, breaks down some sort of proverbial wall, and now water’s rushing over his body in torrents and it feels a lot more like a flood of affection and care than anything.

They’re put in one of the cars, he and Niall are, cuffed in the backseat with their hands behind them, and the doors are slammed shut and locked tight and the radio is playing an old country song that Harry hums along to in hopes that it’ll fend off a bit of his rising hysteria.

“That was fun.”

It didn’t. Humming along to the song, that is.

But Niall does.
Harry laughs. “Shut the fuck up.”

Niall cackles, low in his throat, and it’s a good sound, a nice sound, a beautiful sound, and he nudges Harry’s shoulder with his and really, that’s kind of all he can do what with his hands cuffed behind his back.

“Oh, come on, H,” Niall whines, tips his forehead against Harry’s shoulder; Harry can’t see Niall’s face anymore but the flashing red and blue lights still make Niall shine like a sky full of fireworks and Harry remembers the apologies he was baptized in not too long ago. “It was fun, and you know it was fun. And look — we’ve even got cuts that’ll turn into scars that people will ask us about one day when we’re old and gray.”

“And I’ll tell them that it was the time I learned to not trust my best friend when it came to the law.”

“If that’s what you want to say, I guess I can’t stop you,” Niall replies, and he’s laughing, breathy little chuckles pressed into the hot skin of Harry’s shoulder; he turns his face, lays his cheek against Harry’s arm and sighs. “They aren’t really going to do anything to us, you know. They won’t take us in or anything.”

Harry blinks, hesitates, and then lays his cheek against the top of Niall’s head and smells sweat, smells heat, smells Niall. It’s like heaven, in the back of a cop car.

“How do you know?”

“I don’t,” Niall replies, laughs, and Harry snorts, but he wishes his hands weren’t cuffed behind his back because he really, really wants to put his fingers in Niall’s hair and hold his face close so they can kiss the fright out of one another’s mouths. He likes the way desperation tastes on the tip of Niall’s tongue when they’re able to finally breathe. “I’m just hoping. And guessing.”

“A little bit?”

Niall shakes his head. “A lot bit,” he replies, and he’s stupid, so damn stupid, but Harry’s the one that ran first, by the way, and maybe he’s stupid, too. “They didn’t read us our rights, anyway, and I think that may be a problem for them.” Oh, yeah — Harry forgot. Niall yawns. “I’m sleepy, Harry.”

Harry smiles, and it’s a little, tiny grin that makes his lips twitch. “Go to sleep, baby,” he says, and Niall speaks under his breath, something or another that Harry can’t really understand, and then he’s asleep in the next instant and Harry’s left to think.
just like jesse james

you think you’re so bad, drive the women folk wild
shoot ‘em down with the flash of your pretty smile

— Cher, ‘Just Like Jesse James’

Minutes pass — hours, maybe, but Harry isn’t quite sure, and he doesn’t really care very much, either. He’s in and out of sleep and awake; it’s hot in the cab of the car, so hot that he feels Niall’s skin sticking to his with sweat through the sleeves of their shirts, and he’s got to pee, too, very horribly, and Niall’s snoring in his ear and his breath stinks, oh, God, his breath stinks so bad, like all sorts of rot and decay, but he doesn’t move for fear that Niall will rouse around and he wants Niall to sleep as much as he can, as much as he wants.

It’s peaceful. Kind of. In a really, really strange way; like the precious moments the two of them are stealing from one another, he doesn’t want to define why or how or when or if. The five officers are standing outside the vehicle, arms crossed and mouths moving, and they’re talking rather lethargically, but Harry doesn’t care to strain his ears to hear because the radio is pleasantly soothing and Niall’s breathing is more important at the moment than the words that are being shared outside.

The sun is up now. It’s high and bright in the sky, yellow and white, sort of; the land is painted in rivulets of color and Harry’s able to see the planes now as they skirt over and hit the runway with epic speeds. They’re loud, too, and bigger than any Harry’s ever seen before, and the force of them flying overhead shakes the car they’re in, sometimes wakes Niall up, too, and he has to soothe Niall back to sleep because Niall needs rest and Harry needs his quiet time, as well.

He isn’t sure what to make of Niall’s confessions. Now that he’s able to sit down and think and attempt to understand the secrets Niall so readily, so completely shares with him without prompting, without asking on his part, he isn’t sure what to make of the promises and the fears that Niall has laid open for him.

It doesn’t make any sense — well, Harry doesn’t think it makes any sense, per se. Niall’s fearless, and he’s a god that has the whole world in the palm of his hands, but really, what’s the difference between a god and a king? If you think about it, what is the difference? Because Niall’s both. He is. Worshipped and feared, and looked on with a reverence that Harry can’t imagine ever not feeling whenever he meets Niall’s blue, blue eyes.

Harry can’t explain what’s happening between him and Niall, isn’t sure he would ever want to put a label on the budding flower they’re nurturing, nourishing together between them, in their hearts and in their souls and in their minds. It’s weird. It’s very, very weird, but he likes it. It’s strange and fragile and silly and unexpected and serene. And good. It’s so good. And he likes it a lot. He thinks Niall likes it a lot, too.

He just… he just wonders how long Niall’s been harboring the thoughts of running away with him — with him, of all people, of all the people Niall can easily have because he’s so bright and effervescent and entirely more than he thinks he is — and never, ever coming back. He wonders how horribly it would break Niall’s heart if Harry said no, or if Harry went without him and left him here. He wonders how lost Harry would be if Niall changes his mind, if Niall leaves without him or with someone else.

But that’s just it — it’s just wondering. It’s just ‘what if’s’, and they don’t matter. They don’t.
“‘ow long ‘ave we been in the car, Harry?” Niall asks, rousing awake; he tears Harry from his musings, from his thoughts, and Harry jumps a little as Niall raises his head, smears a halfhearted kiss of greeting across Harry’s cheek that sets him on fire in a smoldering sort of way that’s more burned embers than blazing flames. “My neck hurts.”

Harry laughs, quiet and easy. “I bet. You were laying like that for a while. I couldn’t very well move you with my hands behind my back and all.”

“How long?”

Harry yawns. “A few hours, I think,” he replies, answers, and it’s just a guess, really, but he was counting the songs in hopes that it would help him pass and keep up with the time, too, but a commercial came on and he dozed off and he lost his train of thought afterward when the sound of an early-morning talk show brought him out of his dreams. “I’m not really sure. I’m just guessing. And I’m probably wrong.”

“They should let us out of here soon.” Niall lays his head on Harry’s shoulder again, and they’re closer now than they were before, flush and sweating with the proximity, and it’s more comfortable for Harry to put his cheek against Niall’s temple and it feels so good, too good.

“If we aren’t booked for trespassing and evading the officers, that is. We did run, after all.”

Niall makes a noise under his breath, in the back of his throat, and turns his body just so, curls himself around Harry just so, and Harry takes his cheek off of Niall’s head and their eyes meet, green and blue, earth and water, and Harry’s hit suddenly with the overwhelming truth that he misses the color whenever Niall’s asleep, whenever Niall’s away, whenever Niall blinks.

Oh. Oh, Harry just loves Niall so, so much. It astounds even him. And he has no earthly idea what he’s going to do if this wonderful opportunity he has been given is suddenly taken away whenever they get back to LA, whenever the summer ends, because they’ve come too far now for things to ever, ever, be put back to normal.

He doesn’t want to think about it. Just like Niall fears never getting out, Harry is afraid of being let go. And he’s not quite ready to admit that it’s their fears that are spurring their actions.

They’re perfect for one another, aren’t they? Just bloody fucking perfect. In every way. There’s nobody else in the world who fits their fullness into Harry’s emptiness as well as Niall.

“Don’t you think they would’ve already took us in and booked us by now?” Niall reminds him, and he’s got a point, you know, regardless of how careless he is sometimes — or, well, most of the time, really, if he’s being truthful. Harry reckons he ought to get used to it while he can; Niall’s careless and Harry’s careful. “They’re just holding us for shits and giggles right now, probably hopin’ it’ll teach us a lesson or something.”

Harry hums, wonders how Niall knows all of this stuff. “You think so?”

Niall nods. “Yeah, I do,” he says, so breathy and airy and light and faint, gosh, and Harry’s heart has never been so calm in his body before and he wonders when the brewing storm inside of his soul is going to relinquish the tight hold it has on his serenity. He reckons he’s going to break a little bit more before the summer is over, and then — and then he’ll snap in two when it is. But that’s okay. “I wish our hands weren’t cuffed.”

Harry shuts his eyes and tips his head forward, lays his cheek on Niall’s shoulder and relaxes as
much as he can in the restricted position they’re in. He’s sleepy, and he reckons he could slip off any moment now. “Why?”

“’Cause I want to hold your hand,” he replies, so soft and so gentle and so sweet, and Harry does something weird, something cool, nudges Niall’s cheek with his nose till they’re face to face, eye to eye, and then he leans forward and puts his lips against Niall’s, across Niall’s mouth, and Niall’s breath still stinks and Harry’s definitely doesn’t taste very good, either, but none of that matters, really, and they kiss each other for so, so long, till Harry’s lips are numb and Niall’s cheeks are flushed crimson and Harry no longer feels as if this is the end.

It’s coming, though. The end. Harry doesn’t want to watch it approach, would rather have it take him by surprise than meet its eyes as it comes to whisk away the best kind of happiness he’s ever known, and he wonders if that makes him a coward — but then he remembers that it doesn’t fucking matter what people think of him, what Niall thinks of him, as long as what he thinks of himself is something that makes him happy.

And it does. Right now, it does.

“When they let us go — or, if they let us go, I guess — we’re finding a hotel and we’re getting a room and we’re going to spend the rest of the day and night in bed, and we aren’t going to leave till tomorrow morning, all right, Niall?” Harry says, but it’s more of a statement than a question, really, and he isn’t going to take no for an answer. Niall nods. “I’m so tired, and I kind of want to hold you for a little while ’cause we got interrupted earlier.”

And I think my hands were created just so I could put them on you.

Niall’s eyes sparkle and the smile on his lips is red from Harry’s kisses and bigger than the sun, brighter than the stars, and Harry wonders if Niall knows that he’s made up of universes nobody has ever mapped before but him, but Harry.

“I wouldn’t mind having a hot bath with you,” he says, Niall says, and it’s a whisper, a temptation at the tip of his tongue that tingles Harry’s insides in just the right way, so good and lively, and they’ve showered with one another, of course they have, more than once and definitely when they were younger, but they’ve never bathed with one another. It feels ultimately more intimate than a shower ever could. “I feel so dirty.” He leans in, puts his lips to Harry’s cheek in a chaste kiss that’s sticky and fat. “I’ve been wondering lately what it would feel like if you washed my hair for me, and scrubbing you down with soap is a great excuse for me to touch every single piece of your body, I think.”

Harry’s heart beats a little faster, a little harder, and it’s time. It’s time, and he knows it’s time, and he isn’t going to be disturbed. This is for him, for Niall, for them, and this time he isn’t going to be broken off before he’s able to say it — before he’s able to say that he loves Niall, that he’s in love with Niall, that he doesn’t know how he can ever not be in love with Niall. It’s time, and there’s no point in waiting any longer. Summer will be over soon, and Harry can’t handle the thought of living the rest of his life without admitting to Niall how much he truly, truly means to Harry.

He thinks that maybe, just maybe, if he lets Niall know how much he’s loved, that it’ll be okay when Niall says goodbye at the end of the season.

“Niall, I —”

There’s a knock on the window behind Harry, and he turns, sees that the youngest of the male officers is at the door and his courage wilts like wheat in winter and he wonders if he’s ever going to be able to speak without being interrupted and if God truly, truly has destined the two of them to be
together or if this is nothing but a taunt of what he wants but cannot have.

Harry sighs. “Fuck.”

The door is pulled open by the officer, and he’s backlit by the rising sun and he kind of shines like an unforgiving angel, really, and Harry narrows his eyes, squints his gaze so he isn’t blind because the light hurts more than he imagined it would.

“Can we help you?” Niall asks, *dammit*, and even though he’s had a few hours to calm down, to act right, he’s still just as much of a smart ass now as he was then and Harry can’t imagine him any other way. “We were trying to do each other again, by the way, if you were interested in knowing. But I can’t very well grab his cock with my hands behind my back, can I? Would you care to take these cuffs off of me, please?”

*Wonderful.*

But, really — at least he said please. Harry’s counting that as a win.

The officer rolls his eyes, and Harry’s out of this world with joy that he isn’t paying any mind to Niall’s lecherous comments. “You two are free to go,” he announces, stiff and monotone, and he reaches in the car, grabs Harry by the collar of the shirt and pulls him out.

His legs are wobbly and wimpy as he stands, and the officer is very nice, very understanding as he turns Harry around and takes the cuffs off of his wrists; Harry winces once he’s free and brings his hands up, sees that there’s a red-purple bruise on his skin. He rubs the flesh swiftly as he pivots to see Niall being pulled out and freed, as well.

“That’s it, then?” Harry asks, and his voice is kind of scratchy, hoarse and rough. It makes him cringe. “You’re just going to let us go like that?”

“Like that, yeah.” The officer shrugs and nods; Harry notices that the other four are off to the left, behind the three of them, and are watching on avidly, and he realizes that the man standing before him is probably still in training. Hmm. “What you did by running was fucking stupid.”

Harry sighs. “I know.”

“And the reason we kept the two of you is ‘cause you ran,” the man continues and huffs a breath, rolls his eyes again. Harry wonders if it’s appropriate to tell him that his eyes will get stuck if he keeps that up. “Which really doesn’t make any sense to me, but they’re my bosses and I can’t argue with them.”

“True.” Niall comes to stand beside Harry then, and they don’t reach for one another’s hands but their shoulders are touching, brushing, and that’s just as good as interlacing their fingers.

The officer grins, and he’s kind of cute, really, in a weird way — his eyes are as dark as his skin and his hair is short, shaved close to his head, and he isn’t very broad, isn’t very wide, and Harry reckons it wouldn’t take much for him to overtake the man in front of him. His smile is definitely sweet, though, and his mouth looks as if it tastes like ripe fruit, all pink and pretty.

“So y’all just find a place now that isn’t private to lay with one another, all right?” He shakes his head and laughs. “Trust me, I know how hard it is to keep your hands off of your boyfriend ‘cause I still swerve when my girl’s in the car with me, but it’s important to mind the law so you don’t get in trouble.”

Niall hums. “I feel like a little kid getting chastised by their teacher for being a dick to the new kid or
something,” he says, comments, and Harry snorts, rolls his eyes, and the officer just laughs.

“Then don’t act like a little kid anymore,” he says, the officer says, and Harry stutters a laugh as Niall’s eyes go wide. “Now, off you two go, yeah? It’s too goddamn early to be dealing with this shit. You two have a good time.”

He turns, then, and leaves Harry and Niall standing there, by themselves, and Harry isn’t sure whether he should be impressed or distressed but he reckons that doesn’t matter because Niall turns their faces toward one another and kisses Harry as if he’s the reason the stars shine at night and, really, Harry rather likes focusing on the way Niall’s tongue draws shapes on the corners of his lips for no reason at all other than the fact that he can.

Harry lines up the tires with the concrete block bracketed by yellow-orange paint and puts the vehicle in park, turns the key off; he and Niall were let off with a warning and told to find somewhere else to go to sleep — somewhere legal, that is — and Harry’s first thought was to crash in the airport parking lot because he’s too sleepy, too exhausted to risk driving through a town he isn’t familiar with to find a hotel or motel.

“Backseat?” Niall asks, reaches out and puts his hand on Harry’s arm, Harry’s bicep. “I can sit up and you can rest your head in my lap? Or we can both lay and you can stretch out on top of me, if that’s what you want.” His smile is warm and sweet and not nearly as promiscuous as his words seem and Harry just loves Niall so much. “I’m fine with whatever as long as you’re comfortable enough to sleep.”

Harry smiles, tips his face back and leans against the headrest for a moment, tired and loopy with love and exhaustion. “You didn’t sleep very much more than I did,” he replies, points out, and Niall nods, laughs lightly as his fingers dance up and along Harry’s face. “The backseat sounds lovely, Ni.”

He makes sure the two front windows are cracked just a bit, just a tiny bit, and then unbuckles and pushes out of the driver’s seat and walks to the back, the very back, to the bench seat, and when he’s there he lays down, completely collapses, and only bothers to kick his shoes off before he’s grabbing Niall around the hips and pulling him on top, putting his body between his legs, and it’s hot and they’re close and Harry’s as comfortable here, beneath Niall, than he would be anywhere else.

“So we’re doing it this way, eh?” Niall says, quips, and he laughs, just a little bit, and wriggles his body, aligns his hips and crotch with Harry’s, and maybe if Harry wasn’t so tired he’d be kind of ashamed of the way his self reacts to Niall’s but he doesn’t care at the moment, really, that he’s got a stiffy and he’s fairly sure Niall doesn’t care, either. “At least we’re not trespassing anymore.”

Harry snorts a bit of a laugh and brings both of his hands up, shoves them into Niall’s hair and grips on, grips tight. He likes the way the thickness feels on his flesh, between his fingers; it’s so smooth, so silk-like, so soft and pleasant and calming, and it relaxes Niall, too, if Harry can trust the way Niall’s body sags with undeniable serenity and relief against his.

“At least we’re not trespassing anymore, yeah,” Harry says, repeats, and he closes his eyes and it feels good, so good, to be able to see nothing but darkness, to be able to feel nothing but Niall. “And if someone comes over and asks what we’re doing sleeping in the back of the van, then we’ll just say that we came to pick — to pick our cousin up and the flight got delayed and we… we wanted to nap and were too lazy to find a hotel.”

Niall chuckles, presses the smeared laughter into Harry’s chest till they’re both rumbling with it.
“Sounds about right,” he says, muses, and Harry reckons it’s mostly to himself than anything, really. “I’m glad you’re so smart. I’m glad you can think so quickly.”

Harry wets his lips and arches, adjusts his body so that Niall and he are flush in every way possible. “One of us has to use their brain,” he says, yawns, and Niall does, too, but the noise is muffled by Harry’s chest. “And I’m afraid you showed me you weren’t capable of thinking before talking when you kept telling the officers that we were trying to ‘do each other’ before they interrupted.”

“Oh, come on, H. It was funny.”

“It was stupid.”

Niall grunts and raises his head from Harry’s chest; Harry opens his eyes and their gazes meet, green and blue, and Niall’s smile is the tip of the iceberg that’s going to eventually sink Harry’s ship. “You talk a lot of shit, you know,” he says, smirks. “Sometimes I think about putting something in your mouth to gag you, and maybe tying you up while I’m at it.” His hand swims down and his fingers find the hem of Harry’s shirt; they dive beneath and play with Harry’s skin, Harry’s hot skin, and Harry shivers even though he feels as if he’s on fire. “Does that sound good to you?”

Harry uses the hold he has on Niall’s hair to pull him in so their lips can slot together, and they kiss till all Harry can taste is Niall’s tongue in his mouth before they finally, finally, drift off to sleep and maybe, just maybe, Harry will admit to Niall that he’s wondered how it would feel to be dominated, too.

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“Fill ‘er up, baby,” Niall says he gets out of the van, tosses Harry the keys as they pass one another in front of the vehicle; Niall’s on his way inside of a convenient store and Harry’s been given the job to gas up. “Do you want anything?”

Harry’s cheeks are red at the term of endearment Niall called him so effortlessly, so loudly. “Just some brownies and a Coke, please?” he says, asks, and Niall surprises him in that moment, rushes forward to knock their lips together in a fleeting kiss before pulling back, before nodding, before pivoting on his heel and taking off toward the entrance of the store.

He shakes his head, ignores the butterflies in his heart and grabs the pump, fiddles with the levers and buttons for a moment before stuffing it inside the tank; it’s been a few hours since they left out of the airport parking lot and Harry isn’t sure what town they’re in, really, and he’s only guessing that they’re still in Mississippi but it’s nearing dark, and the sky is dusty pink to the west, colored in all sorts of oranges, too, and Harry wonders if he could find a phone before midnight to ring his mum.

It was nice. Their nap, that is. Wildly fitful, and hot and sweaty, but moderately undisturbed and extremely, wonderfully needed; Harry woke up with his head in Niall’s lap and Niall’s tipped back, mouth wide open as he snored, as he slept on, and he put his nose to Niall’s, rubbed them together till Niall roused around and they kissed for a minute, for a little tiny minute, all soft and open-mouthed and laughter swallowed as fingers grabbed, and then they were off.

And it’s just been a few hours of driving, really; they’ve not talked very much, but, then again, they don’t need to. Sometimes the silence is better, and Harry’s realized that the comfort he thought he always found in noise was nothing more than misguided, misled theories orchestrated by people who shame others for being different and — and yeah, the wind whipped through his hair and Niall’s fingers were an ever-there touch on his wrist and they didn’t need to talk at all.

It makes Harry smile. It makes Harry smile really, really big, because he’s been through a lot, it feels
like, and now he isn’t sad, isn’t upset, isn’t hurting, and that just — that just makes him smile, okay, and sometimes his cheeks hurt but he doesn’t really care because this is the best kind of pain anyone can ever experience, he thinks.

The pump makes a noise, stops fueling, and Harry wiggles it a bit, pulls it out and hangs it back up; he screws the lid back on, wipes the gas off his fingers on his jeans and turns, and he sees a man running out of the entrance of the store and he frowns, and then he spots Niall, too, following after, with his arm wrapped around a plump, obnoxiously pregnant woman, and her lavender-colored dress is dark and Niall’s got a panicked look on his face and it all clicks in that moment and all Harry can do is say, “Fuck,” because it’s just one bloody thing after another.
Harry sighs and drops his head forward, tipping his forehead against the cold metal of the payphone just inside of the hospital doors he’s been able to find after several moments of searching blindly through the never-ending corridors; he stuffs his hands in his pocket — his coat pocket, for fuck’s sake, because it’s as cold as ice in this damn place and he knew he was smart to pack at least one jacket — and digs out the collection of quarters he was lucky enough to find while thoroughly inspecting the van. Niall’s with the woman and man, Sarah and Jackson Lee (the latter being named after both generals from the Civil War, by the way, Stonewall Jackson and Robert E Lee, and Harry thinks that’s really cool, as it happens, regardless of all the shit the man no doubt gets) and, you know, there’s only so much yelling and crying and screaming and cursing and swearing to never allow anyone near again that Harry can take, and he opted to duck out of the room where a baby is definitely being delivered into this world in favor of searching the van and finding enough change to call his mother.

And Janie. Janie, too; he’s got to call her because in his search for silver change he found her number scrawled onto a piece of paper, all slanted and crooked and sloped with loopy letters and digits that bleed into one another, and he — he can’t just ignore it, can’t just ignore her. She’s special to him — three days spent with one another, bathed in so many colors that Harry doesn’t know the names to, and she means as much to him as Louis, as Liam.

And maybe he ought to ring them up, too. Louis and Liam, that is. They’re like Harry and Niall: where one is, the other is not far behind. It’s been a while since he’s talked to them, the night before Niall crawled into his room and forced him to grab his things, to pack his bags, to tell his mum goodbye through a letter sat on the kitchen counter, and he misses them, misses Louis’s brash loyalty and Liam’s easy nature of understanding, trust, and acceptance.

Maybe he’ll call them. Yeah, maybe he’ll call them, too; however, he’d have to drive till he finds a convenient store to switch paper to coins, but he doesn’t really mind that very much. Harry reckons they’re worth a bit of trouble.

He leans back, narrows his eyes; it’s late but it’s bright, so very bright in this part of the hospital, and his vision blurs as he inserts the coins, one by one by one, into the payphone. He’s quick as he dials his the number to his house, long since having memorized the damn thing, and he counts the rings when he puts it to his ear, one and two and three and four and five and six and seven, and then it’s picked up, she’s picked up, his mum has picked up, and she’s sleepy, tired and probably worn out, exhausted from something or another as she says, “Hello?” so faint and airy and light, and Harry has to smile for a moment because he just loves her so much and he’s so lucky, so very lucky, to have her in his life, in his heart, in his soul.

“Mum?” he replies, brings his free hand up to wipe at the cool sweat on his temple. “Mum, it’s me. It’s Harry.” He shuts his eyes, lets out a big breath that echoes in the receiver and around him, too, and it mingles with the unbecoming stench of antiseptic. He hates hospitals. “Did I wake you up?”

If he did, he’s sorry, but — but not really, if that makes sense. He doesn’t mind suffering through a chastising lecture about time and zones and distance and whatnot as long as he can hear her voice, as long as he can listen to the way she talks. It soothes him, kind of — even as a child, it was never a
blanket or a bear or anything most other children used for solidified security. It was just her, and her voice and the way she rubbed her hand on his back to get him to sleep not long after he laid down.

“Yeah,” she replies, sighs, yawns, and Harry feels a pang of regret in his heart but he brushes it off, puts it to the back of his mind; he knows she isn’t mad, knows she can never be mad at him for calling when he needs her. “It’s all right, though, baby. I’ve been on vacation from work for a few days and I don’t have much to do, so I planned on sleeping in till at least two in the afternoon and maybe catching a film with Robin later on in the evening.”

Harry laughs, wonders if it’s the smart thing to do to tell her that his sleeping schedule is as fucked as her shitty hours at the hospital. “You’ll be up before ten ‘cause you can’t stand to stay in bed that long,” he says, reminds her and himself just how much he knows her, and they both laugh quietly. “How’s — how’s home?”

She yawns, again, and this time it makes Harry follow, too, and in a fit of abrupt drowsiness he turns to lean his shoulder against the wall in case he really does fall asleep.

“It’s okay,” she replies; there’s a bit of random noise in the background, banging and such, and he figures she’s meandering toward the light switch to flick it on so she doesn’t trip over anything. “Gem’s been staying over a lot lately, her and Oliver, and Louis and Liam make it a point to stop by at least every other day to see how I’m doing without you here. Robin’s here most often than not, too, and he and I have started to date regularly, as well.” She laughs, then, and Harry makes a mental note to thank his friends for being — for being so brotherly. Sometimes he’s reminded of the fact that his life would have been so very different if his parents hadn’t divorced, and he’s hit all of a sudden with the sheer joy that they split because he wouldn’t have this if they would have stayed together, he and Gemma and their mother wouldn’t have what they do now. “Thanks for letting me know that Louis thinks I’m good in bed, by the way.”

Harry sputters, stutters, turns as red as all the lights he ran earlier trying to get to the hospital hours ago, before Sarah pushed the baby out in the backseat of the van, but no amount of words can create a viable excuse to elaborate on the fact she’s just brought to light — and it is a fact, mind you, because Louis (and Liam, and Niall, and even Greg, too) have told him multiple times how beautiful, how sensual, how overwhelmingly well-kept they think his mother to be. And that’s just… weird. Yuck. That’s his mum — his mummy, for fuck’s sake. He doesn’t want to hear that shit about her.

“I didn’t think it was very important,” he replies, tries to answer, and at least he’s telling the truth. “Louis’s had a small crush on you since he hit puberty, and I’ve just ignored it for the longest time.” He shrugs. “He’s not done anything to you, has he?”

“Other than mowing the lawn and bringing in the paper and offering to cook dinner and rub my feet after a rough day of work, no,” she answers, and Harry shuts his eyes, exhales a sigh, leans completely against the wall and slides down till he’s sat on his bum on the floor, in the floor, all cold and bright and sick to his stomach from the screaming Sarah was doing and the nasty smell of the halls. “He’s a better son that you are, what with you and Niall leaving off and not giving Maura or me a single clue about where you’re going.”

Harry winces. “Does she know?”

“Who?”

“Maura.”
“Well, of course she does, Harry,” she replies, and Harry’s stomach just kind of curls hurtfully and he can’t breathe for a moment, for a short moment, and he’s thankful that he doesn’t have to speak because she apparently isn’t finished. “I had plans to ring her up and let her know, but Greg must have already did that and she called a few days ago to let me know that she was catching a flight back to the States this coming up week.” She pauses, and Harry licks his lips. “She’s a bit angry, Harry.”

Harry rolls his eyes and brings his knees up to his chest, picks at a bit of stray thread hanging from the flared bottom of his jeans. “What for?” he asks, absent and aggravated, annoyed. “She’s got no reason to be getting angry. She told Niall that he could have ten grand of the money from the settlement to do with what he wanted, and that’s what he’s doing. There’s no point in getting mad about something she’s already said was okay.”

“Harry, oh, baby,” she breathes, and there’s something her voice, a lilt or twang or emotion that he can’t quite place, isn’t sure he wants to place. “Is that what he’s told you?”

Harry frowns. “Is that what he’s told me?” he repeats, lost and dumbfounded and altogether confused about how he should feel, about how he should think. “What do you mean, Mum?”

“Harry, honey, I love Niall just like you and I’m so very glad that you and him have found one another and stayed together through the years,” she says, begins, and he wants to say, wants to scream that she doesn’t, that she can never love Niall like him because he’s in love with Niall, will always be in love with Niall, but he stays quiet and keeps his eyes wide open, plastered to the off-white floor he’s sat on and forgets about the way the sickly smell of the air makes him feel for a moment. “But he’s lied to you. He’s fed to you the lie that he was given ten thousand dollars to spend with no inhibitions without Maura’s consent, Harry. He’s lied to you.”

Harry shakes his head, immediately. No — no, no, no, no, no. Niall didn’t lie — Niall isn’t lying right now, can’t be lying right now. Of course he isn’t — of course he can’t be lying. They’ve promised not to lie to each other again, ever again, and this was before the impromptu road trip to Atlanta for the fucking Stones concert was even brought to the light, when they were drunk and high and lying on a rubber tube in a pool, someone’s pool, and that was so long ago, so long ago, when they were fourteen years old and having just graduated from the eighth grade.

Niall didn’t lie, isn’t lying to him. He isn’t.

“Maura’s lying to you,” he says in reply, crosses his legs and grips the base of his ankle; his nails are sharp and in need of a trim, a fact that makes him flinch when he realizes he’s digging them acutely into the skin he’s bared there. “She’s not what you… she isn’t the kind of person you think she is. She’s hurt Niall — not physically, no, but mentally, and he’s messed up for it, he’s so messed up for it, Mum. She’s the one lying.”

His mum sighs, and there’s a rush of hot tears that burn his eyes and drag a sob of a gasp out of the back of his throat. “Baby, I believe you,” she replies, and he doesn’t feel any relief because he knows there’s more, knows there’s a catch. “I’ve always thought that Greg and Niall weren’t given the love they so very desperately needed, and I’ve tried my best to do what I can in that department.”

“That isn’t your job.” He shuts his eyes, wipes at the corners of his blurry vision and hopes that she can’t tell that he’s crying through the phone. “It isn’t your job to love someone else’s son when their parents are too damn stupid to give their children the car they deserve. It’s not your job, Mum.”

“Harry, baby.” His mother makes a noise, too, and maybe she’s crying, as well, kind of, and this definitely isn’t how he thought this phone call would go but here they are, right now, and Harry feels as if his heart is being ripped out of his chest because he’s trusted Niall, trusted Niall so much, and if
this is true, if he really is telling a fib about all of this, then Harry doesn’t know what he would do. He’s never had to think about it before. “Maybe this is Niall’s way of getting back at his mother for all of the things she’s done to him when he was younger.”

“No,” Harry says, and he’s adamant and stubborn and stupid, so goddamn stupid, and he pushes himself shakily to his feet, stands on wobbling knees that aren’t capable of keeping him up for long, and he continues on the same course, “No, no, no,” as he takes the phone from his ear, hangs it back on the hook, makes his way toward the wing of the hospital he came from.

Niall didn’t lie. And Niall isn’t still lying, either. He wouldn’t do that — he wouldn’t do that to Harry, wouldn’t do that to his brother, wouldn’t do that to his mother. Niall wouldn’t do that. Niall may not have the best relationship with those members of his family, of his immediate family, but he still cares for them, still wants them to know that he loves them.

He does. Doesn’t he?

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Niall finds Harry sitting outside of the rambunctious maternity ward in the waiting room; it’s early, really early, around six-something in the morning, when nothing’s on any of the stations except talk shows and quarterly hour updates, and Harry’s eyes are thick and heavy as he watches the local news being told on the grainy, boxy television. His body aches, too, and he wants so very badly to lie down and go to sleep for hours on end, but he surprises himself by scavenging enough strength to turn his head and meet Niall’s eyes, smile at Niall’s red hot expression of total excitement and blundering tiredness.

They need to tame their wild ways, at least for a few days. A bit of rest is sure to do the both of them entirely too much good.

“How is everything?” he asks, and his voice is hoarse and rough, and he clears his throat, coughs into his hand and wonders if the bright lights, if the foul smell, if the secreting bodies, if the infested air could possibly give him an illness. And, really, what tough luck that would be, you know, seeing as they’re nearly in Alabama and then it’s Georgia, and then Atlanta and then a concert, the concert. “How’s Sarah and Jackson Lee doing?”

Niall drops to his knees in front of Harry on the Pepto-Bismol pink carpeting, opts to instead be on the floor instead of in a chair. “They’re doing great,” he says, gushes, and his eyes are like vivid blue fire and his face is red, flushed with the color, and his brown hair is sticking to the sides of his face and he looks every bit as beautiful now as he ever has before and Harry wonders if it’s just going to keep getting brighter, all the things he’s feeling for Niall. “She delivered a healthy baby boy and the first thing he did was piss on the doctor.”

The smile that stretches across Harry’s face isn’t near as forced as it feels like, and he turns his body, situates himself so that both of his knees are on either side of Niall’s shoulders and Niall leans forward, puts his cheek against one of Harry’s knees and wraps his arms around Harry’s waist, pulling him close and nearly out of the chair he’s sat in, and Harry traces his fingers through Niall’s hair, brushes out the nasty snarls and tries to remember the last time the both of them showered and had a decent night of uninterrupted, content sleep.

It’s comfortable, being like this, with Niall’s head in his lap and his hands in Niall’s hair, running and gripping and pulling and tugging; he thinks this is it, thinks this could be it, how it’s supposed to be, and knows that he would be content and serene if he was able to just stay like this for the rest of his life.
Niall’s the sun, but he’s also the sun of Harry’s world, and Harry’s the earth that revolves around it; one cannot coexist without the other. If they aren’t together, what would happen?

“What’d they name him?” Harry asks, quiet and easy and delicate, not unlike the way he’s carding his fingers through Niall’s thick, greasy hair and smoothing out the snarls that catch at his knuckles stubbornly.

“They thought he was going to be a girl so they didn’t have a name for him,” Niall replies, laughs, smears the noise against Harry’s clothed thigh and he’s warm all of a sudden, from his head to his feet, and the coat he’s got on his no more than a hindrance he wishes he could take off and sling to the side in rage. “They named him James Edward.”

Harry’s lips curl into a tentative smile and he leans forward, rests his cheek on top of Niall’s head and breathes in the musk of sweat and days on the road. “Our middle names,” he says, whispers, and there’s a bit of pride in his body, rushing through all of his systems — he doesn’t know Sarah or Jackson Lee, and Niall doesn’t, either, but the four of them have been thrown together and now there’s one more, now there’s five, and he’s both Harry and Niall’s namesake, the little man that caused quite a ruckus in the back of a van, and Harry never thought that so many colorful things would happen on this road trip, really, and he’s kind of glad nothing is as he expected it at first because that would have been so boring. “That’s — that’s amazing.”

Niall nods his head, and it dislodges Harry’s and they both lean back and look into one another’s eyes for a moment, green and blue and earth and ocean, and sun, too, mixing in the water, and everything’s changed but it’s all the same, as well, and Harry isn’t sure if he would change a thing about this summer if he was ever given the chance and it’s that thought at this moment, this very moment, that convinces Harry to just — to just live, to just live it up because he’s never going to live it down.

The summer’s going to end. So what? That doesn’t mean he and Niall have to end, too, and he’s going to fight to make sure they don’t. Yeah. Yeah — that sounds like a great plan.

“I know,” Niall says, and he’s breathless, airy, and he unwraps his arms from Harry’s waist, reaches up and puts his hands on Harry’s cheeks and pulls him down for a kiss, and Harry lets out a gratifying moan as Niall licks into his mouth and it’s all he can do, really, to keep himself upright as Niall hugs him close again, and Harry wonders if he can push himself into Niall’s body because there’s no other place he would rather be.

He’s the first to pull back, Niall is, and he’s got this look on his face, one that Harry’s seen so many other times before, and it’s so very open, so very bright, so very vulnerable, and Harry just leans in for another kiss, nothing more than lips on lips and mouth to mouth, and he hopes that Niall can understand that it doesn’t matter what he’s done, that it doesn’t matter what he does because Harry will love him regardless, no matter what.

No matter what.

That’s a bad thing. Or — Harry thinks it’s a bad thing, at least, but thinking and understanding and believing are all three different, all three variegated, and he’s only on the first level. Sometimes people get stuck there, can’t find their way out; he thinks he has, but he knows — he knows — he’s going to find himself out. He’s not helpless, and he isn’t as innocent as he believes himself to be, either. He’s strong, and he’s going to live it up.

Hopefully.

Niall lifts his lips from Harry’s, swallows up the string of saliva that bridges their mouths and grins,
wet and red and reminding Harry of freshly bloomed roses in a springtime rainfall that climb up the dilapidating rock of the house at the corner on the road they live on.

“Do you want to come see them?” he asks, Niall asks, and Harry’s enthusiastic and eager and energetic as he shakes his head, as he pushes to his feet and pulls Niall up along with him.

“Yeah,” he replies, bashful and shy, and why he is, he can’t really say. The conversation he had with his mother a few hours ago is still heavy and fresh on his mind; he’s not forgotten what she said, not forgotten all the valid points and arguments she made, but Harry isn’t going to ask Niall anything. He’s got this tiny paradise full of light and affectionate love with Niall, and he doesn’t want to kill everything he’s fought so hard for. Not yet, at least. Maybe when summer’s over he’ll sit Niall down to figure it out, figure it all out, but right now he’s going to live. “Yeah, I’d like to see them.”

Niall smiles, and he takes Harry’s hand, interlaces their fingers.

The baby is a light, faint weight in his arms; his face is red and his hair is charcoal black and he’s got ten fingers, ten toes, and he makes these cute bubbly little noises as he reaches, as he shoves his hands into Harry’s chest and moves, wiggles to get closer to the warmth, to the solidity that Harry’s holding him with.

Sarah’s face is red, too, and she’s sweaty, wet with it, and her hair is adhered to her face and her eyes are still puffy from all the pain and the tears, but she’s got a smile on her face, one of the prettiest, one of the proudest even though she’s on the verge of total exhaustion, and Harry feels as if he’s holding the world in his hands, but then — but then he is because this boy, this little boy named James Edward is Sarah’s world and Jackson Lee’s world, too.

He has to take care of the little man.

“He’s so little,” Harry says, mostly to himself, and Niall’s at his side, big and hot and bold, and he realizes that this little baby is going to have to grow so much, so much, to be of the same size of him, of Niall, of his daddy, and Harry wonders what it’ll be like when he watches his own kids grown as big as him. “He’s precious.”

Jackson Lee laughs, and Harry pulls his eyes off the baby to see that the man is just as red-faced as Sarah, is just as puffy-eyed as Sarah. “He’s my little man,” he says, and he’s proud, so very proud, and Harry reckons he’s got the biggest reason to have a stupid grin on his face. “He’ll prob’ly be the only one ‘cause Sarah swore on our graves that she wouldn’t let me near her again, but that’s okay. I’d be happy with none, but now I have him — now we’ve got him, and I’ve never been more excited.”

He leans over the bed Sarah’s on and puts his lips to hers in a kiss that’s so soft, so gentle, so sweet, and Harry turns his head, meets Niall’s eyes, and in this moment he thinks — what would it be like if he and Niall were to have children, their very own children? Little pieces of him, of Niall running around and making a mess of things? What would happen if he and Niall were able to have a life as happy as Sarah and Jackson Lee?

“What’re you looking at me like that for?” Niall asks, quiet and whispery-soft, and he slants his head, kind of, just a little bit, and wraps his arm around Harry’s waist to pull him in, to pull him close.

Harry shrugs. “No reason,” he says, but for a moment, with James Edward in his arms and Niall against his side, he pretends everything is going to be okay.
Louis and his family and his friends have all my prayers. I wish the best for them in this time of grief.

other arms reach out to me
other eyes smile tenderly
still in peaceful dreams i see
the road leads back to you

— Ray Charles, ‘Georgia On My Mind’

Three days, two states, and one restful night of sleep plus a bountiful of chaste kisses and tender glimpses of skin on skin to soothe each other to fitful sleep, Niall’s pulling the van into the congested parking lot of a prestigious hotel in Atlanta right on the main road, just down the block from the arena that the Rolling Stones will be playing at in two weeks, fourteen days, and Harry’s a little bit too overcome with the congealed excitement of being here, of finally fucking being here, that he isn’t at all tired even though it’s well past midnight and he should be on his way to crashing after only having twelve hours of sleep.

Niall pulls the van between a honking pickup truck and a sleek Camaro the same color of the green in his eyes, and he puts the vehicle in gear; he turns, takes his hands off the wheel, and the lights that are lining the parking lot are big enough, tall enough, bright enough to shine through the windshield and paint Niall’s face in shadows that hug the angles of his sculpted face and make him look like a shadowed figure from the history books.

He’s beautiful. In this light, and in this moment, he’s beautiful in the way that secrets from centuries ago are, lost but always ready to be found.

Harry grins. “We’re here.”

“Yeah, we are,” Niall replies, nods, smiles, yawns, and Harry looks at the clock on the dash, sees that it’s two twenty-seven and that the stars are muddled from the darkness that the lack of moon is breeding. Niall turns shut the vehicle down, and Harry takes his seatbelt off and reaches over to unclick Niall’s. “If you grab the bags, I’ll run in and get us a room. Sound good?”

Harry nods, blinks, and he isn’t sleepy, no, but Niall looks to be on the verge of total collapse and maybe he ought to have pushed it a little bit more when he asked Niall if he wanted to pull over to switch. He doesn’t want Niall to not enjoy what’s left of this trip because he was too preoccupied with wanting Harry to enjoy it.

“Sounds great.” Harry smiles. “I’ll see you in there, Ni.” He turns away, puts his hand on the knob and opens the door, and he’s about to step out when Niall reaches and grabs him by the shoulder, stops his movement; he looks behind him, Harry does, and Niall crawls across the middle and lays his lips across Harry’s. It tastes like sweet-crust peach pie and chicken fried chicken from the restaurant they stopped at hours ago; Harry’s a bit put off, lays his hand on Niall’s elbow to keep him there, to keep him close, and he’s in the biggest daze of his life when Niall pulls back and gives him
a shattering, shy smile. “Oh.” He blinks, melting in all the right places. “What was that for?”

Niall’s brows knit, and Harry can see his timid frown in the shadows of the night and he wonders what glorious colors Niall’s mixing in his mind tonight. “’Cause I wanted to,” he says, soft and quiet and tender, so tender. “And I like kissing you. More than I ever thought I would.” He smiles, licks his lips, and Harry’s entire body shivers as if he’s just been tossed into an icy wasteland and he wonders if Niall’s always going to be there to warm him up. “I’ll see you inside, baby.”

He gets out of the van, then, fast and swift, and doesn’t glance back or even offer up anything more to explain what he just did, what he just said, and it weighs heavy on Harry’s mind, the actions and the words, as he hops from the vehicle, as well, and shuts the door, reaches for the back handle and pulls it open, leans in and grabs the two full bags he and Niall are living out of.

They stopped yesterday morning after waking up in a seedy motel and bought a hundred dollars’ worth of clothes, jeans and socks and boxers and shirts he and Niall can share, are definitely going to share, and they’re heavier now than they’ve ever been before, but he reckons most of that could probably be the cans of pop they’ve got shoved inside, too.

He takes a moment to himself, then, and leans against the van once he’s got the door shut; he drops the bags to the ground and falls to sit, as well, and it’s dark, of course, but he’s also in a corner of the lot that he can’t be seen very easily, and so he brings his legs up and wraps his arms around his knees and puts his chin on his forearms and shuts his eyes and wonders what sort of emotional instability he’s going to have to help Niall work through tonight.

He’s not thought about the end of summer and what all it’s inevitably going to bring for him and Niall since he’s realized, finally realized, that in waiting for the greatest thing in his life to wither away he isn’t going to be able to enjoy it before it’s gone.

Or, well, that’s a lie — he has thought about it, can’t stop it from worming into his mind when he’s having the best of time, but he doesn’t dwell on it, hasn’t dwelled on it; he’s living it up like he said he would, like he promised himself he would.

It’s just — Niall says things, and sometimes they sink into Harry’s skin and touch his heart, his soul, so consuming and fully unable to be prepared for, and it makes him feel, so much and so much and so much, till it’s really all that he is, all that he will ever be, and it dances around inside of him, leaves him breathless and aching and full of a kind of hurt that makes him smile long after his cheeks have started to sting with the effort.

And he’s done it. Again, he’s done it. With the simple statement — “I like kissing you more than I ever thought I would,” and even now, replaying the rasp with which the words were spoken in his mind leaves his skin itchy with a want so deep, so hungry, so thirsty for Niall’s whole heart and he’ll take care of it, he’ll take the best care of it because he knows what Niall wants, knows what Niall needs, and it’s just a never-ending cycle of want want want want want.

He hasn’t lost himself, though. He hasn’t lost himself to the thirst and hunger for Niall, for Niall’s heart; he’s teetered on the edge and nearly fallen off more than once, of course he has, and he’ll never not say he hasn’t, but he’s not let himself go. And he doesn’t think he will, either, because he’s stronger now, in this moment with his ass against the soggy concrete of the parking lot, than he ever has been before — the summer’s going to end, as all summers eventually do, and it’s going to leave a mark that can never be washed away, but that doesn’t mean he and Niall are going to follow in the season’s footsteps.

A rumble of thunder rattles in the air, humid and heavy and highly intensified, and a moment later a crack of dry lightning streaks across the sky, illuminating the purple and blue and black and gray
clouds that are rolling and sifting, like sand through a shaker, and Harry pushes to his feet and grabs the bags and makes his way toward the entrance of the hotel just as the first drop of rain falls onto the back of his neck.

The hotel room is rather large and plush, spacious, and the single lamp sat on the nightstand next to the bedframe illuminates the place gracefully, simplistically; the bed is big and covered in red and tan and brown, and the walls are painted the color of grainy sand on the beaches Harry and Niall spent hours and hours and hours on when they were younger, searching for rocks that matched one another’s eyes, and the floor is wood, cherry-brown, and there’s photographs of flowers in vases and overrun gardens and ancient art from Greece and Rome on the walls and it smells like sweet, sweet spice.

Niall moves forward and drops down onto the bed, face-first, and Harry sets the bags to the side, next to the dark brown dresser, and shuts the door, turns the lock, puts the deadbolt in place and maneuvers around the room to flick on a few lamps. It’s dim and dark in here, kind of, but there’s a window to Harry’s right and the blood-colored curtains are pulled open and there’s rain on the glass, thunder in the air, lightning in the skies and Harry kind of likes the intensity.

Harry finds a chair, red and flowery and brown, like everything else in the room, and drops to sit, kicks his shoes to the side and toes at his socks till they’re off and out of the way. “This is okay?” he asks, quiet and soft; it’s late, a few minutes shy of three in the morning, and he doesn’t want to be a hindrance to any of the neighbors. “I mean, it’s nice and all, and prob’ly really expensive. Are you sure you don’t mind staying here for two weeks?”

“S’fine, Harry,” he says, Niall says, and the words are slurred and tired and Harry just has to smile because he’s never seen anyone as adorable as the young man in front of him, sprawled out and grinning at him with heavy lids and messy hair and raw pureness. “Come lay with me, please.”

With his heart in his throat and his stomach in his legs, Harry stands and walks over to the bed; he stops at the foot, takes Niall’s boots and socks off and places them over to the side, next to his own, and then he puts a knee on the mattress, crawls up and over and to the side of Niall till he’s stretched out beside Niall, one arm wrapped around Niall’s waist while the other holds his head up, and Niall’s big blue eyes fall closed and the red blush on his cheeks spreads till his whole face is pink with it.

“You sleepy?” he asks, just as soft as he did before, and scoots closer, a little bit closer, and flushes his body with Niall’s, chest and stomach and groin and legs, and then tangles their bare feet together, and it feels so good to fit with someone like this, with Niall like this.

Niall nods, hums low in his throat. “A bit, yeah,” he replies, hoarse, and reaches out to run his fingers through Harry’s hair, picking out the knots that have been infesting his curls for the last three days. “We should probably shower, though.”

Harry smiles. “Together?” he asks, and his voice is light and faint and airy, hopeful, and sometimes he kind of wants to be air, you know, so he can be nothing and something all at once.

“Please.”

Harry rolls away and slings his legs off the side of the bed, pushes to stand up; he looks over his shoulder, sees that Niall has raised himself up, and he reaches for Niall, grabs Niall’s hands and tugs him over, pulls him along, and Harry leads them to the bathroom where their bare feet hit cold tile. He flicks the light on, looks around the bathroom and sees that there’s both a shower and a bathtub; Niall walks forward, brings him along, and he fiddles with the knobs of the tub till the water’s on and
smoking, steaming.

He looks up at Harry, bright-eyed and grinning, small and sweet. “Feel the water and see if it’s okay.”

Harry reaches around and puts his hand beneath the water; it’s a bit hot, and he adjusts it, turns the coldness up notch, and when he tests it out again it’s perfect. He grabs the complimentary products at the edge of the tub and flicks the lid up on a one, dumps the red liquid just beneath the faucet; bubbles are immediate and so is the smell of strawberries, fresh and fruity.

“Guess you weren’t kidding when you said you wanted to have a bath with me, then, were you?” he asks as he steps away from Niall and begins to undress, ripping his shirt over his head and dropping his jeans and stepping out of his underwear, too. “You gonna wash my hair like you said?”

Niall laughs, and the noise rings out in the heat of the bathroom; Harry shuts the door and turns the lock as Niall peels his clothes from his body, as well, and throws them on top of Harry’s, creating a messy puddle of cloth.

“Of course I am,” he says, Niall says, and he moves forward, flushes his front against Harry’s, and his half-hard prick grazes Harry’s thigh, soft and hot and hard and cool all at once, and Harry’s body jolts wildly into Niall’s arms and he’s glad Niall’s strong enough, big enough to support his large weight because he definitely doesn’t want to fall any harder than he already is. “May even wash your body, too.”

Harry shivers, drapes his arms around Niall’s shoulders and holds on, clings tight; he shifts his leg, spreads both of Niall’s with one of his, and puts his face in Niall’s neck and breathes, tries to relax his tight body so the electricity of Niall’s bare, naked touch on his skin doesn’t make him blow before he’s had time to enjoy the development of the effervescent eruption.

“You pamper me,” Harry whispers into the heat of Niall’s neck. “You spoil me. You make me feel so weak and so little, but I kind of like it.”

Niall puts his lips to Harry’s temple and drops both of his hands from Harry’s waist, grips each of Harry’s ass cheeks with greedy fingers and uses the indenting hold to rub their heated cocks together.

Oh, my.

That feels good. Harry wonders if tonight will be the night of firsts.

“I just like to take care of you.” Niall reaffirms his grip on Harry’s ass and spreads his cheeks, pulls him in closer, and Harry gasps as they nearly topple over onto one another, tripping over the clothes and the need to jump each other’s bones, to leech beneath each other’s skin. “I’ll always take care of you.”

Harry makes a noise and pulls away, steps from Niall’s possessive grip; he’s breathless and red, hard and wet, and aching and empty, too, and he wants to be full, wants to be so goddamn full he can feel Niall all over, inside, and he hopes that the lubrication he discreetly tossed into his bag as he was packing days ago will finally, finally, be of use.

He blinks. Niall’s face is pink and his chest is red; his hair is unruly as it tapers down his stomach and flares at his groin, and his cock is long and thick and veiny, mushroomed at the tip and gloriously curved, and Harry feels himself twitch against his thigh so hard it nearly hurts.

Niall wets his lips, and Harry remembers when Niall sucked him off, when he swallowed Harry’s cum. He wants that to happen again.
“Wash me?”

Niall nods, and there’s no trace of hesitation or explicit expectation on his face; Harry steps forward, grabs Niall’s hand and brings him to the bath they’ve drawn.

Dropping into the bath is a crazy, messy affair; the tub is filled too full and both Harry and Niall are quite big, broad and thick, not yet fully matured, and water sloshes over the sides and into the floor and Niall laughs like a little kid as he situates himself opposite of Harry and reaches for the shampoo sitting on the side of the porcelain.

“This is fuckin’ stupid.”

Niall rolls his eyes. “Hush up, you little tit,” he says, and Harry moves his foot just so, gets his toes beneath Niall’s bum and pinches the flesh there; Niall yelps, spills more water over the side, and maybe this is childish, maybe everything he and Niall are doing is childish, what with the bathing and conflicting emotions, but they’ve not shared a tub since they were little children with skinned knees and fingers smelling of the dirt they dug through for fishing bait, and Harry feels the same now as he did then — complete, whole, full, entirely full; he and Niall are best friends, the very best, and this is nothing more now than it was in the past.

But it is. It is. It’s so, so much more.

He doesn’t want to remind Niall of that, though. He’s doing good — Niall’s doing good, and reminding him of what’s changed, of how drastically things have went from this to that because it will do nothing but scare Niall back into the shell he’s trying so damn hard to get out of.

“Did you just pinch me?” Niall asks, hisses, and his eyes are wide and Harry’s grinning and Niall puts his hand beneath the water, bats up some sudsy liquid and splashes it across Harry’s chest. “You’re a child.”

Harry shrugs, adjusts his legs and pulls them up so his knees are resting out of the water, against the tub, and slants his head a bit. “Sometimes you make me feel like one,” he replies, serious and soft, but there’s a smile on his face and he isn’t sure if the way Niall makes him feel is a bad thing or not.

Niall thins his lips. “Get your hair wet and then lean over,” he says, orders, and Harry’s grinning and Niall puts his hand beneath the water, bats up some sudsy liquid and splashes it across Harry’s chest. “You’re a child.”

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“Fuck off.” Harry scoots close so that he’s cross-legged in front of Niall and Niall’s bracketing him on either side with his thick thighs, meaty and hairy and so warm Harry thinks he may be on fire.

“Wouldn’t you want that?” Niall retorts, smart-allecky and sarcastic, and Harry snorts as Niall tilts Harry’s head down, shoves his shampoo-covered fingers through Harry’s hair. “You’re always so tightly wound, like a string pulled so there’s no slack in it. You’re always ready to pounce on me and jump under my skin and into my bones.”

Harry’s nose twitches, and he wishes he was sat away from Niall so he could draw his legs up to his chest and hide his body, hide his heart, hide his soul, but he can’t; he’s never been one to be anxious or apprehensive, but he feels with a strong validation that the loss of breath people who do suffer from such issues — and more, definitely more — is something that could drive anyone mad with repressed misunderstanding.
“I’m sorry,” he says, apologizes, and he holds himself back from enjoying the feel of Niall’s fingers in his hair, scratching at his scalps and smoothing out the snarls and taking care of him when he himself wasn’t taken care of. “I didn’t —”

“I’m only teasing, H,” Niall says, cuts Harry off; he takes one hand out of Harry’s hair and grips Harry’s chin with it, raises his face and holds him there, keeps him steady. “You don’t have to worry about trying to hide from me, baby, ‘cause I’ll always find you.” Niall smiles and leans forward, puts his lips to Harry’s nose in a tender, wet kiss. “You’re amazing, Harry, and I swear there’s not a thing in this world you could do to ever, ever make me think less of you.”

Harry’s face turns as red as the shampoo and he flails about, reaches for Niall’s elbows and grabs them with all the strength he has left. “Okay,” he says, breathes, and Niall’s tiny chuckle of amusement at Harry’s reluctant acceptance is everything at this moment.

And Harry thinks this is kind of unorthodox, allowing Niall to wash his hair and clean his body — and he’s sure he’ll do the same to Niall, too, even though a bit of begging may have to be factored in — and it feels good, kind of, to know that he’s just as cared for and just as worried over, but then Niall gets suds in one of his eyes and he starts cursing, language that’s almost as colorful as the rainbows and flowers Niall’s creating, and Niall does, too, and the faint hint of awkwardness that’s been leveling in the air since this started falls and slips away and Harry isn’t afraid and Niall isn’t shy and they’re just the same, just the exact same as they’ve always been.

It doesn’t take long for Niall to wash the shampoo from Harry’s hair, and then Harry’s soaping his hands to clean Niall up, too, and after a bit of kissing, a bit of touching, a bit of wiping tears off of one another’s cheeks because of the biting suds they’ve gotten in each other’s eyes, they’re done and out, pulling the plug of the tub, and Harry’s wrapping a blood red towel around Niall as Niall pulls a sand-colored one around Harry after using it to dry off Harry’s head.

“You’ve got so much hair,” Niall says, muses, and this isn’t the first time he’s brought it to attention and Harry knows it’s not the last, either, and he wonders if Niall likes it as much as him. “How long are you going to let it grow?”

Harry smiles, brings his hand up from his side to wipe off a bit of water from Niall’s temple. “Not sure yet,” he replies, but it’s kind of airy and absentminded; Niall’s eyes are just so big, are just so blue, and he can’t really help how he’s so consumed by Niall but Niall told him not to be ashamed and he isn’t going to be anymore. “May let it grow till it reaches my tailbone. Or I may chop it off and buzz it close to my head.”

“You’ll be beautiful no matter what you decide, baby.” He leans forward and puts his lips to Harry’s cheek; the shower’s left him warm but now he’s hot, so very hot, and it’s just as all-consuming as always. “Bed?”

Harry laughs, sighs, wraps one arm around Niall’s waist and turns the both of them, leads the both of them out of the bathroom and into the bedroom and toward the large bed.

“I’m not really tired.”

Niall’s hand splays against the small of Harry’s back and then rises, drags across Harry’s humid skin, and he shivers from the sticky touch of fingers on flesh. “Me either,” he says, whispers, and he grabs Harry by the shoulders, by both shoulders, stops and spins him, and presses their lips together.

It’s soft but hard all at once, the kiss, and Harry opens his mouth almost immediately, drops his bottom lip as Niall’s tongue tickles across the plump flesh, and he lets out a noise when Niall’s in as deep as he can go and Niall just swallows it like he always has, like he always will.
Harry pulls away, breathing hard, and grabs Niall’s face; he shoves his mouth against one of Niall’s protruding collarbones and kisses the sharp bone there, licks at the bump and then bites down, hard, and Niall whines low in his throat, so deep Harry can feel the noise rumble beneath his lips, and he smiles, smears his grin along Niall’s skin as he moves up and leans back to meet Niall’s eyes.

“What do you want to do?” Harry asks, slants his head to the side; he’s hoping, but he isn’t sure what for, and he doesn’t want to feel let down if the thoughts that are swirling in his mind are wrong. “We’ve got all night, Ni.”

Niall smiles and puts both of his hands on Harry’s chest; he pushes Harry, just barely, and Harry falls backward onto the bed in a flurry of cloth and blankets, and he turns his head to the side while spreading out on the comforter to meet Niall’s wide, wide eyes.

“Niall?”

Niall steps back, just a bit, and fiddles with the towel; it drops to the ground at his feet and he steps free from the cloth. “Harry?” His voice is faint and scared, kind of, and Harry doesn’t dare drop his gaze from Niall’s. “Harry, will you suck me off and make me cum?”
Harry pushes himself up on his arms and wets his mouth, stares into Niall’s blue, blue eyes. He’s standing there, Niall is, stark naked and shy, and wide-eyed, too, and scared, so very scared — scared as if Harry’s going to reject him, scared as if Harry’s going to think less of him, scared as if him wanting Harry in the same sense that Harry wants him is something to be frightened of.

It isn’t. It’s not love, Harry knows that — he isn’t naïvely idealistic or sickly nostalgic about something he has yet to have, about something he will probably never have — but it’s something. Oh, God, the thing between the two of them is something, all sorts of crashing water on sharp rocks and trees that stand so tall it’s as if they’re reaching for the sun to burn them to blackness, to colorlessness.

Harry slants his head. “You want me to give you head?” he asks, and maybe his words are a little bit crude — it isn’t as if he can very well help it, for fuck’s sake; he’s dangling over the edge after having been knocked off so wildly and the only thing that’s keeping him from falling completely off is Niall’s precious, timid smile — but he doesn’t know what else to do. “You really… want me to suck you off?”

A small puff of laughter is expelled from Niall’s lips, and the noise makes his tiny smile get just a little bit bigger and Harry finds that he has no problem keeping his gaze on Niall’s eyes because he isn’t only in love with Niall physically. It’s an all-consuming, effervescent sort of love; he fell for Niall quick, so hard and so fast, and it was with Niall as a whole, a total complete, but now that he isn’t afraid of the end of summer, he can fall in love with Niall again, slowly and surely and softly, every single piece of the giant puzzle that is Niall Horan.

And he’s enjoying it, having the time of his life. He isn’t sure if he’s ever going to be able to find anything greater than falling in love with Niall when he’s fell as far as he can.

“I’d really like for you to, yeah,” Niall says, nods his head vigorously, over and over and over. He looks like a little kid agreeing to be good, to behave so he may receive a prize as a reward — and what a surprise a hot mouth milking out a static orgasm would be. “If — if you want to, of course. I don’t want you to think you have to.”

Harry doesn’t think he has to at all. He doesn’t feel forced, doesn’t feel pressured; in fact, of all the weight he’s taken on lately, he feels utterly without the heaviness and he thinks it’s Niall’s distinct want to try to be with Harry, to try to make this work even when the world is against them.

No. No, he doesn’t feel pressured, doesn’t think he has to. He and Niall are finally, finally, on the same page, and it’s quite ironic that they’re seeing eye to eye, on one another’s level, now that they’ve crossed over into Atlanta, nearing the end of their trip.

Niall’s standing before him, naked and naked, one and both, and Harry appreciates that — he appreciates that so much because Niall’s come far in such little time, and yes, he wants to put Niall on his stomach and shove his face into the mattress and dick him six ways to Sunday, of course he does, but he also wants to listen to Niall’s stories and chase Niall’s dreams and drink too-sweet hot chocolate in the middle of the summer while they watch the heat come up in waves from the asphalt.
in silence, as well.

That’s… paradise. The greatest kind of nirvana one could ever reach.

“I do. I do want to.” Harry smiles, too, and curls his fists in the fabric of the blanket he’s sprawled out on; his towel is haphazardly across his lap, definitely showing off more than it’s supposed to be covering, and he wonders if Niall can see how excited he’s getting so quickly, almost immediately. They’ve not touched one another in a while, and Harry’s always drawn too tight. “I really want to. If you want to — if you’re sure, Ni.”

Niall nods. “I am,” he says, sweet and soft, so very soft that Harry feels as if there’s feathers running across his skin, and Niall walks forward, slowly and surely, if a bit staggeringly, and reaches for Harry; Harry puts his hand in Niall’s and Niall is so happy and so strong, so full of strength when he pulls Harry to sit up. “I promise I am.”

Harry blinks, licks his lips again; they’re chapped, and he can’t ever remember to pick up a tube of chap stick for some reason. “Bend down here and kiss me, please,” he says, but it’s more of an order, one that’s spoken with a shaky tongue, and Niall does as he demanded, moves both of his hands to Harry’s cheeks and lays their lips together.

Niall’s lips are dry and Harry’s are wet, and they slot together so well, so completely; Harry shifts his head a bit, just a little bit, and sucks Niall’s bottom lip between his and the noise Niall lets out is scandalous and so very, very arousing and erotic. And Harry feels like a bumbling, fumbling virgin — he doesn’t know where to put his hands, settles on gripping Niall’s midsection at the sides and he hopes his nails don’t cut into Niall’s skin but he kind of wants to scrape the flesh there to leave his mark, fuck, and Niall uses his knees to kick Harry’s legs apart and steps forward, steps inside, and Harry can feel Niall on him, grazing his bare thighs, and Niall’s hot and Harry’s smoldering and now they’re both on fire and Harry wonders if the world has always been bathed in flames because he can’t ever imagine his life without the color of Niall.

He flicks his tongue, runs the tip along Niall’s bottom lip, and Niall leans back as if he’s been burned, red-faced and pink-chested and the blue in his eyes is so dark it’s nearly purple. “Touch me,” he says, gasps, and he grabs Harry’s hands from his sides, puts them on the muscular swell of his thighs that’s covered in velvet-like hair. “Touch me, baby, please.”

Harry nods, absently wonders if he’s going to turn into a bobble head by the time this frozen moment in time is over, and leans forward, lays his forehead against Niall’s tummy; the little trail of hair that leads down toward Niall’s stiff cock tickles his face, wrinkles his nose, and he opens his mouth, slathers kisses and licks and bites and suckles all across the swell of skin, of thick flesh as he digs his nails into Niall’s thighs to keep him there, to keep him still.

“You smell so good,” he says, Harry says, and the words leak into Niall’s skin in the same way that the parched ground swallows up every drop of water it’s given after a rough drought. “God, you smell so good.”

Niall giggles, airy and so very tantalizing, and puts his hands on Harry’s head, cards his fingers through Harry’s damp hair; it’s a little bit cold against his shoulders and back, but the gooseflesh that floats along his body isn’t from the chill of the water still dripping from his curls. It’s from Niall — always Niall. He’s either on fire or cold as ice; he doesn’t know gray when he’s with Niall.

“We smell the same, H,” Niall replies, teases, and how he’s able to keep his words from shaking in this moment, in this very moment, has Harry in a fit of confusion because — well, because Harry’s always explicitly tongue-tied whenever Niall so much as gives him a look longer than normal. “Strawberries and roses and stuff.”
Harry hums against Niall’s tummy as he slowly, slowly sinks lower on Niall’s body, ghosting his lips across the faint arch of Niall’s acute hips. “It smells so much better on you, though,” he says, and he wonders if it’s considered blasphemy if he worships Niall like a god, like a king, and really, what’s the difference between the two, anyway, in the minds of people who believe and don’t believe?

“Please, Harry,” Niall says again — please; that’s the word — and he doesn’t want Niall to beg, doesn’t want Niall to have to beg because he’ll give Niall anything, he’ll give Niall everything, and that isn’t such a bad thing anymore, oh no, and he kind of thinks that Niall may do the same for him now. “Put me in your mouth now, Harry, please.”

“Oh, Harry,” Niall says, breathes; Harry remembers how it felt when Niall took him in his mouth, down his throat, and if Niall’s experiencing the same things he did — hot and cold and wet and heart-tugging and gut-churning and warming, so very warming and calming with a promise neither wanted to bring attention to then — he knows it won’t take much for Niall to come (and come undone, as well). “Your mouth is so wet, and hot, Harry.”

Harry hums, acknowledges the fact that he heard Niall, but he’s more focused on not gagging, on making Niall’s first — and possibly only — blowjob by a male, by him, the best he’s ever had.

(And also attempting to control his suddenly overactive gag reflex, as well, but that isn’t something he’s rather found of talking about.)

He flares his nostrils, breathes in through his nose; Niall smells just like he tastes: hot and sweaty and spicy with a kind of musk that’s man, that’s him, and strawberries and roses and it’s something inside of Harry’s mind, the corner that’s shrouded in darkness that keeps telling him this isn’t happening, this isn’t possible, this isn’t in the cards, but it is happening and it is possible and it is in the cards, in their cards, and his own length curls up against his stomach and twitches and his body jolts, shakes, and his mouth slips down ever further along Niall’s prick, surprising the both of them as Harry drags the tip of his tongue along the silky slit and moves his hands to grip Niall’s ass harder, stronger, pulling his cheeks apart and baring his tiny, tiny hole to the chilly air of the room.

Oh. Oh, what if — what if?

He pulls off, and there’s a string of sticky saliva that bridges his mouth with Niall’s cock; he opens
his eyes, looks at the thickness between Niall’s thighs, and gosh, he’s wet with Harry’s spit, clear that it is, and viscid as it dries, and red and pink, his entire body in a fading blush that resonates with the angry tip of his prick, and Harry says it all the time, thinks it all the time, but Niall is beautiful — so much more than beautiful; he’s bright, and intelligent and strong and warm with the care, affection that he bestows upon people, and he makes Harry think and makes Harry feel and makes Harry want to answer every single question Niall ever asks him, makes Harry want to do every single action Niall ever asks of him.

Harry blinks, slow and languid; there’s a collection of spit at the corner of his mouth, and he uses his tongue to suck it up. “Niall?” he asks, breathes, and his voice is hoarse, thick, raspy, and Niall’s eyes are so wide, so very wide and dark, too, almost purple with the desire and pleasure that’s dancing around in them, and Harry’s selfish because he doesn’t want to ever share this with anyone but Niall, doesn’t want Niall to ever share this with anyone but Harry. “Niall, are you okay?”

Niall nods.

Furrowing his brows, Harry takes both of his hands off of Niall’s bum and puts them on Niall’s hips, grips the flesh there. “Good,” he says, bites his swollen bottom lip and shivers, shudders as he swallows more of Niall’s taste down his throat. “What do you want, Niall?”

Niall’s face screws up into a bit of concentrated hesitance; Harry realizes that he knows what Niall wants, that Niall knows what he wants, but he isn’t sure how to say it.

“Harry —”

“It’s okay, Niall.” Harry smiles, uses the grip he has on Niall’s hips to wriggle his body just a bit. “It’s okay.”

Niall takes a deep breath, sucks the air through his teeth in a hiss that echoes in the quiet, rosy air. “I want you… inside,” he says, tries to say, and his face relaxes and his brow smooths out and he reaches for Harry’s face, holds Harry’s cheeks and caresses the undersides of Harry’s eyes, where the purple bags hang. He’s got this look on his face — Harry can’t exactly describe it, but it’s determined and soft, so very delicate in its strength. “I want you to be inside of me, Harry.”

Harry’s breath startles in his lungs and his grip on Niall’s hips becomes white-knuckled, painting pale half-moons into the flesh. “You want me inside of you?” he asks, raises a brow; Niall nods, biting down on his bottom lip, and it’s answer enough for Harry, honestly. Niall wouldn’t be asking this of him if he wasn’t sure. “I’d have to stretch you out.”

“You’ve fingered yourself before.”

Harry scoffs a laugh and falls forward, meshes his cheek with Niall’s lower stomach. He doesn’t have it in him to care or be embarrassed about the fact that Niall knows that secret because — well, because he’s got Niall’s prick laying atop his shoulder and it’s so hot, so heavy, so heated and so ready to burst, and if he isn’t timid about this he definitely shouldn’t be shy about that.

“Of course you know,” he says, laughs, shakes his head. “How?”

“You talk in your sleep, especially when you’re tired,” Niall replies, colorful with mirth, and he lifts Harry’s face toward his, sets Harry’s chin on his stomach so they can look into one another’s eyes, gazing up and gazing down. “Will you?”

“Be inside of you?” Harry nods. “Yeah. I want that, too.”

Niall hums, and it rumbles Harry’s face. “Go get that lube in your bag, then, baby, and I’ll get
comfortable,” he says, and steps away, pulls Harry to stand, as well, and Niall presses a kiss to Harry’s face, just beneath the corner of his eye, and Harry’s heart swells with adoration, with affection, with attraction, with the greatest kind of love in the world.

“Niall, I —”

Niall puts his lips to Harry’s to silence his words. “Hurry.”

Harry shuts his lips, thins his mouth, and detaches himself from Niall’s hungry, sticky body; his towel falls to the ground as he moves toward his bag and rifles through the compartments, finds the half-empty bottle of lube and stands up, wonders if they’re going to use the whole thing, and — and when he turns around, he sees that Niall is on the bed, lying face down with his head in his hands and his legs spread just so, just a little bit, and Harry wants to suckle Niall’s balls adoringly, sweetly.

“Niall,” Harry says, whispers, and the call of his name is heavy in the air as Harry puts his knee on the foot of the bed and uses it to crawl up, to crawl on, and he sits on the backs of Niall’s thighs and sets the lube off to the side. He leans forward, puts both of his hands on the small of Niall’s back; for a moment, he forgets about his raging erection and Niall’s flushed red body and the striking joy that’s got him as calm as the undisturbed ocean. “You have a beautiful body.”

And he does. Niall’s brown hair is a tangled, wet mess and his neck is long, thick, and his shoulders are broad, tight, covered in freckles from hours in the sun; his back is wide and dotted with tiny moles, as well, and it tapers into a trim waist and large thighs and muscular calves and soft feet and pointed toes, and he’s got hair everywhere, of course he does, and Harry does, too, and his skin is several different shades, and — and Niall’s not a woman, not particularly feminine, either, but Harry’s about to be inside of him, inside of Niall, and this is a large step and once they take it there won’t be any going back.

Harry hopes Niall understands.

“I’m not as beautiful as you keep telling me I am,” Niall replies, and his voice is muffled into the pillow he’s got his face shoved in and Harry doesn’t think there’s ever going to be a noise more pleasant than Niall’s tone when it’s wrecked with glorious desire and want. For him. “Hurry, please, Harry.”

Harry makes a noise in the back of his throat and reaches for Niall’s hands, grabs them with both of his and brings them back, puts Niall’s palms on his own bum and urges his fingers to pull, spread apart his cheeks, and he does so with a squeal of infectious arousal. There’s hair there, as there is everywhere, coarse little curls that are the same color of brown on top of Niall’s head, and they make Harry smile so big, so wide that his jaw begins to ache.

“You’re so beautiful, Niall.”

“Harry, stop,” Niall says, and there’s a plea in his tone, and he wonders if Niall will ever come to realize and understand and accept that he is, indeed, the most beautiful person in Harry’s world. “Please, Harry — please.”

Harry grabs the lube from the side and flicks the lid up and off, turns the bottle upside down and squeezes out a large dollop that lands on three of his fingers. “Hold yourself open just like that, Ni,” he says, whispers, and lays the bottle down, puts his stickily-lubed fingers on Niall’s puckered, pink hole and begins to rub slowly, gently. “It’s going to feel weird.”

“It already feels weird, Harry,” Niall muses, and his body jolts, and Harry bites the side of his lip as his mouth curls up into a grin of brilliant love. “I’m just glad it’s you I’m able to feel this weird with.”
Harry laughs as he massages the three of his fingers around Niall’s hole; it feels weird on his fingertips, ridged and ribbed and puckered, almost impossible to breach, but Harry knows that’s false and he pushes inside just so and shivers as the ring of muscle allows him easy access. He’s hot and dry, sort of, and his walls are tight, squeezing, but Harry knows they’ll loosen up and adapt to the intrusions soon enough.

His did. Niall’s will, too. And then it’ll be good — so good Niall will be a bluberring mess of pleasure and sensation.

Niall’s body clenches and he lets out a sharp breath. “Oh — oh, whoa.”

“You’ll tell me if it hurts,” Harry says, and it isn’t a question; Niall nods, and Harry leans up, leans over, and sees that Niall’s mouth is wide open and his eyes are shut tight. “You’ll tell me if it feels good, too, won’t you?”

Niall nods. “Yeah.” He wriggles around, moves his bum, and Harry grins as he realizes that Niall’s trying to fuck himself back into Harry’s finger and also grind himself into the abrasive comforter that’s sure to leave his chest red from his chasing writhing. “This feels kind of good.”

“One finger.”

Niall grunts. “Add another, please. You’ve got ‘nough lube on ‘em to grease both of our bodies up.”

Harry laughs and moves, adjusts himself; his cock drags against the inside of Niall’s thigh and it feels good, oh fuck it feels so good, but he can’t wipe off the grin from his face because — because he and Niall are doing this, are about to fuck, and he’s getting Niall prepared, fucking him wide with his fingers, and Harry’s laughing and it’s just… it’s just so easy for them to be, for them to do, and it’s Niall, it’s always been Niall, and he’s it for Niall, too, he knows he is even if Niall won’t admit it, won’t believe it, won’t accept it.

Yet.

“M’kay.” Harry does as Niall asked of him and pulls one finger out, adds another on the way back in; it’s harder, a bit tighter, and he has to scissor his digits to move in, to sink in deep. “Okay?”

Niall nods, whimpers, brings his legs out and spread them as wide as he can. “Feels nice,” he replies, whispers, and one of his eyes opens, blinks, and he gives Harry a crooked, lopsided grin, his signature grin, and Harry falls forward, meshes his front with Niall’s back, and lays his cheek against Niall’s. They breathe in air, each other’s air, and Harry’s never felt so full before. “You feel nice.”

“I want to make this good for you,” Harry says into Niall’s ear as he absently begins to rub, to rut at the back of Niall’s thigh. “I want to make you feel as good as I know I’m going to feel.”

Niall chuckles, curls up a bit, just a little bit, and bumps his bum insistently into Harry’s hand, fucking himself on Harry’s slick fingers and he forces Harry’s digits to curl and graze against the hidden bud of pleasure and they both let out a gasp of appreciative pleasure.

“You already are, Harry,” he replies, blinks, and they’re so close, so damn close that Harry can feel Niall’s lashes on his face and he does his best to hit Niall’s prostate with each tug and pull of his fingers. “Put a third, H.”

Harry does, eases his third finger inside, and Niall sucks in a breath and just as he’s about to blow it out, about to make a noise of half pleasure and half pain, Harry lurches forward and claims Niall’s lips with his in a kiss that’s nothing more than mouth on mouth, and he swallows Niall’s sounds, all the moans and whimpers and groans and whines and pleas that’s sure to fall off of his tongue any
second now as he continues to work Niall open.

And they do that, keep that up for a moment, kissing and fingering, and it works, really, and Niall lets his bum loose and curls one of his arms up and around, grabs Harry around the neck and holds him there, holds him close, and this isn’t fucking, was never supposed to be fucking — this is making love, this is what making love looks and feels like, as pure and raw as if it were their first time, and Harry wants Niall to know, needs Niall to know that he’s loved, that someone’s in love with him.

It doesn’t matter that they’re both boys. As far as Harry’s concerned, there’s more important problems in the world than two boys that want to kiss one another.

Niall pulls away, turns his head, and Harry’s lips smear across his cheek. “’m gonna come if you don’t… if you don’t stop,” he says, warns, and Harry has to force himself to pull back, to pull out, to grip Niall’s hips with both of his hands and flip him over so that he’s on his back and Harry’s hovering above him, over him. Niall’s eyes are wide, dilated, dark blue like the sky on the edge of nightfall, and Harry’s a shooting star at midnight. “Get inside of me now.”

“Niall.”

“Please.”

One of Harry’s hands flashes out and he slaps around till he finds the lube; he sits up, leans back on his legs and adjusts Niall’s so that both of his thighs are on either side of Harry’s and his bum is elevated a bit, sat on Harry’s knees. Niall’s chest is red and his face is pink and his cock is almost purple with a bruising need to come, to burst, and his eyes are blown wide and his mouth is wet, swollen, sparkling in the dim light of the hotel room.

I love you.

But instead, he says, “You’re so beautiful, Niall,” and Niall turns even more red, even more pink, and he flails wildly about for a pillow to shove under his bum so he can wrap his legs around Harry’s waist. “You’re so damn beautiful.”

Niall smiles, and it’s perfect, really, white teeth and pink face and grabby fingers that cling to Harry’s shoulders as Harry empties the rest of the lube in his palm, as Harry slicks his cock from tip to base, as Harry lines his head up, as Harry pushes inside.

And his smile never fades. His eyes shut and his nose crinkles and his grip on Harry’s shoulders loosens, and his body bows, arches to get away from the intrusion, but his smile never fades and Harry pushes slow, steady, soft till he’s all the way in, flush against Niall’s body, and he falls forward from the rush of total shock that thrums through his system and he wraps his arms around Niall’s torso and holds him close, holds him as tight as he’s ever held anything or anyone before in the world.

He sucks in a breath and chokes on the air, shuts his eyes, and he’s crying in the next second, tiny little drops of tears that land on the hard bone of Niall’s clavicle he’s got himself pressed into.

“Oh, God, Harry.”

Harry shakes his head and reaffirms his grip, lifts his hips and draws out, draws back. “You gotta touch yourself, Ni,” he says, slurs the words against Niall’s skin; he grits his teeth, but there’s flashing colors behind his closed lids and he feels a gathering of sensation in the pit of his stomach and he knows he isn’t going to last much longer. “Can you do that?”
“Yeah.” Niall is breathless and hungry as he moves one hand between their flush bodies and begins to tug, pull, wank himself. “Can you move?”

“I’ll try,” Harry says, and he drops his hips a bit, thrusts into Niall’s hot cavern; he hits Niall’s prostate immediately, isn’t sure how he’s at an angle to do such a thing, and Niall clenches around him, flutters of pressure and Harry comes right then, right there, one thrust, and he opens his mouth to scream but it’s a muted yell and all he can do is breathe, is pant and grip Niall tight in his arms as he fills Niall up with his cum, so much it’s leaking out and wetting the insides of both of their thighs.

“Oh, Harry,” Niall says, pets Harry’s hair, and Harry shakes his head, smears his tears and wordless praises against Niall’s skin as his shudders continue and continue and continue, and then Niall hits his peak, too, and it’s with a mass of quivering as well as a whimpered moan of Harry’s name and his climax soils the both of them more than they ever have been before.

They don’t stop shaking. Minutes later, five and ten and fifteen and twenty, and they’re still shaking, cold and sticky and definitely in need of another bath, another shower; Harry’s still crying, soundless tears, and Niall’s brushed his fingers through Harry’s hair so many times it’s dry and frizzy and fluffy like a poodle.

“Harry?” Niall puts his lips to the top of Harry’s head. “Oh, baby.”

“Don’t let me go.” He burrows himself further into Niall’s skin, inhales the intoxicating way his scent amalgamates with Niall’s. “Don’t let me go, Niall.”

Niall puts his lips on Harry’s forehead, and Harry can feel the smile on Niall’s mouth. “Never.”
Harry wakes up, confused and naked and shocked and wet, so very wet that he’s bemused heavily for a moment; he’s hard, aching, pulsing, twitching, and he blinks a few times, one two three four five, and through the smear of interrupted sleep that drags across his vision he sees that there’s a thin sheen of cold, stifling sweat covering his bare body and Niall’s between his legs, on his knees, with his hair flopped over and into his face, covering his pretty pretty pretty eyes, and he realizes what’s going on in the next sharp, sudden moment.

He sucks in a sharp breath. “Oh,” he says, keens, moans, and puts one hand on his stomach, puts the other on top of Niall’s head, fluttering fingers that lift and sift through the thick brown flop of hair that’s over into his face because he wants to see Niall’s blue eyes, wants to be carried away by the treasures he finds in there.

Niall opens his eyes, raises his gaze; he’s got his lips wrapped around the head of Harry’s cock while one of his hands is gripping the base and the other is pressed against Harry’s thigh, holding him down and holding him still, so very still, and Harry didn’t know Niall was this strong, didn’t know Niall had this much weight to use to keep him in a single place, oh my God, and he didn’t know Niall was this big, either, almost the same size of him, just a little bit thinner and a little bit shorter and it’s weird, sort of, because for so many years in Harry’s life he’s loved the softness of fleshy tummies and thin toes and thick breasts and handfuls of plumpness, but now he loves hard muscles and arching slopes of sharp bone and soft hair that tickles his skin and deepness in every way possible, in every way not possible.

Niall grins, and the movement causes the tip of Harry’s prick to slip from his mouth; it’s wet, thoroughly soaked, and Harry shivers roughly as the cool air of the room blows gently across his raging red erection. He turns his head to the side, Niall does, and lays his cheek on Harry’s thigh; his breath is hot against the even hotter skin of Harry’s cock, and Harry tangles his fingers in Niall’s hair so tight that it surely must hurt, that it surely must sting.

But Niall doesn’t say a single thing.

That makes Harry smile.

“It’s cold in here,” he says, Harry says, and his voice is heavy and thick with sleep and diluted pleasure; he’s been woken up by hands on his body before, of course he has — most were unpleasant, however, and Harry isn’t ever going to forgive Louis for bringing him out of his nap
with a swift slap on the ass one too many times— but never by a mouth, never inside someone’s mouth. He thinks he likes it — he knows he loves it. Only if it’s Niall, of course. “You got… goosebumps all over you.”

Niall nods. “I know,” he replies, puffs out breaths of hot air against Harry’s prick and — and fuck, it feels good. “You’ve got them all over you, too.” He smiles, and one side of his mouth is higher than the other as it always is, as it always will be. “I woke up hot and opened the window.”

It feels so good to be worshipped by the most beautiful person in the world and not have to worry about having to measure up, about wondering if he’s less, about dealing with the insecurity that almost always used to guilt trip him in to believing he was somebody no one would ever want. He isn’t beautiful, knows he isn’t beautiful — he’s smart, though, and open to hear the opinions of others even though he may not agree and caring, kind, supportive, empathetic, respectful, and Niall makes him feel beautiful, makes him feel so full inside that sometimes he’s afraid his chest is going to burst any second, and that’s all he needs, all he’s ever going to need.

Harry moves his hand out of Niall’s hair, curls it around the acute angle of Niall’s jaw and cups his cheek, holds his face. “What time did you wake up?” he asks, faint and airy, and his breath is hotter than the air blowing through.

“Just a few minutes ago,” Niall replies, sighs; he reaffirms his grip on the base of Harry’s prick, squeezes a bit, a bit harder than he was before, and Harry brings in a cracked gasp of pleasure. He forgot Niall still held him in his palm, and it’s — Niall looks so good, so pretty with a cock in his hand. Harry isn’t sure if he’s at liberty to say that, but he’ll always, always, think it. “I wanted you to be up, too.”

Harry chuckles, as much as he can; the night before comes rolling over him in waves till he’s made of nothing but memories, of touch and sound and feel and smell and taste, and he’s not ashamed and he’s not embarrassed and he’s still smiling and Niall’s still here, he’s still here, and everything’s okay.

What he thought would change, what he thought wouldn’t change — everything’s okay. He’s in love with Niall, and Niall cares for him, and everything’s okay because it’s meant to be okay, because it was supposed to be okay.

“You thought waking me up by sucking me off was a good idea?”

Niall’s face turns pink and then red, the same color of roses, and they have thorns and Niall does, too. “I just… I just looked at you and my mouth started to water, is all,” he replies, and it’s as good enough of an answer as any, really, and it makes Harry’s gut churn and roll with sizzling heat. “Are you okay with that?”

Harry wets his lips, nods; his mouth is empty and tastes old, feels old, and he’s sure he’s got sleep crusted around his eyes, wet and dry, but Niall’s looking at him as if he’s the person who drew the stars into the blackness of the sky to light their way to one another in the pitch dark of the night and he doesn’t feel ugly, doesn’t feel unwanted for long.

“Of course I am,” he says, wriggles his hips; Niall’s grip adjusts and Harry hisses as his prick slides against the tip of Niall’s nose. “And I’d love for you to… continue sucking me off, if you’d like.”

Niall laughs low, in the back of his throat, and sticks his tongue out, draws the sharp tip along the angry vein that’s lining Harry’s cock. “What’s the magic word, Harry?” he says, teases, and his breath hits the wetness he’s left behind and it’s all Harry can do to keep himself from crying out.
“God — please, Niall,” Harry gasps, curls the words around his tongue as he brings one of his hands up and puts it in his hair, grips the tangled mess and pulls, pulls so hard the pain conflicts with the pleasure and the knot forming in the pit of his stomach tenses, tightens. “Please, Niall — oh, please please please please, Niall, please.”

Niall hums. “You’ve not got to beg, H,” he says, coos, and Harry doesn’t like being coddled like he’s a child, usually, but when Niall does it makes him feel valued, validated, cared for and always, always protected. It makes him feel just as good as he does when he’s having his dick sucked, when Niall’s sucking his dick. It’s just as emotional as it is physical. “I just wanted you to say please, baby.”

He moves around then, does some sort of weird maneuver that Harry can’t very well see because he’s got his eyes shut tight from the repressed need to plea, and then his lips are around the head again, wet and fat and hot and encasing, all compassing, and Harry never knew a tongue could do that, oh my gosh, flitting into the slit like a slithering snake attacking its prey, fuck, and maybe Niall’s the snake and Harry’s the prey but Harry doesn’t really care, can’t really care as long as Niall swallows him up whole, as long as Niall swallows him up good.

“Oh, my — my God, yes.”

Niall’s mouth is hot and wet, so wet it’s almost dripping; he’s slow with his movements as he flicks his tongue, around and around and around, and Harry digs his heels into the mattress, mindlessly uses it as leverage to thrust up, to buck up, to shove his cock further passed Niall’s lips, further down Niall’s throat.

He gags, Niall gags, and it’s kind of disgusting, hearing the noise as it’s choked around his cock, a strange vibration that makes him hum with pleasure below his brain, thrumming through his veins.

He wants to do that again, over and over and over.

Oh.

Niall pulls off with a gasp and coughs, sharp and hard; Harry opens his eyes, blurry as they are, and sees that Niall’s face is red, sees that Niall’s lips are pink, sees that Niall’s pupils are so largely dilated the vibrant blue is nearly overtaken and that there’s tears leaking from the corners.

“Careful when you do that, H,” Niall says, chastises, and his voice is soft, so soft, and kind of hoarse, as well. “You almost choked me.”

Harry frowns, tugs at his hair so hard he feels the sting of a few strands being ripped out. “I’m sorry, Niall,” he says, and he really is, really means it, but — but when Niall’s doing this to him, when Niall’s got his lips wrapped around him, when Niall’s bare against him, he can’t help it. He just — can’t help it. “You made me feel really good.”

Niall’s lips are swollen and fat, and they pull into a stretched smile that makes him look older, that makes him look handsome in a timeless and classical way. “Yeah?” he says, breathes, asks, and — and oh gosh, oh fuck, Harry reckons he can come right now, right now, just by looking at the precious grin on Niall’s face and the dark sparkle of wicked desire in Niall’s eyes. “I made you feel good?”

Nodding, Harry smiles. “Yeah,” he answers, draws the word out; he reaches for Niall’s hand, finds it on his thigh, and their fingers grab and tangle, intertwine, and they hold on tight to one another.

“You did. You always make me feel so good.”
Niall laughs, so light and airy Harry’s not exactly sure if he truly heard or not. “I have an idea,” he says, Niall says, and he moves around again, pushing himself up on his knees and slinging one leg over Harry’s so that he’s straddling Harry’s hips. He’s naked, Niall is, and his own length is hard and firm, curved upward, flushed red and dotted with white speckles of precum; Harry wets his lips and whispers, drops his head back against the pillows and places his hands on Niall’s hips, digs his nails into the fleshy skin there.

“Niall?” Harry says his name, a bit wobbly, and uses the grip he has on Niall’s hips to keep him steady, to keep him from falling over. “What are you doing, Ni?”

Putting his hands on Harry’s shoulders, Niall tips forward a bit and gives Harry most of his weight and says, “I want you inside of me again,” and Harry nods, draws in a tight breath and takes one hand off of Niall’s hips, moves it to wrap around the base of his cock; he holds his length still for Niall, rigid and hard, and Niall inhales sharply before dropping his bum. The tip hits the hole, takes a bit to breach the ring of muscle, and then the mushroomed head of Harry’s cock is slipping inside of Niall’s tightness; it’s hot and wet, just like Niall’s mouth, and Harry lets out a moaning whimper as soon as Niall settles on his lap. “You okay?”

Niall’s breathless, words tinged with just a hint of pain; Harry opens his eyes, looks into Niall’s, sees that they’re shining bright and damp, too, and Harry doesn’t want him to cry, doesn’t want him to feel pain when Harry’s feeling nothing but pleasure.

“Of course I am,” he replies, gasping for all the breath Niall’s taking away from him; he’s being squeezed, being held tight in a hot cavern of ribbed warmth, and he’s got a volley of gooseflesh on his body now as he shakes, as he shudders, as he shivers and sweats to himself that he’ll make this as good for Niall as it is for him. “I should be asking — are you okay, Niall?”

Niall nods, presses his lips together in a thin line; he moves his hips a bit, just a little bit, probably trying to find an angle that doesn’t hurt or sting as much, and Harry whines low in his throat and slaps his hands on Niall’s thighs, grips the thick flesh and holds him still.

“Hurts, is all,” Niall answers, bares his teeth in a wolfish grin; he’s in pain and he’s trying to hide it, and that says everything anyone ought to ever need to know about this king of a man. “There was still some lube left in the bottle and I used it trying to… open myself up, like you did last night, but I — the angles were all wrong and I couldn’t reach all the places you did and I just gave up. You do it so much better than me, but I’m not as tight I was before.”

Harry smiles, and his body warms as if he’s just been set on fire. “That makes me… kind of happy,” he says, wrinkles his nose; Niall moves, lifts his hips up and then drops them back down just so, just barely, and Harry breathes a sigh of electric pleasure as his body goes slack and everything inside of him turns to molten sensation. “That I’m the only one who can make you feel a certain way.”

“You ought to feel privileged, silly boy.” Niall smiles, leans his face down and puts the tip of his nose against Harry’s; they’re in this position, this precarious position of potent pleasure, and they’re — they’re connected, you know, with Harry inside of Niall, and they’re rubbing their noses together, for fuck’s sake, and he likes how they can be this and that, Harry likes how they can be this and that at once because he isn’t sure if anyone has ever felt this sort of liberation that he has before. “You’re the only one who makes me feel this way.” He laughs, kisses Harry on the lips for a short, easy moment, and his jubilant happiness is infectious. “I think you’re prob’ly going to be the only one to make me feel this way, too.”

Oh.

“Come here, you beautiful boy,” Harry says, and he reaches for Niall as if he would otherwise
drown, as if he would otherwise shrivel up and rot away, and wraps his arms around Niall’s shoulders, pulls him down, down, down; Niall’s looser now, sort of, and Harry plants his heels on the bed and thrusts up, arches his back and moves insides of Niall’s heat. “Hold on to me, please, Niall.”

Niall nods, presses his face into the crook of Harry’s clavicle, between his shoulder and throat, and puts one of his hands in Harry’s hair while the other winds around Harry’s neck and he says, screams, “Oh, God, yes, Harry — like that like that like that,” and the pitched high yell reverberates in the room, in Harry’s ear, and he shuts his eyes, squeezes Niall tight.

He’s moving fast, Harry is, and Niall’s body is lax and heavy and full, so full; the sound of skin on skin, flesh on flesh, permeates the air, slap slap slap, and it’s loud and obnoxious and so very, very dirty and erotic and filthy, and it sounds a lot like fucking, a lot like having sex, but it’s not — it’s not because Niall’s breathing, whimpering little words of hushed affection in Harry’s ear and Harry’s moaning, low and light and little bits of fragmented sentences of absolute ecstasy and it doesn’t matter how fast, doesn’t matter how slow they’re going; it’s still love, it’s still making love and Harry’s still in love and Niall may not love him, may not love him just yet but it’s still love of some sort and Harry won’t ask for more.

It doesn’t last long, really. Not when Niall’s cock is being rubbed roughly between both of their stomachs, not when Harry’s relentlessly drilling inside of Niall, not when Niall’s whispering cries of desperate release in Harry’s ear, not when Harry’s swiveling his hips just so and hitting Niall’s spot, Niall’s prostate, every time, not when Niall’s squeezing Harry as if holding on is his only choice to not be dropped from the highest cliff in the entire world.

And then —

“Oh, Harry, yes!”

— there’s a warm, creamy sort of substance suddenly on Harry’s stomach, on Niall’s stomach, jizz, and it’s a sticky, viscous feel that triggers Harry’s own orgasm; he comes in a hurry, in a sudden flurry of anarchic pleasure that has him arching so hard, so far he slips completely out of Niall’s stretched hole and slathers Niall’s bum in spunk. Their timid cries of fulfillment fall from their mouths, and Niall puts his lips to Harry’s neck in a suctioning kiss that makes his skin prickle with flavorful sensation.

Harry shuts his eyes and breathes in, breathes out; he loosens the grip he has around Niall’s torso and relaxes, puts his hands on Niall’s sides and runs his fingertips up and down, up and down Niall’s shivering, shaking body. They’re a hot mass, a wet lump of syrupy bodies, and Harry never wants Niall to take his weight away because it’s more comforting than a kiss on the head, more comforting than a rub on the back, more comforting than a cuddle in the darkness of the night.

He wonders if it will ever diminish, the feeling he gets whenever he’s with Niall; it’s so big, so large, makes his chest swell so thickly that it’s a wonder he doesn’t suddenly burst. He wonders if it will ever weaken, the strength of the feelings he has for Niall; they’re so bright and brilliant, bathed in nothing but color because there’s no black, because there’s no white, because there’s no such thing as a gray area.

Niall is color. Niall is all the colors. And that’s not to say Harry’s never seen colors before, mind you; it’s just — when he’s with Niall, like that and like this, things are more vibrant, things are more tangible, things are more saturated with every hue imaginable.

The sky is longer, bluer; the ocean is deeper, more navy than midnight; the flowers are pink and yellow and purple and orange, pansy and gold and violet and fire. The world is uglier, meaner, but
it’s also more beautiful, more tolerating and open to allowing freedom, liberation.

Niall is everything and nothing, something and anything all at once, all at the same time. It’s strange.

But Harry likes it. And he loves Niall, as well.

“Are you okay, Niall?” Harry asks, faint and fairly quiet; he’s still breathing hard, can’t seem to catch the air that Niall took from him, and he kicks his legs up, grabs the blanket with his feet and throws it over Niall, tugs it with his hands and brings it all the way up to cover their bodies and keep in a bit of their heat. “You’re — shaking, Niall. Are you… okay?”

“Yeah.” Niall nods, smears his answer against the heated flesh of Harry’s throat. “I am.” He snuggles closer, loosens the grip he has around Harry’s neck. “Are you? You cried yesterday, and I — you aren’t crying this time, are you?”

“No, I don’t think so.” He opens his eyes, puts one of his hands in Niall’s hair and lifts his head, turns his face so they can look at one another clearly, freshly; Niall’s cheeks are red and he’s sparkling in every way, in every single way, and Harry wants to tell Niall how much he means to them, how much he’s always going to mean to him. “Last night was… was really great.”

Niall’s nose wrinkles and he smiles so slowly, so softly. “Are you saying what just happened wasn’t great?” he asks, teases, and cards his fingers through the tangled hair at the base of Harry’s neck.

Harry scoffs and rolls his eyes, pinches the flesh of Niall’s hips. “Hush up, you idiot,” he replies, grunts below his breath. “Last night was great. Just a moment ago was amazing. I can’t put into words how… thankful I am to be able to share all of this with you.”

Harry’s fairly sure the novelty of having Niall by his side, regardless of all the muddled opinions and stripping connections, will never wear off.

“It’s only going to get better, Harry,” Niall says, and his words — they’re so ripe, so heavy with all sorts of promises that Harry hopes will be kept and they make Harry want to jump off the highest cliff into the deepest ocean with no life-saving device except for his hand in Niall’s. “And we probably need to get some more lube, too, since — since we’ve started this.” He laughs, giggles like a little kid, like the little kid he was never able to properly be, and Harry swells because he’s doing something, because he’s giving back to Niall in the only way he knows how. “I guess a day out on the city will be fun.”

“Probably.” He ought to call his mother before they head out on the town, though, as well. Just to let her know that he’s okay, that he’s fine, that he’s… sorry. And that he loves her, too; he still isn’t sure what to think, still isn’t sure what to ask, but she’s only got his best interests at heart, he knows that, and even if he doesn’t believe the words that came out of her mouth he still cares for her as if she hung the moon.

Niall sniffs and blinks, so slow Harry tries to count all the individual eyelashes he has resting on his bronzed, freckled cheeks, tipped gold like the mounds of molten yellow in his eyes. “That sound good to you?” he asks, and the way he says the words, the way he wants to know Harry’s thoughts is just… uplifting.

If Harry had any doubts before, they’re gone. They’re all gone.

Harry nods and shuts his eyes and leans in, leans close, puts his forehead against Niall’s and wonders when a home went from four walls and a door to two arms and a beating heart.
breathe

breathe, breathe in the air
don’t be afraid to care
leave but don’t leave me
look around and choose your own ground

― Pink Floyd, ‘Breathe’

The streets of Atlanta are long and congested, thick with all sorts of people — black and white and brown and red; American and African and Mexican and Asian and Middle Eastern, all sorts of wonderful nationalities that Harry’s witnessed before, that Harry’s never witnessed before — and Harry’s never seen so much color before, never seen so much diversity before.

Languages and accents and slang words are new and diverse and familiar, as well; he’s heard Spanish and Arabic (he thinks, though he could be wrong; Niall says it’s Arabic, at least) and Chinese, too, from one of the vendors sat up on the corner of an intersection with a broad smile and kind eyes and wicked way with food. In LA, he always felt out of place with his brush of British compared to those with no lilt to their words, and Niall definitely stood away from most with his Irish twang, as well, no matter how much it’s diluted over the years; here, though, in Atlanta, he doesn’t feel as distanced as he did in California.

Things feel more open and acceptable here; he thinks maybe it’s the history of the city, how it went from this to this to this, racially diverse and oppressive to racially inviting and equal.

LA is a big city, considerably larger than Atlanta; the thing is, though, LA is more divided than Atlanta, more separate and insistently one instead of multiple.

“Your eyes are really bright,” Niall says, and his words pull Harry away from his musings.

They’ve been walking for a while, for a few hours now; Niall’s hair is flat on his head and sweaty, sticking to the sides of his face, and his cheeks are flushed red with the heat of the sun wafting down from above. His shirt is thin and gray, slicked to his skin and wet with perspiration in a few places, and his jeans are loose on his lean hips and gosh, Harry thinks he looks so good right now, so good it’s kind of hard to have a glance at someone else and believe they measure up to the bar Niall’s setting.

Harry shrugs. “I just really like this place, is all,” he answers, but it’s not the whole truth and he wonders if he should tell Niall now.

His eyes are bright because people have asked him how his day has been going with so much care, because people have stopped to greet him with a smile on their face so big it’s a shock their lips didn’t split, people have held actual conversations with him and seemed genuinely interested in his day. His eyes are bright because his stomach is full with good food and his pockets are full with Polaroids of him and Niall that they got snapped by a roadside photographer. His eyes are bright because they’re here, because they’re finally here and finally ready and finally at the end of this wild, wicked road trip.

And the end is just the beginning.

But, really, his eyes are bright because Niall’s got his hand in Harry’s, tucked close between their bodies, in plain sight but also hidden away, kept at their sides and at their hips — his eyes are bright
because Niall is not pretending and Harry is not hurting and they’re doing this together, doing this against all odds.

And they’ve gotten looks. Of course, they’ve gotten looks; they’re two men holding hands in 1975 Atlanta, two men who have shoved one another aggressively into the alleyways to steal a few hot kisses from one another’s lips, and though homosexuality and its openness have come a long, long way since the 60s, it’s unapologetically naïve to believe that their show of total affection and adoration is not going to draw negative attention from a few people.

(And, really, is negative if it’s against someone’s religion to be homosexual? Is it? This great country was founded on the freedom of religion, was it not? Harry thinks as long as people aren’t expressively harassing him and Niall — and whoever else he might be linked to in the future — then there isn’t anything wrong with believing homosexuality is an abomination.)

(However, Harry reckons he thinks this way because he’s part of both categories — the offender and the offended. It’s both sides of the same coin, really.)

But there’s been good looks, too. Smiles, nods, words of agreement and slaps on the back that come from the goodness of the hearts of some people — where there’s good, there’s always going to bad, and Harry can’t help that. That’s just something he’s got to deal with since he’s a human, since he’s someone on this earth. What he can help, though, is the way he reacts to the good and bad; his actions are going to affect not only him, anyway, and he doesn’t want to be the reason to bring a frown to someone’s face.

And that’s all anyone can do, really. You just have to deal with it, is all, and try your hardest to make the best of whatever it is that you’re given.

“Harry?” Niall’s voice is careful in the heat of the day; he’s shining bright from the sun, so brilliant it’s almost blinding, and he’s just as effervescent as angels flying through the air with sparkling wings that glimmer like stars and Harry wonders why it’s taking Niall so long to realize that they’re supposed to be together, that they’re meant to be together, that they’re going to be the lucky ones. “You’re staring, baby. What’s up?”

Harry realizes, then, in that moment — there’s never time. There’s never really time for anything. There’s no such thing as the right time, no such thing as the wrong time; time is relative and just something that’s been created by man to give reason as to why people let so many great things pass by. And he doesn’t want to fall into that category, doesn’t want to fall under that category of lonely and empty people who let their entire lives pass them by. There’s no such thing as the right and wrong moment of time, no, so you have to make your own time and just hope, just pray that the time you’ve taken from someone else isn’t going to go to waste.

“Niall? I love you.”

And this may just be the most frightening moment of Harry’s entire life. It beats out having to leave his father in Holmes Chapel, it beats out having to help his mother control the wild bleeding of her nose, it beats out having to sneak Gemma’s intoxicated self inside without waking their mum — it beats out getting the call that Niall’s been in a wreck, it beats out racing to the hospital, it beats out being jerked away from the bed, it beats out having to wait out in a dimly-lit room for the word from the doctors, it beats out being able to crawl into bed beside Niall and being conscious of how tightly he held on.

Niall slants his head to the side, knits his brows together. “What?”

“I’m in love with you,” Harry replies, repeats, and he’s smiling, grinning, but when his eyes lift from
the stained ground he sees that Niall’s face is pale and pinched tight with an ugly frown.

“Why’d you say that?” Niall asks, and his voice is tight, pinched tight and pulled tight and pressed tight, and Harry gulps, swallows so loud he’s sure Niall can hear and he doesn’t understand how someone can go so quick, so fast, from infectiously happy to solemnly upset. “Why’d you just tell me that?”

Harry draws in a deep breath; his lungs inflate and his chest swells, and he wonders if it’s okay to cry after just confessing his love for his best friend. “Because I want you to know that I love you, Niall,” he says, replies, and it’s a good answer — it’s the only answer. There’s no lies and no hidden agendas and it’s — just that, just so simple. Harry’s not hiding anything right now. “Because I’ve been in love with you for a few days now, and I’ve been trying to tell you and I realized — there’s never a right time and we’re here, Niall, we’re in Atlanta and it’s only going to be so long before we leave and head back home to a place that kind of feels like a prison and I don’t want to go back there without telling you how I really feel and… wondering if there’s any possibility that you could feel the same.” He stops, brings his hand up to wipe at the back of his neck; it’s sweaty, his skin, and he just wipes the perspiration on the leg of his jeans. It isn’t like he’s got anyone to impress. “Is that a bad thing, Niall?”

Niall drops Harry’s hand, takes a few steps back till they’re several feet apart and people are having to go out of their way to not knock into them, to not walk into them. “That’s the worst thing you could have done, Harry,” he says, Niall says, and Harry isn’t sure if his heart has ever felt so small before.

It starts raining a few moments after that; Harry didn’t notice the dark clouds brewing in the distance because they were behind him and came up on him like a traitor, like a liar, like a beast prepared to grab him around the neck and pull him down, down, down without allowing him the right to try and fight, to attempt to battle for his honor.

Niall tells him it would be smart if they started back to the hotel, and Harry nods, agrees, silent and stoic and stone cold; they’re both silent as they walk, stealthily avoiding one another’s body and the heat they’re giving off even as the rain is coming down, even as the rain is drenching their clothing, even as the rain is clinging to their skin and washing off, rinsing away all of the touches they’ve left on each other in the past few hours, in the past few days, in the past few weeks.

It almost feels as if everything Harry’s done, as if everything Niall’s done, as if everything the two of them have done together never mattered at all.

The thought makes Harry sick.

And it hurts. A lot. And tears can mix, mingle with rain, but Harry is tired of crying and he isn’t going to allow Niall to bring him to sobs anymore — and he damn sure isn’t going to allow Niall to make him feel bad, to make him feel in the wrong when he has only done right.

They return to the hotel drenched and shaking; the temperature outside is still as hot and sticky as it was before, yes, but the air inside of the room is cold and chilly — kind of like the distance between Harry and Niall, if you want to look at it in that way.

Harry is quick to rid himself of the soaking, sopping clothes. He undresses, rips his shirt over his head and drags his jeans down his legs and kicks his underwear somewhere to the side; he grabs a
long-sleeve flannel, a pair of thick pajama pants, and a fresh set of drawers, and gets them on quicker than he took his clothes off and leaves the water-logged fabric on the floor.

He kind of doesn’t care that it’s sure to leave a stain.

Niall just kicks his shoes off, sits on one of the chairs in the corner; his face is pulled tight and Harry reckons the more space he can put between him and Niall the better, and so he moves toward the bed — it’s made now, and Harry will have to ask Niall to tip the maid graciously when they leave, together or separately, as if that matters — and draws back the comforter, inserts himself under the thickness of the fabric.

It takes away the shivers that are shaking his body, yes, but it also acts as a barrier of some sort — it’s like holding your arms around your stomach or pulling your knees up to your chest, really, if you think about it: both are for protection, both are for defense, both are to keep something out that should never be let in, that should never have been let in.

Niall sighs, and the noise beats Harry’s body like the rain pelts on the glass of the French doors and this is a war he never wanted to be part of. “Harry —”

“Why?” he stops, interrupts Niall; his voice is hard and edged with a sharpness he has never heard before. It kind of frightens him. But it’s just him, just his reaction to the whole thing; he isn’t less and he isn’t more because he’s upset and regulated to feeling horrible after his confession. “I just want to know why. Again. Because you’re always doing stupid shit without a proper reason, and you’re leaving me to wonder if it’s my fault or not.”

Niall shuts his eyes and tosses his head back, reclines in the chair; he’s getting the padding wet and it’s sure to mold if not dried correctly, but he has a feeling Niall doesn’t really give a damn and, frankly, Harry doesn’t, either.

“You can’t see things from my perspective, Harry,” Niall says, begins, and Harry’s going to give Niall a chance — of course he is; he has to — but Harry is not going to allow Niall to push him to the side again and trample all over his thoughts, all over his feelings. He is not going to allow Niall to make him feel less of a man than he is — especially not when he has worked so goddamn hard to make himself better. “You can’t see how horribly my mum and brother have affected me, and my dad, too, and you can’t — I don’t want to hurt you. I don’t want to mess up trying to love you because I don’t know how, because I was never taught how.”

Harry wets his lips; they’re the only thing that stayed dry, it seems. “No, I can’t,” he says, agrees. “But you can’t see how badly it hurts me when you tell me one thing and then do the exact opposite.” He shakes his head. “You say you don’t want to hurt me, but fuck, Niall, that’s all you ever seem to do.”

“I’m sorry, Harry. I’m so sorry.”

Harry blinks. “That’s not going to make it better this time, Niall,” he replies, Harry replies, and his voice is sticky with a sick kind of hurt that he has never felt before.

“And you can’t understand how scared I am to know that you’re in love with me. You can’t understand how scared I am.”

Harry frowns. “Why? Why does it scare you that I’m in love with you?” He slants his head, just a bit, and burrows further beneath the blanket. It’s a whole lot warmer, a whole lot more welcoming than Niall is at this moment. “Cause it doesn’t scare me. I’m the one in love with you, and it doesn’t scare me.”
It did. It used to, would grip him sometimes during the night and twist his dreams so horribly he’d wake up with a cold sweat. But it doesn’t scare him now. It makes him feel every bit the warm-blooded human being he is.

“Why doesn’t it?” Niall asks, and his voice is pulled to the end, to the absolute breaking point; he is stretched and weary, apprehensive and hurt, and Harry doesn’t understand how he can still feel so little when he is the biggest thing in the world, in Harry’s entire world. If only Niall knew of the wonderful strength and power he has over Harry, will always have over Harry — the possibilities are abundantly endless, and Niall wouldn’t think so little of himself. He is everything. “Why doesn’t it scare you that you’re in love with me?”

“Because it just doesn’t.”

And yeah, what a great answer that is.

But it’s hard for Harry to put into words what he’s feeling, really. Relieved to have finally admitted the deep feelings of his heart, yes, and also a bit upset because of the reaction Niall’s given him, of course; however, the reason he isn’t scared to be in love with Niall, isn’t scared for people to know that he is in love with Niall stems from something so simple it’s almost hard to comprehend.

He loves Niall. He’s in love with Niall. And that’s it. That’s the reason.

Does there have to be another? Does there have to be any?

Love isn’t something that can be defined. Love is something that just is and always will be; categorizing the complexity of such a thing diminishes its strength. It’s the best and it’s the worst thing to ever happen to the world, to ever happen to the two of them — and, really, they’re each other’s world, if you want to look at it that way.

“Aren’t you scared of the church? Of our parents? And even today, on the streets, when we were holding hands — didn’t the looks the people gave us hurt you? Didn’t the looks scare you and make you think you’re wrong for being in love with me?”

Harry purses his lips and thinks. And thinks and thinks and thinks till he can somehow understand Niall’s fear.

He’s already dealt with all of this — he’s already pushed through and plowed over the opinions of the church, the thoughts of their parents, the nastiness of the strangers they passed by on the street only moments before. He’s already thought about it, and he’s over it — because it doesn’t matter. It just doesn’t matter.

They hold no power over him. They hold no power over Niall.

(And besides — if Christians are going to outwardly shame and judge and terrorize you for the way you’ve decided to lead your life, are they truly Christian?)

(No. No, they are not. As a Christian, you are meant to love and support and accept and encourage all of God’s children; the word is meant to be shared, not shoved. And it’s misinformed, misguided Christians that give the rest a bad name.)

You can be in love with someone the same sex as you and still be religious, still hold on to the beliefs you’ve been taught and learned over the years of your life; you can refuse to agree with the choices of your children and still love them regardless of the way they have chosen to lead their life; you can never accept homosexuality and still be a decent person to the gay people you pass on the street, as any decent human being would, religious or not.
It isn’t one or the other; it isn’t radical or weak, left or right, black or white. It’s both — or, it can be both. It definitely should be both. Harry doesn’t understand why the concept of equivalence is so goddamn hard to accept and express; tolerance needs to be given and accepted around the world more than it is.

“No, I’m not scared of any of them at all,” Harry answers, soft and silk-like; he wants to move, wants to put his arms around Niall and hold him close but he doesn’t, just stays on the bed and cuddles further underneath the blankets. “I’m not scared of them because I love you. And because I love God, and ‘cause I know and you know He loves us and that’s enough. That’s enough for me not to be scared. Their words and thoughts can’t hurt me ‘cause God is in my heart and on my side, and so are you.” He smiles — or, tries to, that is. “So are you, Niall.”

And, besides, God is the one who is going to be the judge at the end of the line; it is nobody’s job on this earth to be doing what He swore to do in death.

Niall sighs and shakes his head, gives Harry the shakiest smile he’s ever seen before. “Harry, please —”

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Niall sighs and shakes his head, gives Harry the shakiest smile he’s ever seen before. “Harry, please —”

“Niall, just — just tell me why you’re so scared to admit that you’re in love with me, too.”

And it’s silent for a moment, tense and wildly pressurized, and then, from Niall, from deep within the linings of his heart, “Because I’m leaving next month and I don’t want to leave in love!”

Harry’s heart pitter-patters and he grips the fabric of the blanket so tight it’s a wonder his blunt nails don’t cut right through, don’t shred the stitching. “Niall, you’re…” he begins — tries to begin — and trails off because he can’t… fathom Niall leaving, can’t fathom ever being without Niall at his side. It’s been the two of them for so long; being without Niall is like ripping entangled roots apart, thinking of being without Niall is like trying to plug all the holes in the sky during a torrential rainfall. “Well, then, I’ll just go with you.”

Niall sighs. “You can’t,” he says, and it’s sad, so fucking sad, and Harry wants to take all of the pain away, all of his anguish and Niall’s torment and just — if he could kill a word, if he could grab it around the neck and strangle it till it stopped breathing, he thinks he would destroy hurt before all the others. “You can’t do that this time, Harry.”

“Niall, just — just tell me why you’re so scared to admit that you’re in love with me, too.”

And it’s silent for a moment, tense and wildly pressurized, and then, from Niall, from deep within the linings of his heart, “Because I’m leaving next month and I don’t want to leave in love!”

Harry’s heart pitter-patters and he grips the fabric of the blanket so tight it’s a wonder his blunt nails don’t cut right through, don’t shred the stitching. “Niall, you’re…” he begins — tries to begin — and trails off because he can’t… fathom Niall leaving, can’t fathom ever being without Niall at his side. It’s been the two of them for so long; being without Niall is like ripping entangled roots apart, thinking of being without Niall is like trying to plug all the holes in the sky during a torrential rainfall. “Well, then, I’ll just go with you.”

Niall sighs. “You can’t,” he says, and it’s sad, so fucking sad, and Harry wants to take all of the pain away, all of his anguish and Niall’s torment and just — if he could kill a word, if he could grab it around the neck and strangle it till it stopped breathing, he thinks he would destroy hurt before all the others. “You can’t do that this time, Harry.”

“This time?”

“Harry.” Niall grips the arms of the chair so tight his knuckles turn white. “You have a life in LA, and you can’t leave your entire world just to follow me while I try to find mine. You can’t do that.”

Harry leans forward, just a bit. “What aren’t you telling me, Niall?” he asks, Harry asks, and he’s reminded of the phone call he shared with his mother not too long ago, in a hospital that smelled so horrible of antiseptic and rubbing alcohol, before he held a precious baby in his arms, and he knows the words she spoke to him then were the truth.

He should have listened.

“I lied,” Niall says, looks down, and Harry wipes at his eyes before the sudden rush of tears fall. “I lied about everything, Harry. I lied about it all. My mum had no idea I took ten thousand dollars, and Greg had no idea I took his van, and Louis and Liam had no idea I was planning on having a road trip with you, only you, and —”

“— I had no idea you were going to be leaving next month,” Harry says, finishes for Niall; his voice is wrecked, Niall’s is, and hoarse and rough, scratchy to hear spoken in the air, and he doesn’t want
to have to listen to it anymore. “Where are you going?”

Niall wets his lips, smiles at the ground. “Stillwater,” he answers, as if that’s an explanation, as if that’s answer to all the questions swirling around in Harry’s head. “It’s in Oklahoma, about an hour away from Tulsa. I applied in December to the university there, and got accepted pretty quickly with tons of scholarships.” He stops, laughs humorlessly. “They said they liked my determination in the essay I wrote, but it’s funny ‘cause I wrote it about you and how hard I was working to make you feel as good as you make me feel.” He shrugs, and his indifference is cutting through Harry’s skin like the dull blade of a relentless knife. “I leave to move in August fifth. May even see about being a walk-on for basketball.”

Harry blinks; his eyes are heavy and his lids are thick with water, weighted with tears. “And you didn’t tell me?” he asks, croaks, and oh, God, he’s going to sob. “You had… you had to lie to me?

“I didn’t know how. I didn’t know how to tell you.”

“So all this — all of this is just… you saying goodbye to me?”

And everything I’ve ever known, everything you’ve ever known?

Niall is slow to shake his head, but it’s still a nod that rips Harry’s heart right out of his chest. “You aren’t wrong if you say it like that,” he replies, knits his brows together. “I just… I just thought that I could give you something in turn for all you’ve done to make me smile, to make me feel good, to make me happy, before I left you. You’ve made my life worth living, and I wanted to give you back a little bit of everything you’re still giving me.”

Harry wipes his face. “Something?” he asks, repeats. “You mean — lying to your mum and brother and Louis and Liam and bringing me to Atlanta to see the Stones perform is your gift to me before you leave?”

Thinning his lips, Niall nods. “Yeah,” he says, replies, and then he’s pushing to his feet, standing up, and moving so quick, so swift toward Harry, over to Harry, and he’s reaching out and cupping Harry’s cheeks with his hands, gripping the red flesh as softly as a father would his newborn child but Niall’s hands are rough and Harry’s cheeks are chapped and this isn’t perfect, won’t ever be perfect. But Harry doesn’t want perfect — Harry wants real. And in wanting real, he’s got it. Oh, he’s got it. “But, Harry, you have to know. You have to know by now. I can’t say it, not now, not when I’m leaving you in less than a month, but you have to know.”

Harry turns his head, presses his lips to Niall’s wrist. “I do.” And he does. He does know that Niall’s just as much in love with him as Harry is with Niall. He kind of thinks Niall always has been, could just never picked through his emotions and properly come to the conclusion himself. Harry can’t relish the knowledge that he’s loved just as much as he is loving because — because Niall’s leaving. “I swear to you that I do.”

“Thank you.” Niall leans in, puts his lips to Harry’s forehead; it’s warm, it’s comforting, it’s welcoming, it’s thanking, and, abruptly, there’s a knock on the door and Harry pulls away from Niall, looks up at Niall. Both of their eyes are glassy and red-rimmed, faces flushed and noses cold from the rain; Niall kisses Harry on the lips once, tastes like salt and rain, before he pivots and heads toward the door, undoing the lock and slinging it wide. “Hello — oh.”

There, in the doorway, stands Louis and Liam; the former has on nothing but a pair of boxers and a colorful Hawaiian-print shirt and the latter is more conservative, wearing jeans and a Janis Joplin t-shirt that has a few notable stains on the shoulders. Smiles are on their faces, big and so very hopeful, helpful, delighted to see them, to see both Harry and Niall — but Harry’s crying and Niall’s on the
verge of total tears and they’re falling apart and their worlds are falling apart because they are one another’s worlds, and Louis and Liam didn’t come here to see this.

Louis cringes, meets Harry’s eyes over Niall’s slumped shoulder. “Is this a bad time?”
rough boys

rough boys running the streets
come a little closer
rough toys under the sheets
nobody knows her
rough boys don’t walk away
i very nearly missed you
rough boys come over here
i wanna bite and kiss you
i wanna see what I can find

— Pete Townshend, ‘Rough Boys’

“What the fuck is going on? And why the fuck are you dripping wet?”

Harry sighs, stifles a laugh that comes from deep within his chest and falls forward, smashes his face against the small mountain of blankets he’s got gathered up around his legs; Louis and Liam come in — without being properly invited, mind you, but when it comes to the two of them, when it comes to the four of them manners seem to not mean shit and, really, Harry isn’t all that surprised — and Louis goes straight for the chair that Niall wasn’t in and Liam makes himself comfy on the foot of the bed and… and honestly, the heaviness that was weighing down Harry’s heart, that was weighing down Harry’s soul a few moments ago has diminished.

Amazing.

It’s still there, but it isn’t at the forefront anymore; he knows he and Niall are going to have to sit down and properly discuss what’s happened, what’s not happened, what’s going to happen. But not now. No, not now — not yet.

Soon, though. Soon.

Niall shuts the door, turns the lock; he kicks his shoes off and begins to strip till he’s bare, bending over to dig through the contents of his bag. When it’s the four of them, together, there’s no such thing as modesty; that went out the door when they were twelve and Louis talked them into not only streaking ass naked down the street to rub their pubescent dicks on his ex-girlfriend’s window but also jumping from the balcony into the pool below.

That was a great way to learn how to be comfortable with your body.

“We went out to go shopping and got caught in the rain, is all,” Niall says, answers, and Harry tears his eyes off of the sculpted curve of Niall’s bare bum before Louis and Liam catch him, before Louis and Liam judge him. He isn’t at all sure what they would think about him and Niall, and not because he doesn’t know them, no, but for the simple reason that everything he has thought over the last few weeks has been wrong. He doesn’t want to assume anymore. “Shower came out of nowhere and ran us back here, but we got soaked on the way.”

He pulls out a fresh pair of boxers, gray and red and black, and tugs them on, grabs a plain white t-shirt and puts it on, and then he moves toward the bed, rounds the side, shimmies beneath the blankets and scoots on his bum till he’s next to Harry, against Harry, shoulder to shoulder and side to side and thigh to thigh, and he tickles the wideness of his palm across Harry’s leg till he settles high on Harry’s thigh, gripping the thick flesh through Harry’s pants, and their legs tangle together, too,
and their touch is hidden under the thick covers and he doesn’t hate having to hide this secret from two of his best friends but he doesn’t not like it, either.

Harry shivers, but tries not to show how utterly affected he is by Niall’s proximity after — after they confessed that they were in love with one another. Well, sort of. Niall didn’t say the words, but — he didn’t have to; Harry knows him well enough by now that it isn’t hard to read his heart, to read his soul.

Niall’s in love with him. Niall’s in love with him, too. And he doesn’t care when, doesn’t care how. He only cares that it’s happened, that its’ finally happened, and it’s strange, too, you know, because he always thought that if Niall confessed his love that the two of them would be impassioned and go at one another for hours, would be insatiable and seek each other’s touch after only seconds of being apart, but that isn’t it.

No, Harry doesn’t feel desperate, doesn’t feel heavy and forced to seek Niall’s heat so he doesn’t freeze. He feels powerful and formidable and full of all the colors, able to fight through anything and everything that’s been thrown at him, that will continue to be thrown at him. And peaceful, too. Harry feels at peace, in a way he never has before.

He looks out the corner of his eye, sees that there’s a tentative, bright smile on Niall’s lips, and he knows Niall’s at peace, too, because he can read Niall’s heart and Niall’s soul and he doesn’t have to beg, doesn’t have to cry out for the things he wants most now.

It’s wonderful.

(Of course, it also hurts, too, you know, being this close to Niall, because Niall is leaving in a few weeks and this is really the beginning of the end and Harry knew but he didn’t know, not really, not the severity of the distance, of the space that’s going to be put between him and Niall, between two people who are in love.)

(Dammit. Fuck.)

“What’re the two of you doing here?” he asks, Harry asks; he reckons that ought to have been the first question spoken between the four of them. “And how’d you know?”

“Funny thing, that,” Liam replies, and Louis laughs, and Niall tenses, and Harry’s kind of scared to hear the reason because he knows Liam and he knows Louis but that doesn’t mean he always knows what they’re up to.

“Mind explaining?” Niall asks, but he isn’t mad, per se; his voice is heavy with dripping laughter and humor and controlled joy, and although the touch he’s giving Harry on his thigh is tight, strained, Harry knows Niall isn’t upset, knows Niall isn’t keeping things in that will only cause him to blow. They’ll talk later — it’s a promise. “We’ve sure as hell got time for an explanation, seeing as the concert isn’t for another few weeks.”

Liam looks to Louis, who shrugs, giving Liam the opportunity to explain. “Maura rang us up when she got back and asked Louis and me to fly out to Atlanta and meet up with the two of you,” he explains, brings his hand up to wipe and scratch at his neck. “She paid for our tickets and we flew out, arrived a week ago and booked up in a hotel a few streets down from this one. Anne called us earlier this morning and let us know where the two of you were staying and asked if we could check in on you.”

Harry frowns. “When did she get back?” he asks, blinks. “Maura, I mean.”
Niall freezes beside him, and it’s enough for Harry to know that Niall lied about her date of arrival, as well. And he isn’t mad, isn’t angry, either; he’s upset and disappointed and so very hurt that he isn’t sure how he can ever look at Niall again the same way.

But then he thinks of Niall, thinks of his smile and of his laugh and of the way his tough is as soft as the flutter of a butterfly’s wings, and he knows. He just knows.

“Um… a few weeks ago,” Louis replies, scratching his temple as he kicks his shoes off, makes himself comfortable; Harry wonders if he ought to be mad about Niall’s lying, if he ought to feel empathetic about Niall’s lying. He did it for a reason, but he still — he still lied, and that ought to warrant a little bit of anger. Right? Right. “Prob’ly closer to three than two, really, but I don’t really know ‘member because Atlanta’s one hell of a city.”

The thing is, though — Harry isn’t sure if he can be mad at all, if he can stay mad at Niall because he knows, if their situations were reversed and Harry was the one going off, going out of state and halfway across the country at the end of the month, that he would have done the exact same thing Niall is now.

Maybe. Maybe Harry would’ve.

He doesn’t really think he would. He knows he wouldn’t. But Niall did, and he still is, and Harry can’t help that right now.

“And he’s been partying all night, every night,” Liam adds, and he’s exasperated, just a little bit, and Harry has to wonder — what kind of trip did Louis and Liam have; was it anything like the journey of self-discovery and innocent, pure love he and Niall have been on, are still on? “Asshole won’t take a break and give me time to sleep.”

“Speaking of taking a break —”

Liam curses. “Fuck.”

“— I got the four of us each a free pass to the fair a few towns over. Free rides and all.”

Liam sighs, sputters some sort of jumbled sentence under his breath. “What the hell does that have to do with taking a break?”

“Well, I thought we were going to take a break so we can rest up and then leave out at six or so,” Louis replies, and he’s haughty, you know, the biggest smartass Harry knows; sassy is too weak of a word to explain Louis’s thick, abrasive personality, and he thanks God every day that Liam is here to handle Louis’s… eccentricity — since it’s a nice word, sort of, and Harry doesn’t want to offend Louis — because he knows he couldn’t, knows Niall couldn’t. “Don’t act like you don’t know what’s going on, Liam. I discussed this with you on the way over here.”

“Are you sure you did?” Liam asks, slants his head to the side; he’s got an attitude now, shit, and Niall mumbles something under his breath, scoots that last inch closer to Harry so they’re adhered from head to toe, heart to soul. “We took a bus, Lou, and I’m fairly sure we didn’t sit next to one another.”

Louis makes a face. “Well, goddamn, Liam!” he says, exclaims, and Harry laughs, has to bring his hand up to muffle the noise. “It isn’t my fucking fault you were in such a hurry to come over here. We could have walked — or, better yet, taken another bus where we could actually sit next to one another!”

Niall chuckles, lays his head on Harry’s shoulder; this is normal, this proximity and touch, and Harry
has to tell himself, over and over and over, that Louis and Liam don’t know, won’t know, can’t know — unless Gemma let the cat out of the bag, that is, but he doesn’t think she did, doesn’t think she would do that to him and Niall without consent from them. This is his secret to tell, Niall’s secret to tell, and they’ll let Louis and Liam in on their relationship when they’re ready — or, you know, they’ll wait till the end of the summer when it’s over, when Harry is stuck in LA and Niall is trying to live his life in Stillwater, when the things they did with one another don’t mean anything, when the things they did with each other don’t matter, and just let it fizzle out into a figment of the past.

Or — maybe it will matter. Maybe it always will matter. And maybe they can survive the summer, the end of the summer and the distance that’s going to be put between them. There’s still breaks and leaves for holidays, and besides — Harry’s not sure what he wants to do with his life just yet, what he wants to do for the rest of his life, and he could transfer to Stillwater when he finishes in LA.

He could do that. He could. But it all depends on how this summer ends, really, doesn’t it?

And it’s funny, you know, because everything kind of depends on how this summer ends. Harry wonders if Niall knows how big of a deal all of this is — him leaving, him lying, him confessing his love without verbally confessing his love; Harry staying, Harry smarting from the pain of being kept in the dark, Harry swiftly confessing his love with the only words he knows how.

He’ll have to ask. He isn’t scared anymore; confrontations are a thing of life, and running from a problem isn’t going to solve a damn thing, and he’ll have to ask if Niall wants him as much as he wants Niall, have to ask if Niall will still want him as much as he wants Niall.

He thinks Niall may. He hopes Niall may, at least.

“And you didn’t even ask Harry and Niall if they wanted to go with you,” Liam replies, and the two of them fight a lot, you know, as they always have and probably always will. It’s comforting to see that some things haven’t changed. “You’re going on and assuming things, and you know when you do that you’re always wrong.”

Niall laughs, turns his head a bit, just a little bit, and somehow his lips press into Harry’s skin through the fabric of his shirt and it’s noticeable, it’s so goddamn noticeable that he and Harry are in love, are sharing that love, and if Louis and Liam can’t see that something has changed, can’t see that everything has changed, then they’re blind in the best way possible.

Or they’re pretending not to, and if it’s that case — well, Harry can’t be mad.

“We’ll go, yeah,” Niall says, answers the unasked question that’s floating in the air; his hand moves down Harry’s thigh, cups his knee, rubs the hard bone that’s protruding — and Harry’s always had a thing about his knees, you know, always thought they were ugly because they were too acute, because they were too bony, but Niall’s touching them as he does every other part of Harry’s body, as if he’s the most beautiful person ever to walk this earth. And he feels it, too, especially when he’s with Niall. “We’ve got nothing else planned tonight, anyway.”

Besides the discussion that’s definitely going to happen at one point in time, no, they’ve not got anything planned tonight, and an evening out at the fair sounds wonderful; he reckons it will do the both of them good, to be out and to be with other people that isn’t them, that isn’t exclusively the two of them.

It’s possible to spend too much time together. Harry thinks that maybe — knows that maybe he and Niall have spent a little too much time alone with one another lately.

“That sounds fun, going to a fair for a while.” Harry smiles, moves to slide his arm around Niall’s
waist to hold him there, to hold him close; if Louis and Liam can see, they aren’t giving any sign. Harry’s glad, but even then — this is normal, something the two of them do in front of others. And it makes him wonder, really, just when his and Niall’s emotions shifted from platonic to romantic. “I’ve not been to a good fair in ages.”

“And it’s good?” Niall asks, yawns; Louis did say they were going to rest for a while before they headed out, and Harry hopes he can take a short nap before then because — well, because last night still has a few lasting effects he would like to sleep off, if that’s possible at all. He never knew his body could move that way, or that Niall would hold him inside as if it’s where he’s meant to be. “The fair, I mean.”

“Oh, it’s good,” Louis replies with a grin, with a smirk that’s heavy with diluted mischief, and Liam just sighs, a bit shakily. “It’s the best one I’ve been to.”

Harry blinks his eyes, one and two and three and four and five times; he opens his mouth to question Louis’s reply, to ask what makes it so great, but Liam interrupts and says something targeted at Louis and another round starts between the both of them, Louis and Liam, and Harry just sighs, slumps heavily against Niall’s body because he knows he’s strong, knows he can hold the weight, and smiles.

A lot of things are wrong, are going wrong, but in this moment he feels… free. With Niall beside him, cuddled up into him, he feels exceptionally more free and liberated than he ever has before.

The seat swings sharply, back and forth in the gusting wind, and Harry gasps, reaches out, grabs Niall’s shirt in his hand and balls his fist in the fabric; he and Niall waited for the better part of an hour in line for the Ferris wheel and now that he’s on it he kind of wishes he would have opted out of Niall’s self-proclaimed romantic suggestion for a ride into the stars and instead just stayed with Louis and Liam and joined their quest to find the ultimate thrill.

“Scared of heights, eh?” Niall asks, laughs; he puts one hand over the fist Harry has corded in the fabric of his shirt and wraps his other arm around Harry’s shoulders, pulls him in close. They’re nearly at the height of the wheel and most of the other seats are empty, allowing Harry and Niall the accepted freedom to cuddle into one another and not be ostracized for it, as if there’s something wrong with being in love. “Is this a new development?”

“I’m not scared of heights, really,” he says, Harry says, and he grips Niall’s shirt tighter, wonders if Niall would be mad should he accidently rip the clothing. “I’m just scared of falling.”

Niall chuckles, lays his cheek against Harry’s temple; it’s warm, so warm, and Harry loves how they’re like this, loves how they can be like this. “That’s some sort of philosophical shit right there, H,” he replies, muses. “Got anything heavy on your mind you’d like to discuss while we’re alone? ‘Cause I have a feeling you and I won’t have much time to ourselves these next few weeks.”

Harry shakes his head, turns his face, presses his nose into the bend of Niall’s neck, against his shoulder. “I’m sure I can think of something later,” he says, laughs, inhales; Niall smells like hot skin and sweat, and it’s Harry’s automatic favorite. “I just wish… that you would have told me everything from the start, is all.”

At Harry’s words, Niall’s body freezes, tenses, and Harry keeps holding on, won’t ever let go, because he needs Niall to know that he won’t leave, that he isn’t leaving, that he’ll never leave. He doesn’t want Niall to feel afraid of losing him anymore because he never will.
“I’m sorry, Harry.”

The words are so full that Harry’s heart feels entirely too thick to be kept in his chest any longer. He thinks Niall would be the best person to take care of it.

“It’s okay, Niall,” he replies, rubs his nose along the skin on the side of Niall’s neck; the seat shifts and jerks, and they start moving up slowly. “I understand why you did it, but that doesn’t mean I’m not upset or — disappointed. Because I am. Truly. At you. And I don’t want you to think that you can get by with lying to me. I’m not going to leave you, Niall.” He shuts his eyes against the darkness of the starless sky and sighs. “I’ve seen you at your best and I’ve seen you at your worst, too. If I haven’t left yet, I’m never going to.”

Niall makes a noise in the back of his throat, tips his head back; Harry moves forward, scoots forward, and lays his ear against the top of Niall’s chest, listens to the beat of his heart. “You mean so much more to me than I can ever put into words, Harry,” he says, whispers, takes his hand off of Harry’s and brings it up to run through Harry’s and brings it up to run through Harry’s hair. “I don’t want to lose you, and I think — I think that you’re one of the most wonderful people in this entire world because you won’t let me get away with being a dumbass.”

“Not a dumbass. Just… really bad at thinking things through sometimes.”

“I thought you through, though,” Niall replies, and Harry shivers; it’s hot outside, though, humid and sweaty, and his reaction is Niall’s words and he’s glad, so very glad, that Niall took his time with his decision. “And I’m sorry for taking so long to realize that I want you.”

Harry smiles, keeps his eyes closed, doesn’t say a thing. He doesn’t have to tell Niall, doesn’t have to remind Niall that he would wait forever if that’s what Niall wanted because Niall knows now. Now, Niall knows. And he’s got nothing to hide; he never imagined being in love could feel like this.

“The stars are beautiful tonight,” Niall continues, accepting Harry’s silence with a scratch to the scalp. “When we get married, I want it to be at night under the stars with no shoes and only a few people. And we can get naked and go swimming after for our bachelor party and maybe fly to Europe for a honeymoon.”

Harry inhales, sharply. “Our wedding?”

“Yeah.” Harry can hear the smile in Niall’s voice. “Our wedding. You don’t think we’re going to get married?”

“Yeah,” Harry says, turns and lifts his head, looks in Niall’s gaze; he thinks there’s more stars in Niall’s eyes than there ever has been in the sky. “Our wedding.”

The two of them get off the Ferris wheel a few moments later; they aren’t holding hands, talked with one another before they left the hotel that doing so would ask more questions than it answered, but they are walking side by side, side by side, touching from head to toe, it seems.

Around them, the fair seems to have come alive. There’s flashing lights over here and loud banging noises over there; children and young teenagers are running around with toys and prizes and fluffy cotton candy that melts on their tongue and tickles their stomachs. Adults are chasing after their children and couples are kissing behind booths in the shadows and the ruckus of laughter, of music, of joyous screams at the top of a particularly wild ride ring through the air and make Harry smile.

“You like it here, don’t you?”
Harry hums, turns his head to meet Niall’s gaze. “Yeah, I do,” he answers, blinks his eyes; the lights are bright, brilliant, a little bit more blinding than he’s gotten used to. “And you really like Oklahoma, huh?”

Niall nods. “I do. That’s one of the reasons I decided to apply for college there. The stories Greg told, and the pictures he brought back were just… And Janie, too, you know. She helped a lot.” He shrugs, smiles. “And you could always apply for something in Georgia, too, if you want. You may have to start next semester, but I’m sure there’s still time.”

“I don’t even know what I want to do with my life, Niall.” He’s just — winging it. “I haven’t decided anything.”

“So?” he asks, blinks, and it must feel really nice, you know, to have everything for your future figured out. “There’s still time for you to decide that. You don’t have to narrow down anything until you have an idea, and it’s okay not to have an idea right now.”

*There’s still time, there’s still time, there’s still time.*

But there isn’t. Not really. For a lot of things. The two of them are borrowing so much time that they won’t be able to pay back.

Harry takes a deep breath. “What if I come to Oklahoma with you?” he asks, wonders why his voice doesn’t sound as it should and why his heart won’t stop beating so fast.

Niall turns to meet Harry’s gaze; his eyes are wide and his face is flushed and Harry doesn’t know what to think of the shocked expression he’s wearing. “Harry, you would —”

“There’s my boys!”

Harry looks up, as does Niall, and they both see that Louis and Liam are approaching them through the thicket of the crowd; behind them, two girls are trailing, and they’re dressed for the weather in bellbottoms and crop tops, a bit busty and pudgy and beautiful, but nobody can measure to the utter grace Janie walked with that night everything came out from the shadows to play and a sudden lightning strikes hits his chest and makes him miss the way she made him feel.

“Huh? Hey, guys.” Harry wets his lips, slants his head. “We were just looking for the two of you.”

“How was the wheel?” Liam asks, poses the question at Harry.

Niall nudges Harry’s side, wraps his arm around Harry’s shoulders. “It was nice,” he replies, grins. “Harry’s discovered he’s afraid of heights, so I don’t reckon we’ll be getting on anything higher than ten foot for the rest of the night.”

“I’m scared of falling,” Harry answers for himself, clears up Niall’s muddled reply; Niall chuckles, turns his head, presses his laughter into Harry’s hair. “How did finding a wild ride go?”

“Sadly, we didn’t find one,” Louis replies, sighs; the two girls come to stand beside him, on either side, and they smile in greeting, which both Harry and Niall do in return. One is black, and her hair is done up in a ‘fro; Harry wonders if it’s as soft as it looks, wonders if she’s as nice as she seems. “But we did find these two hot babes instead, and they’ve got a few other friends walking ‘round somewhere I’m sure the both of you would love to get to know.”

He winks, Louis does, and Harry’s eyes widen as his stomach drops.

Niall shifts himself closer to Harry, says, “I’m sorry, but we aren’t interested in hooking up with
anyone,” and the two ladies’ frown and Liam purses his lips and Louis narrows his eyes.

“Why not?” he asks, Louis asks, and Harry sighs, wonders how he and Niall are going to go about wording their coming out to Louis and Liam. “You two have never turned down a good time before.”

But then Niall turns his body slightly, reaches for Harry’s cheek with his free hand; he holds Harry still, leans himself in, and they’re kissing in the next moment, lips on lips and tongue on tongue, in front of people, in front of Louis and Liam, and Harry reckons this is the best way, really, to let two of their closest friends in on their secret.

Niall pulls back, breathless; his lips are wet and his mouth is swollen and his cheeks are red and the smile he has is for Harry’s eyes only. “You taste like the cotton candy I got you,” he says, whispers, just for Harry to hear, and then he turns to face Louis and Liam and the two girls, drops his arm from Harry’s shoulder and finds his hand, intertwines their fingers. He leans against Harry, announcing and submitting all at once. “That’s why.”
lay lady lay

whatever colors you have in your mind
i'll show them to you and you'll see them shine

— Bob Dylan, ‘Lay Lady Lay’

The ride back to the hotel is awkward and tense, so tight Harry feels as if he has been pulled by both
arms to see how far he could reach and is just nearly ready to rip in half; Niall’s driving and he’s in
the passenger seat, buckled up, tapping his fingers on his knees, and Louis and Liam are in the back,
sat behind him and Niall, looking out the windows, and this —

— is definitely not how Harry expected coming out to his two best friends would have gone.

But, really, he can’t tell you what he expected. It’s not like — there’s nothing wrong with him and
there’s nothing wrong with Niall, either, and he knows that and Niall’s close to believing it, as well,
but two men together is still a taboo thing in this world and, the thing is, Harry can’t be mad or upset
or angry at Louis and Liam should they choose to not accept them.

Why?

Because it’s what they’ve been taught their entire lives, because it’s what Harry and Niall have been
taught their entire lives. The Bible tells you that a man lying with another man is an abomination to
God; however, it also states that man was made in His image and that humans were also given the
free will to choose, to decide their lives for themselves, and really, no sin is greater than the other. A
sin is a sin, and God forgives, God loves unconditionally.

People just decide to pick and choose what they wish to believe more often than not; it’s a shock,
him and Niall being together, if you can call it that, of course it is, but he has hope Louis and Liam
will eventually learn to see the both of them for what they are: normal and in love.

And religion is no excuse for hatred, either. It’s an explanation for a differing opinion, for a differing
view and way of life, yes, but religion is not an excuse for blatant hatred.

Harry hopes they know that, hopes Louis and Liam know that.

The hotel looms up in the distance, backlit by the neon color of signs and lights on either side; it’s
big, not as fancy as the one Harry and Niall are staying in, but it’s convenient and modest enough
with an arching entryway and golden knobs on the doors. Harry sucks in his breath as they draw
near.

Niall pulls up beside the curb, just behind a parked pickup with a dog in the back bed; he unlocks the
doors and they slide open, delivering both Louis and Liam onto the pavement. And it’s loud, too, the
hustle and bustle of the night, of all the people, and Harry melts against the seat and avoids the eyes
of the bystanders and wonders if every person in the world feels as he does at once point in their life
— empty, sickly, sorry — and if they ever get over the oppressive instability.

“We’ll see you tomorrow, right?” Niall asks, calls to Louis and Liam; Liam shuts the door, walks
around the front of the van and comes to stand beside Louis, who’s on the sidewalk next to Harry’s
rolled down window. He keeps his shoulders back, Liam does, and meets Harry’s eyes with an
unflinching sort of courage that Harry wishes he had.

Louis blinks; his eyes shine like sharp blue diamonds in the night illuminated by the neon signs
flashing all around. “Yeah, of course,” he replies, nods, wets his lips. “We’ll catch a ride over after breakfast, probably, though there’s no telling what time we’ll be waking up. See you then.”

He turns, pivots on his heel, and walks away; Liam raises his hand, offers a gentle wave and a sensitive smile, one that tickles at the beauty in his eyes and reminds Harry of all the times Liam was patient enough to take care of his injuries, and then follows after Louis up the green-carpeted stairs and into the door of the hotel. Harry watches them through the glass, as much as he can; there’s a large quantity of people inside, however, and he quickly loses them, and it’s kind of like accidentally dropping his favorite photograph into the depths of the ocean.

He sighs.

Niall checks his mirrors and pulls out onto the road again; he reaches over with one hand, grabs Harry’s wrist, interlaces their fingers and holds on, holds on as if letting go will tear them apart. And Harry’s fairly sure it could.

“You okay?”

Harry nods. “Yeah,” he replies, and he is okay, is just fine. He just feels… strange. And not like himself. It’s almost like he’s — lost, in a way that he can’t explain; floating through space now that his tether to the ship has been severed. He doesn’t want to lose Louis and Liam, reckons the thought of losing him has scared them, as well. “Do you think they’re mad at us?”

“Why should they be?”

Harry blinks, thinks about the aftermath of the kiss the two of them shared in front of Louis and Liam and the women and how it was decided that the ladies would stay at the fair to find their friends while the four of them headed back to their hotels to get some sleep and how quiet Louis was and how contemplative Liam was.

“Because we fucked up a good night for them.” He shrugs. “They went out and found two nice young ladies to hook up with and we — we kissed in front of them and doing that, us doing that fucked it up. For them. And for the girls, too.”

Niall chuckles under his breath, shakes his head; he hits the brakes, gently, comes to stop at a red light. “I don’t think they’re mad at us for that, Harry. They like to pull together sometimes, yeah, but I don’t think not having some pussy is going to bring on a bout of anger aimed at us just ‘cause we didn’t want to hook up.” He turns his head, meets Harry’s eyes. “I don’t want a girlfriend and I don’t want to do anything with a girl right now, either. They’ve got nothing to be pissed about. You and I haven’t done anything.”

And — yeah, Niall’s right. He’s always right, especially about this, because — well, because it’s him and Harry in this, not him and Harry and Louis and Liam; this is them, the two of them, and Louis and Liam aren’t mad at them, can’t be mad at them, have nothing to be mad about.

Harry and Niall are just trying to be happy. With one another. And that’s okay, it is. Being mad about two people just trying to be happy is wrong and — and everything is okay.

Everything’s okay. It’s all a little blurry and full of bewilderment, but everything’s okay and everything’s going to be okay, too. It’s all going to work out in the end like it’s supposed to.

“Got a lot on your mind?”

Harry turns his head, meets Niall’s eyes lazily; they’re so blue in the darkness of the car, the only color he can see besides the angry red glare from the stoplight and the neon shine from the flickering
signs. He nods.

Niall brings Harry’s hand up to his lips, presses his mouth against the sharp knob of the knuckle on Harry’s thumb. The simple, soft touch makes Harry’s heart settle and helps soothe away the sharpness that the fear of not being enough brings.

“Wanna talk about it?”

“Why talk about what you already know?”

Niall grins, lays his and Harry’s hand on the center console; it’s loose, the hold they’ve got on one another, but Harry kind of likes the fact that he doesn’t have the need for Niall’s strength. It’s there, able to be taken and borrowed and used whenever he needs, but — he’s strong. And he doesn’t need it. Not anymore. But it’s there, still there, and he thinks it probably always will be.

“Let’s drive around for a while, then, if that’s okay with you. Listen to music and think and such.”

Harry nods, says, “That sounds absolutely perfect,” and the lights turns green and off they go and Harry wonders what he would have to do to keep running.

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Hours later, after they’ve returned from the drive around the city and Harry’s got himself a rather hot, a rather burning shower and a scrub that’s left his skin red and raw, he steps out of the bathroom, wearing a big pair of boxers and a loose t-shirt that hangs on his body comfortably. Niall’s sat on the bed, still fully clothed, leaned back on his elbows and staring up at the ceiling. His throat is bared and thick, a bit discolored toward the start of his sharp clavicle from Harry’s kisses.

It makes Harry smile, knowing that he’s left something on Niall that won’t fade for a while.

“You going to shower?” Harry asks, leans against the frame of the door and crosses his arms; his hair is wet, hanging down his back, and he can feel the coldness of it through his thin t-shirt. “There’s still a few towels left, if you want to.”

Niall leans up, wets his lips; he sits forward, puts his forearms on his knees and smiles. “Come here, please,” he replies, ignores Harry’s question and beckons him closer, curls his finger to bring Harry in; Harry goes, wipes a bit of water off of his cheek and knees Niall’s legs apart, stands between them as he brings his hand up to scratch at Niall’s scalp. “You don’t regret it, do you?”

Harry runs his fingertips along the back of Niall’s neck, presses Niall’s face into his tummy as he shivers and sighs from the ticklish touch. “Regret what?”

“Coming with me.” He turns his head, presses his cheek into Harry’s stomach and wraps his arms around Harry’s waist, pulls him in just that little bit more. “Now that you know everything, you don’t regret coming with me, do you?”

Harry shuts his eyes and breathes out, caresses the top knob of Niall’s spine with the pad of his thumb. “You shouldn’t have lied and hid everything from me, Niall,” he says, Harry says, and he opens his eyes, finds Niall’s face, Niall’s chin, and tilts his head up so they can lock gazes, green and blue and so powerful, so strong that Harry feels like he’s in the center of a hurricane. “But I don’t regret it, no. I think — I’d have gone with you even if you told me the truth, Niall, and it’s hard to regret coming with you when you look at me the way you do.”

Niall blinks, smiles as if he’s a blind man seeing the sun for the first time. “How do I look at you?” he asks, licks his lips, and he’s so beautiful even when he’s got red blotches, even when he’s got
pink acne, even when he’s got purple bruises that make him resemble a rainbow after a thunderstorm. “Hmm?”

“You look at me like — like you see all the colors of the world inside of me.”

Niall’s smile grows. “Everything’s black and white and gray, Harry, and it’s so drab and so ugly to see,” he says, loosens his grip around Harry’s waist and puts the flat of his palm against Harry’s thighs, shifts his fingers beneath the hem of Harry’s shirt. “I do. When I look at you, I see colors. All of them. And it’s familiar, yeah, because it’s always happened, but there’s so many colors and so many universes inside of you that I never knew existed till… till now. And if I look at you like you make me see in color it’s ‘cause you do. I see you, and I see when I’m with you.”

Harry moves both of his hands down from Niall’s hair, puts them on Niall’s cheeks and holds him, rubs at the lavender-colored bags under his blazing blue eyes. “I love you so much,” Harry says and he leans in, puts his forehead against Niall’s and puts his lips against Niall’s and puts his heart against Niall’s and puts his soul against Niall’s. “You make me so happy.”

Niall laughs, lightly, puffs the noise against Harry’s lips; he curls his fingers, shoves the tips beneath the hem of Harry’s boxers and raises a brow, gives Harry a smirk full of colorful confidence.

“Can I touch you?”

Harry draws in a big, acute breath. “Yeah.”

Niall’s smirk turns into a smile and he slowly, slowly pulls Harry’s boxers down; he gives Harry his shoulders, offers his stability to Harry’s thrumming, shivering system as he coaxes Harry into stepping out of his underwear, tossing them across the room and then putting his hands on the bottom of Harry’s spine, gripping the fabric of Harry’s shirt and ripping it up and off Harry’s head, slinging it over there along with his drawers.

“You’re so beautiful, Harry.” Niall puts his face against Harry’s tummy, presses his lips into the soft flesh and leaves a trail of kisses as he stands up, as he drags his mouth along Harry’s lean torso, along the contours of his chest and the sharp protrusions of his clavicle and the sloping curve of his throat and the deliciousness of his jawline and the sweetness of his cheek. “You’re the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen.”

Harry gulps, shuts his eyes and breathes, tries to breathe. “Thank you,” he says, gushes, wraps his arms around Niall’s shoulders; he’s thanking Niall for making him feel beautiful, thanking Niall for reminding him that he is beautiful — because he isn’t all that toned, isn’t all the muscular, and he’s got flab and he’s got rolls and awkward angles and blemishes all over his body, all over his entire body, and it’s sometimes really, really hard for him to feel as if he’s… worthy of the praise Niall delivers him. “Thank you so much.”

“For what?” Niall laughs, winds his arms around Harry’s waist and pulls him in; he’s naked, Harry is, completely, and Niall isn’t, and it’s strange, being bare against cloth, but it makes Harry’s skin itch with arousal and affection. “I’m only telling you the truth.”

Harry shakes his head, opts not to answer Niall’s question; instead, he turns his face, presses his nose against the side of Niall’s throat and rubs the skin, smells the heat, drags his mouth across the thick vein. His skin tastes like sweat and hotness, a little sour and a lot delicious, and Harry moans low, in the back of his throat, as both of Niall’s hands slip low and grip his ass, spread his cheeks.

“Oh, hell,” Harry hisses, jumps; he knocks Niall back onto the bed and Niall takes him down, as well, and they roll for a moment, attempting to find a comfortable way to lay, and it ends with Niall
on top and Harry on bottom and Niall’s knee presses against Harry’s growing cock and Harry’s chest rubbing against Niall’s torso. “What exactly do you want to do?”

Niall laughs. “You.” And he grabs Harry’s cheeks, holds him still and leans in, leans down; their lips meet, closed and soft, so very soft, and Harry scratches his way up Niall’s back, pooling Niall’s shirt up as well, and Niall has to pull away for Harry to jerk it off, to sling it to the side.

But he’s back where he belongs in no time at all, rubbing his nose all along Harry’s till they’re both smiling, till they’re both laughing, and it’s only when Harry begins to keen, begins to moan low in his throat and thrust his hips, arch his body that Niall gives in, lays his lips against Harry’s again.

Harry runs his fingers through Niall’s hair, pulls at the strands till Niall whines, till Niall opens his mouth, and then he runs the tip of his tongue along the seam of Niall’s lips, slips in and meets Niall’s, and they tangle together like their legs between the sheets, like their colorful souls in the air around them, like their interlaced memories from so very long ago, from not so very long ago, and Niall drops, completely falls on top of Harry, and brings his knee up a bit, just a bit, and grinds his thigh against Harry’s cock — and it’s leaking, Harry’s prick is, and the wetness is staining into the denim of Niall’s jeans and they need to be off, they need to be off right now.

Pulling away, sucking in breath, Harry turns his head and drops his hands to Niall’s bum, grips at the denim; Niall kisses at Harry’s cheek, runs his lips all over the heated, hot redness and smears his smile, smears his happiness against Harry’s skin as if he’s imprinting the feel, forever tattooing how it is to be in love on his flesh.

“Take your pants off, Niall.”

Niall laughs, rolls over to the side, off of Harry, and Harry leans up, attacks the button and fly and prompts Niall to lift his hips so he can pull them down, so he can bring them down Niall’s legs; he’s left in just his underwear, Niall is, and there’s a tent of arousal just beneath the white fabric and Niall’s face is red and he’s giggling, chuckling, and gosh, Harry can’t wait to spend the rest of his life with Niall.

But then he remembers that Niall’s leaving in less than a month and that they’ll be thousands of miles apart from each other and he thinks he has a lot of things to fit in to the time they have left because he isn’t sure if there will be anything after they meet up again, if they meet up again.

Harry puts his hands on Niall’s stomach, holds him down. “You wanna go all the way?” he asks, raises a brow as he looks at Niall’s face, as he trails the fingers of his left hand across the tent in Niall’s boxers.

“Yeah.” Niall nods, bites his bottom lip and shuts his eyes as Harry fondles his length through the fabric of his boxers, as Harry leans down to give sporadic kisses to the skin just above the hem of Niall’s underwear. “Please. I wanna — yeah, inside of you.”

Harry presses his mouth just above Niall’s belly button, bares his teeth and scratches a path up Niall’s stomach till he’s at the hollow of Niall’s throat, where he puts a tender kiss that contrasts with his heated display of animalistic possession just a moment before.

“What’s it feel like?”

“To have someone inside of you?” Niall moves one of his hands, grabs Harry’s wrist and shows him what he likes, what he wants, as Harry continues to play with him through his underwear. “Hurts a bit. But then you get used to it and it feels good, especially if you hit the right spot. And I’ll go slow, make sure you enjoy it like I did.”
Harry blinks, rubs his nose against Niall’s throat, presses a kiss below Niall’s ear. “Promise?”

“I swear.”

Harry falls over onto his back and Niall follows, leans up over him; it takes a moment for him to kick his drawers off but then he does and they’re skin to skin, flesh to flesh, and Harry can feel Niall’s hardness dragging along the length of his thigh as his own prick slides just between the crack of Niall’s ass and fuck, Harry loves the drunken feeling of pure euphoria he gets when he and Niall are like this, are naked and naked, are vulnerable and eager and enthusiastically virile.

Harry wraps his arms around Niall’s hips, brings his hands up to grip at the backs of Niall’s shoulders. “I trust you,” he says, Harry says, and he puts his mouth to Niall’s chest, feels the thud-thud-thud of his heart against his lips. “I trust you, Niall.”

“Oh, Harry.” Niall kisses Harry’s forehead, throws his head back and laughs. “You’re absolutely wonderful. I couldn’t have asked for anyone else in the whole entire world. I’m glad it’s you.”

“It’s me?”

Niall nods. “It’s you,” he repeats, grins. “Of course it’s you, silly boy.”

He gets up then, Niall does, and moves about the room, finds the drawer they shoved the lube in earlier and he’s back on the bed in the next moment, Niall is, and his eyes are hooded and his cheeks are pink and his lips are red, are the same color as the tip of his raging cock, and Harry whimpers, low and long, and turns over, rolls over onto his tummy; he lifts his bum up a bit, grabs a pillow and puts it under his hips for added leverage and a respectable surface to grind against and spreads his legs a bit, widens his knees a bit, to give Niall all the room he may need.

“Want me —”

“Hold yourself open, Harry.”

Harry does as Niall commanded him, reaches around behind and grabs at his ass, spreads his cheeks; the bed moves, sinks here and there, and then Niall’s between his legs, knees knocking against the muscles on the backs of his thighs. Plastic being torn fills the air and Harry shivers, sighs as he hears the lid being popped and lube squeezed out and into Niall’s palm.

“Don’t hurt me, Niall.”

Niall leans forward, puts a kiss to the small of Harry’s back. “Never,” he replies, swears, and then he’s placing his hand just above Harry’s tailbone and circling Harry’s hot, tight rim with one of his finger’s that is soaked in lube. It feels weird, though not entirely unpleasant; it’s different than when he was doing it to himself in the shower waiting on Niall to return and it’s that thought, that thought — of Niall here, of Niall doing this to him — that makes him clench his eyes shut and cry out with a hoarse noise. “You okay?”

Niall cuts Harry off, presses the tip of his finger inside of Harry’s rim; it’s odd and intrusive, the finger, and Harry has to force himself to relax so Niall can sink in, so Niall can go further in. And it’s easier after Niall breaches the tight ring of muscle, makes Harry exhale a breath of alleviation; Niall wiggles his finger around for a moment, hums a song with such patience that Harry’s breath is taken away.

“You okay?”
Harry nods. “What song?”

“Bob Dylan.” Niall chuckles, draws his finger out; he squeezes a bit of lube directly on Harry’s hole and it’s cold, makes him shiver, and then he’s pressing inside with two and Harry’s opening his eyes to meet Niall’s, to plead with Niall — and he doesn’t even know what he’s asking for but he knows Niall will give it to him. Always. “‘Lay Lady Lay’.”

“You can have your cake and eat it too/Why wait any longer for the one you love/When he’s standing in front of you.”

“Yeah, that one.” Niall laughs again, and he’s so soft, so easy as he scissors his fingers, as he opens Harry up for him. “You aren’t hurting, are you?”

Harry shakes his head. “Feels weird, is all.” But it’s not entirely unpleasant, either, and the abrasive rub of the pillowcase he’s got against the underside of his prick is sending out tiny shockwaves of needle-like pleasure that makes him feel so hot and so full and so cared for that he kind of wants to cry — out of total happiness. For once. “Am I…”

“Almost ready?” Niall finishes for Harry, who trails off as Niall slips in a third finger; it’s a burn, a sting, one that makes Harry wheeze in discomfort, but Niall spreads a bit more slick over his hole and the slide becomes easier, becomes better. “Yeah. I think — yeah.”

“Yeah?” Harry asks, repeats, and he’s excited, so very excited he can hardly handle himself. “Really?”

Niall hums and twists his fingers a bit, just a bit; he curls upwards, tickles at Harry’s walls and then — Harry squeals, shuts his eyes and allows his body to quake as Niall continues to flick at his prostate till his chest is heaving and he feels himself twitching, leaking with his desire.

“I’ll be easy,” Niall whispers, promises, and Harry nods; Niall brings his fingers out of Harry’s bum and it’s an odd sound, one that makes Harry clench, and Niall moves, slides till he’s sat on the backs of Harry’s thighs. Harry hears him squeeze more lube out, hears him slick up his prick; Harry feels him press the head of his dick against his hole, feels him push inside. And it’s — oh, definitely a lot larger than a finger, than three fingers. “You okay?”

Harry nods, keeps his eyes shut, twines his fingers in the messy sheets.

It hurts, as he expected it would. But it’s just a discomfort, for the most part; a particular stretch he never thought he would have to face, and it takes a moment, strained and tight and so very delicate, for Niall to breach the tight ring of muscle, and when he does, Harry lets out a surprised yowl that’s a mix of pleasure and pain.

Niall stops once he’s all the way in, flushes his front to Harry’s back, and Harry can feel the way his heart beats against his shoulder; the flutters are fast and erratic and Harry opens his eyes, turns his head so he can meet Niall’s gaze.

And Niall’s face is — he’s wide-eyed and the blue is so bright, so brilliant, and his nostrils are flared and his lips are parted and he’s panting, breathing hard; his cheeks are red and his mouth is pink and there’s sweat gathering on his brow and he kind of looks like he’s just discovered the meaning of life between the sheets with the person he loves most.

“Oh my…”

Harry nods, wets his bottom lip. “I know,” he says, and he does know — know what Niall’s feeling, the wet and silkiness; knows what Niall’s thinking, knows he’s wondering if this is what nirvana
feels like and if it’s going to be like this, if it’s always going to be like this. And it is. “Always, Ni.”

Niall makes a noise and nods, puts his forehead on Harry’s shoulder and presses his lips to the top of Harry’s spine; he pulls out a bit, just a little bit, and slides back in, and they meet, skin on skin, and it causes Harry’s cock to rub against the scratchy feel of the pillowcase and his mouth drops and Niall wraps his arms around Harry’s shoulders and he finds Niall’s hands and holds his wrists and tries to not weep with the tumulus effect this joining is going to have on the two of them.

Because this is it. Nothing is ever going to be the same again and the thought, the single idea that things could go back to the way they were before is ludicrous and — and Harry would rather have this, this fleeting bit of love, than not have it at all.

And — yeah, Niall doesn’t let him go. Ever.
The sound of a solid breathing pattern against his shoulder is what rouses Harry out of a deep, deep sleep; he blinks once, twice, three and four and five times, till his vision is mostly clear of the smeared, sticky residue of being unconscious and he can see well enough with the pale blue pre-dawn light shining through the curtains that he and Niall never pulled last night.

Oh, well. He reckons they’re too high off the streets to be of any interest, anyway, and besides — it isn’t as if he is going to feel bad if somebody saw him with Niall. He’s got absolutely no reason to apologize for being with the man he’s in love with, and it isn’t as if it’s their job as God’s children to judge.

Hmm. He wonders how many arguments that little tidbit of info would shut down?

He turns his body, turns his head, presses the tip of his nose into the top of Niall’s hair. It smells like sex and sweat and him and Harry. Niall’s lying next to him, nearly on top of him, and he’s got one arm slung beneath Harry’s neck and the other folded across Harry’s chest, palm sitting right above Harry’s heart, and he wonders if the rapid thud-thud-thud is what soothed Niall to sleep like it does Harry, like it always will Harry.

Niall’s face is smooth and pale, fresh and pure and so very soft against Harry’s skin; he’s got an angry breakout of acne on both of his temples, probably from the sweat of the heat and the dirt of the trip and the oil of the day and the lack of proper hygiene being on the road brings upon. They’re clean, of course they are, but being on the road has made them go a few days without properly bathing and — and really, how in the world does Niall think Harry’s still so damn beautiful when he’s got rats in his hair and dirt streaked across his face and granite beads on the lines of his neck? How?

But — oh, it doesn’t matter, does it? No.

Niall thinks his beautiful even when he’s so far from being considered such a thing, and that’s okay, that’s cool, that’s nice, that’s all that kind of matters.

His cheeks are puffy and his lips are chapped, sort of dry; his nose has a few black spots on them — Harry tries to remember what his sister calls them, falls short of the answer because, in the end, it doesn’t matter — and he’s sporting a nice scruff of hair along his jaw and chin that’s left an accidental rash on the skin of Harry’s shoulder that he’s so comfy on, that he apparently never wants to leave.

Beautiful. Harry smiles. So beautiful. He isn’t sure if there’s ever going to be anyone as beautiful as Niall. God did well — God did so well in creating Niall, in creating Harry’s soul mate; Harry doesn’t think God will hate him and Niall, will cast him and Niall down because they’re following one of the paths have He has laid out for them.

It’s kind of like biting that hand that feeds you. But, like, reversed. Well, sorta. Or maybe he’s completely wrong but he doesn’t exactly care.
Harry shuts his eyes and reaches one of his hands up, finds Niall’s splayed palm on his chest; he interlaces their fingers and holds on, holds tight, brings Niall’s wrist to his mouth so he can press a kiss to the thin skin there, and he feels his pulse, feels Niall’s pulse, and it’s so serene and so gentle. And Harry loves it, loves how he can feel the screaming fact that Niall is alive, that Niall is so very much alive and he would rather be spending his time right here, right here next to Harry and in bed, curled up naked between the sheets that are a little bit too sticky to be clean from the hours they spent loving one another’s bodies to the put of total exhaustion last night.

Never let it be said that he and Niall don’t fit in every single way.

And he’s happy. He’s — light, airy, level on the ground he’s walking on in a way he never has been before; he doesn’t itch, doesn’t crave, doesn’t want, doesn’t thrive, doesn’t envy, doesn’t ache to have anything more than he already does. He has Niall, has the love of his life and the man of his dreams and the lover of his world and the only person he can ever see himself with and he doesn’t want, doesn’t need, doesn’t have to ask for anything more. He has it all. Everything he’s ever wanted — he has it all.

He’s happy. And he’s in love. He’s so in love that he can feel it at the tips of his fingers and the bottoms of his feet and in every corner of his big, big heart.

“Go back to sleep, silly boy,” Niall says, breathes; his voice is hoarse and dry and his breath smells awful, rotten, makes Harry want to cringe and pull away, but he doesn’t, but he never will, and Harry grins, shuts his eyes and lays his cheek against the top of Niall’s head where it’s at, resting on the hardness of Harry’s shoulder as if it’s where he belongs. And, yeah, that’s surely where Niall belongs, isn’t it? “S’not nearly time to be waking up just yet. We’ve still got a few hours before we have to get up.”

“You’re right.” He yawns, twists his lower body and tangles his legs with Niall’s; they’re both hairy, mind you, and they’re both used to cuddling against smooth skin, as well, so to have their big, thick thighs and calves rubbing against some that are as equally as big and equally as thick is… odd. Odd, but definitely not unpleasant. Harry thinks he prefers the hardness, anyway, as long as it’s Niall’s solidness he’s against. “Love you.”

Niall hums, smears his lips across Harry’s skin in a halfhearted kiss that drags him out of the flames he’s been living in for so so so long, and that’s how Niall says it, how Niall tells Harry he loves him. Harry loves it better than words.

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It’s quite a scene when Harry steps out of the bathroom from a rather hot shower a few hours later, after Niall finally roused him awake with a hand on his cock and his lips streaking across Harry’s chest. Niall’s on the bed, just as Harry left him; this time, however, he’s sat up and awake, for the most part, but still just as bare and as naked as before, and sticky, too, and he’s got the blankets and sheets pooling in his lap to keep hold of a bit of modesty in front of the guests they’ve got sat in the chairs.

Louis’s wearing white jeans and a purple shirt that Harry is sure belongs to Gemma, of all people, and he isn’t prepared to question the reason why his friend has his sister’s shirt; he’s sipping at a cup of something, probably orange juice and vodka — Louis’s never been one to rightly care how early or how late it is, really, and Harry reckons he can’t blame Louis for it this time — and he’s flickering his eyes back and forth between Harry and Niall, back and forth and back and forth and back and forth, so many times that Harry feels itchy and uncomfortable. And Liam’s sat next to him in the other chair, fist holding his face up as he attempts not to fall asleep, and at least he’s wearing his own clothing at the moment and not attempting to burn a judgmental hole through both Harry and Niall’s
thick skin.

Because you have to have thick skin when you’re gay. Or, well — not gay, seeing as Harry and Niall are both still vocally attracted to women. Bisexual, perhaps. Or… no labels at all will suffice just fine in the same way that their relationship is budding without a problem.

Ah, well. There’s plenty of problems; however, they’ve worked through them. Mostly.

“Um.” Harry yawns, narrows his eyes; he’s got a towel around his shoulders and one wrapped up with his hair and he feels as if he’s the odd man out for reasons he can’t explain. He’s rather glad he decided to bring a pair of boxers into the bathroom with him this time, though. “Hi.”

It’s a statement, yes, but it sounds sort of like a question — and he ought to not be blamed, you know, because it isn’t every day that two boys kiss each other in front of two other boys, in front of two interested females who are ready to head back to a hotel for some fun; he doesn’t feel bad, doesn’t feel ashamed, but there is something lurking inside of his chest, right at the top, that he can’t defeat no matter how hard he tries and he reckons now is the time they’re all going to get out what’s been bubbling inside since last night’s events.

He’s glad they aren’t going to waste time dancing around the topic, thinks he and Niall can learn quite a bit from Louis’s confrontational assertiveness.

Niall giggles, puts his hand over his mouth and turns to face the opposite direction, and it’s all Harry can do not to coo, you know — because Niall’s so cute, all ruffled and sleepy and sexy and sexed up, all Harry’s doing and he thinks, Harry thinks Louis and Liam definitely know what’s gone on throughout the night and morning they’ve been apart.

And they aren’t making a huge deal out of the fact that Harry and Niall fucked, had sex, made love to and with one another last night, and that’s a good thing… right?

Yeah. Yeah, right. It’s just… Harry’s a little confused by it, is all. And he has every right to be bewildered by the fact that — that all of this is happening, doesn’t he?

“I’m not going to say this is awkward,” Louis begins, slants his head to the side; he’s not letting the events of last night effect his attitude, apparently, and that’s good, too, because the very thought of Louis not being Louis, in all his glory, is frightening, and something Harry would rather not try to imagine, “but this is most certainly awkward. And it’s your fault. Mostly.”

Harry frowns. “What?” he asks, narrows his eyes and does his best to keep his emotions off of his face. He isn’t sure if he succeeds, but it’s the thought that counts, okay, and he doesn’t want to pick a fight, doesn’t want to assert himself into a fight, but he reckons he will if he has to. “What the fuck are you talking about, Louis?”

It’s too early. It’s too goddamn early to be having a fight with his two closest friends — it’s too goddamn early to lose two of his closest friends. He doesn’t want to have to choose, doesn’t want to have to pick between Niall or Louis and Liam because all three of them mean the world to him and — well, if he has to, if he absolutely has to, he reckons they’ve had a good run, they’ve had some good times, they’ve had some good tricks up their sleeves, and friends part ways all of the time and that’s the way the world goes.

He isn’t going to choose. He will not choose.

He hopes it doesn’t come down to that, though. He doesn’t want to choose between Louis, the person who has saved Harry’s ass from getting caught by the police more times than he can ever
count, more times than he can ever repay; he doesn’t want to choose between Liam, the person who tutored and studied with Harry all through high school to make sure he made the basic marks to keep playing on the teams he was on; he doesn’t want to choose between Niall, the man of his dreams and the man he wants to spend the rest of his life with and the only person in the entire world who can help make Harry believe everything is going to be okay.

He doesn’t want to have to choose between either or and he won’t. He won’t.

“Well, fuck,” Niall swears, snorts, rolls his eyes; he’s having none of this, Harry notices, and it kind of makes Harry want to grin. “You aren’t wrong, are you?”

Louis shakes his head; he’s got a smile on his face, one that Harry is more than a little happy to see, and if it’s there — if Louis is able to still grin right now, maybe Harry doesn’t have much to be afraid of, after all.

“I mean, Harry and I did kiss in front of you, and —”

“— swallowed each other’s tongues, as well, which was oh so fucking pleasant to watch —”

“— may have turned off some ladies, but that isn’t our fault. It isn’t our fault that we… that we are. You know. With each other. It’s not our fault.”

And, yeah. No, it isn’t.

Harry walks forward, makes his way toward the bed; he sits down, sits beside Niall, and it’s sort of a habit, really, for the two of them to wiggle around till they’re comfortable, side by side and shoulder to shoulder and thigh to thigh, for the two of them to find the other’s hand and interlace their fingers and hold on, caress one another’s skin with the pads of their fingertips.

It’s nice. It’s real. It’s, um, the best — the best ever. And he isn’t going to apologize for being happy, for doing all that he can keep his grip on that happiness.

“We know it’s not your fault.” This time, it’s Liam who speaks, and his voice is kind of groggy and thick; Harry’s afraid to meet Liam’s eyes because he’s so much, because he’s so intelligent, and he knows so many things that Harry never will. “And we never said it was. If that’s what Lou has made you two think — well, he’s a little bitch.”

“Uh, no, I’m not.”

Liam laughs and Harry does, too. “And we aren’t mad,” Liam continues, keeps his voice steady; Niall lays his cheek on Harry’s shoulder, turns his head to press a kiss to the skin just above Harry’s beating heart. “We truly, truly aren’t. We just… wish you would have said something.”

Niall sighs. “There was nothing to say,” he replies, cuddles as close to Harry as he can; he’s always been the one taking strength and resilience from Niall, Harry has, and maybe this time it’s Niall taking solidity and relent from Harry. Whoa. “Nothing for us to say at the time, at least. It was hard enough for the two of us to come to terms with the fact that we — that we’re like that. That we want to be like that. With each other. And I think the possibility that we could lose everything we love kept us from being okay for a little while.”

And — he said us. Niall said us, and Harry’s never felt more entitled and privileged because he’s in love, because he’s loved in return and the whole fucking world can know for all he cares.

“It was rough. It wasn’t fun. It was… something I never want to have to go through ever again. Our whole lives we’ve been taught that a man loving another man is wrong and we’ve believed it, but
then we set out on this trip and we just couldn’t help it, couldn’t help wanting to be by one another all the time. I can’t tell you the number of times I would wake up through the nights just to scoot closer to him because I didn’t want to be away. We fought. Fuck, we fought a lot. Harry was so far ahead of me in accepting the truth and we didn’t see eye to eye and I made him cry — dammit, I made him cry so much. That hurt. And then, when I would wake up in the middle of the night to move closer to him he wouldn’t let me. I don’t think he knows how much he pulled away from me. That’s what showed me that I really wanted him. And it was really, really hard for… for me to come to terms with it. All of it. And — and God and everything I’ve been taught and everything I believe, too. I didn’t want to give up everything I had for everything I wanted. I didn’t want to let go of my chance of happiness.”

He stops, Niall does, and pulls in a breath; he’s vulnerable in this moment, so open and so naked, showing a side of himself to Louis and Liam that only Harry’s ever seen, that only Harry’s ever known about. And they’re reacting in kind, you know, bent forward and eyes wide and jaws dropped and faces open — so open and receptive and hanging on to every word that is coming out of Niall’s mouth.

Harry is, too. He and Niall haven’t discussed this, the underlining pain and internalized repulsion, confusion of coming into themselves and allowing the love they have for one another to flourish, because there was no need; what one was feeling the other was, as well, and the idea of having to explain every single little thing is a strange concept. Why make heavy of something that both already know of?

They were never in this alone — they’ve always been in this together. With one another, even when it felt like the world was doing nothing but try to pull them apart. The entire time, they weren’t alone. They aren’t alone.

And Louis and Liam won’t understand that. Ever. And that’s not their fault, really; they aren’t like Harry and they aren’t like Niall, either. He wishes there were a way to relay to them, to Louis and Liam what it’s like — what it’s like to question himself without ever finding an answer in the long list of words he’s being told, what it’s like to pine after someone he has very little chance of ever having, what it’s like to be kept awake at night for no reason other than the fact the fear of having to choose between eternal life and a love that is as ethereal as fallen angels made his stomach hurt, what it’s like to finally be given the chance to accept himself and be accepted in return and not have to worry about choosing when his choices were laid out before him by God with a smile.

They’ll never know what it’s like to have to fight to be where they are right now.

“And I don’t know if I’m still attracted to women. I still look at them, and Harry does, too, but it’s different. I don’t know if I’ll be attracted to any other man, either. I don’t — I don’t know that and I don’t really want to know that, but I will somebody. Not now, though. Right now, it’s Harry, and I promise that it’s going to be Harry for a long time.” He presses his lips together, Niall does, and turns his head from Louis and Liam, Niall does, but Harry only has eyes for the man right in front of him. “And I hope it’s going to be Harry for the rest of my life, too.”

Harry’s heart shivers in his chest and he wants to say so many things but he can’t find the words. “Niall —”

“I love you,” Niall says, interrupts Harry’s sentence; he turns back to Louis and Liam, Niall does, but Harry only has eyes for the man right in front of him. “I love him. He makes me feel like I could eat the entire world raw even if people are screaming at me to burn it to the ground. I think I would — burn it, that is, if I could pick Harry up from the ashes every time. And my love for him doesn’t make me any less of a man — my love for him doesn’t make me any less of a Christian.” He stops,
chuckles, and Harry’s sort of jealous in this moment of the relationship Niall has with God but he realizes there’s no point in being envious when there’s more than enough love to go around. “And I don’t need anyone’s words or support to make me feel like I — like I’m not wrong. I know I’m not wrong. I know I’m perfectly right. And all right. But I would… we would both like for the two of you to accept it. To accept us. If you don’t, though, then you don’t. We can’t and we won’t try to make you. We would appreciate it, though.”

Harry’s never felt so full before in his entire fucking life.

Louis coughs, looks down at the floor and kicks at something too little to register in Harry’s mind. “We love the two of you,” he says, whispers; the air is tense and light at the same time, a mix of colors that make Harry question and question and question and he isn’t getting any answers but he reckons that’s okay. “Not in the same way that you love each other, no, but — but we do love you.”

“And we don’t care,” Liam adds, lifts his face to look at both Harry and Niall at once, as if they are one and not two and that makes Harry feel ripe and raw. “I don’t give a shit that the two of you are, um, with each other in that way ‘cause you’re still my best friends and — and I’ll be here. Louis will be here.”

“There’s not a damn thing wrong with either of you.” Louis stands up, grabs Liam by the hand and pulls him along, as well; they move to sit on the foot of the bed, only a bit of space separating the four of them. Harry appreciates the proximity right now. “I’m sorry, so sorry that you had to go through that, Niall. And Harry — oh, Harry, your heart is just so big sometimes. I’m so sorry. And I would have taken it away from you, from both of you if I could have.”

Niall smiles, lays his cheek back on Harry’s shoulder. “I know.”

And Harry knows, too, and that’s nice, that’s good. That’s so very good.

“And it doesn’t change anything.” Liam rushes to say, rushes to reach out and put his hand on Harry’s knee beneath the blankets he and Niall are hiding under. “It doesn’t change a thing. You don’t have to stop or — or lose everything that you have now that you have everything that you want. You don’t have to do that and anyone telling you that you have to can… can — well, I don’t know what they can do, but I know that I can kick their ass and that’ll be the end of it.”

Harry snorts, lets out a puff of air through his nose — but then he’s laughing; laughing so hard he’s crying, so loud it’s reverberating off the walls, so long it’s got his chest hurting, and Niall and Louis and Liam are, too, and it feels good, feels so fucking good to be able to do this, to still be able to do this.

He isn’t sure how he could have done it, isn’t sure how he could have walked away; he would have always been looking back at them, at the smeared memories they’ve shared, especially the ones that are faded around the edges and muddled with all sorts of stains he can’t remember ever getting, and he’s so glad he doesn’t have to say goodbye, so glad he doesn’t have to let go of everything he has now that he has everything he’s ever wanted.

It’s good. Right now, it’s good. Life’s good. He’s got his boyfriend and his got his best friends and life is good and life is going to stay good and he thinks that’s the best mentality somebody can have when they’re so close to losing everything they’ve ever known.
After the talking and laughing and long, strenuous heart to heart the four of them had where everything was laid out on the table for all to know, there was only one thing left to do — nap.

Or — fucking nap, in Louis’s terms.

(Harry thinks he’s quite right in his terms. Louis, that is.)

And that’s why they’re all squished together on the bed, big as it may be, and having to share the sheets and blankets and this odd little throw Niall had stuffed into his duffel — because Louis is an actual little bitch who has to be cuddled and tucked beneath or else he will never be able to sleep, holy fuck, and Liam melts and sprawls and has no proper idea of what it means to share when he’s rolled over onto his tummy.

Harry’s on the edge of the bed, got his legs tangled with Niall’s between the sheets they’ve been awarded from Louis and Liam’s ball of loud snores and occasional grunts and restless movement; the lights are shut off and the curtains are pulled and the door is locked and Harry isn’t sure if he’s ever been more comfortable before in his life surrounded by his friends and his… his boyfriend.

Whoa.

He hasn’t slept yet, doesn’t think he’ll be able to doze off any time soon no matter how hard he wishes he could just turn his head off, what with all of the little tidbits of info he’s got swirling around in his mind at the moment. There’s — there’s a lot to toss around, to think over right now.

And he has to do it right now, you know, because he’s fairly sure he’ll ever have any time to himself now that… now that everything’s been figured out.

Well. Sorta.

He never knew Niall felt that way — or, well, that’s a bit of lie. He did know Niall felt that way, always knew part of the reason Niall was so reluctant to admit and open himself up and allow everything to happen naturally and progress the way it was supposed to, but he never knew how completely reliant Niall was on the fact that, in his mind, giving in to Harry was the same as giving up everything he’s gathered over the course of his entire life.

That is what Harry didn’t know. That is why Harry can’t find it in himself to sleep now that he — now that he knows Niall’s internal struggle to admit and accept himself was so hard.
He thinks he should have, though. Should have known, that is. About the inner turmoil that Niall was going through, was having to deal with, and all of the emotions that tore him up on the inside — he felt so lost, he felt so conflicted, he felt so invalid, he felt so wrong; he had it in his mind that choosing Harry meant letting go of his beliefs but also that picking his thoughts was the exact same as severing the bond he has built up over the years with Harry and that hurt, that must have hurt so goddamn bad and kept him up at night and twisted him all over till he was absolutely sick with the repulsion of having to choose.

Of having to choose between his life and his love, of having to choose between the way he wishes to live and the person he wants to give all of his love to.

That’s not going to happen. Ever. There isn’t an either or in this situation — you can’t be one thing and not be the other, you don’t have to choose one thing and let go of another. You can be both, you can have both. You can be black and you can be white; you can be marked in every shade of gray but also shine with all the colors, as well. You don’t have to lean toward the left or rush toward the right — you can make yourself a happy little home right in the middle and be just as validated as you would be if you decided to choose to bend to either side.

It’s all about choices. You choose to do this, you choose to do that; you make the decision to either live your life as you know you are destined to or make due with settling, never to be given the opportunity to feel all of the things you know you deserve and all of the things that reminds you why you’ve not given up.

And it’s your choice. No matter what, it’s your choice. No one can make it for you; yes, there can be measures in attempt to sway your decision to the left or to the right, but it is still your choice to make — whether it’s giving in to the things that sway, whether it’s putting everything out of your mind so you can make the decision without being pushed in the haste to choose.

It will always, always, always be your choice.

Niall makes a noise in the back of his throat, something Harry can feel against his chest because they’re flushed so close together. He shuts his eyes, Harry does, and pretends to sleep, reckons worrying Niall with the reason he’s not been able to rest is a trivial problem that Niall shouldn’t have to think about.

“I don’t know why you’re pretendin’ you’re asleep when we both know you’ve not dozed off once,” Niall says, whispers; he maneuvers himself around till he has both arms out of the sheets and both hands carding through Harry’s messy, tangled hair. It hurts, sort of, and Harry knows not to lay in bed with wet hair but — he couldn’t help it. A few snarls in his hair won’t hurt in the long run of things. “What’s got you up, H? What’ve you got on that pretty mind of yours?”

Harry shivers, sighs, nestles his face further into the warmth and solidity — and sort of hairy — bit of Niall’s chest that he’s found is entirely more comfortable than a downy pillow.

(Louis’s also stole all of the pillows, by the way, and Harry’s only improvising as best as he can.)

“Stuff. Things.” He yawns, and it’s real; he’s tired, quite literally exhausted, but he can’t drift off no matter how much he wants to fall asleep. Niall’s words probably aren’t going to allow him to rest any time soon. “I can’t properly turn my mind off, is all.”

Niall inhales deeply, slowly; he combs his fingers through Harry’s hair, tries to brush out the knots and snarls and it’s rough, he’s rough, but he’s trying to be soft and that’s what matters, that’s what makes Harry’s heart flutter and flitter in his chest.
“What about?” he asks, keeps his voice as low as he possibly can, and yeah, Harry doesn’t want to wake up Louis or Liam because — well, because the former will rage like a hellion should he be awakened and the latter will only roll back over without assisting with the aforementioned diva. “We can talk ‘bout it. Don’t think I’ll be heading back to sleep any time soon since you won’t.”

“We ought to not be sleeping through the day, anyway,” Harry quips in a reply, pressing his lips against the thickness of Niall’s chest. “I mean, I highly doubt you and the boys will be able to get to sleep later tonight. You’re all going to be rolling and tossing ‘round and I’ll be sleeping on.”

Niall scoffs, wraps his hand around a bit of Harry’s hair and tugs, pulls, lets him know that his joke is heard and most definitely not appreciated. “It’s cute how you think you’ll be sleeping without me.” Niall moves one of his hands, puts his palm against Harry’s cheek; he rubs at the skin beneath Harry’s eye with the pad of his thumb, a bit softer and smoother than Harry is used to, and he purrs with the fire it sets inside of him. “And it’s so much fucking cuter that you think I won’t be putting to use that time I’m not able to sleep, babe. You and I have a whole bottle of lube that I plan to put to good use.” He grins, devilishly, and Harry feels his heart absolutely flutter in the hottest of ways. “And then we’ll buy another. And another. And another and another and another till we think we’ve had enough of each other, but we still won’t.”

Harry opens his mouth to say something witty and charming, lecherous and cute in return, but Niall cuts him off, splays his fingers out on the back of Harry’s head and pulls him in; their mouths catch, hold, and Harry’s bottom lip is instantly sucked between Niall’s and he inhales deeply, sharply, blows the air against Niall’s cheeks and tries to grab hold of the breath Niall’s taken away from him.

As always.

His breath smells like sleep and tastes like dryness, sort of sour and packed like layers cement, odd, okay, and Harry has no option but to loosen his jaw and allow Niall’s tongue into his mouth, allow Niall’s tongue to claim his mouth; he drops his head from Niall’s chest, moves to lay on his back, and Niall tosses one of his thighs over the top of both of Harry’s, follows his lips and kisses him as if they’re alone, as if they’re running out of a time, as if this is the last moment they’ll be able be like this.

He turns his head, pulls away; a bit of saliva falls onto his cheek and makes his face wet and he twitches in the hardest of ways, has to angle his hips away from Niall’s. “Stop, Niall,” he says, croaks; he puts his hands on Niall’s shoulders, pushes him away slowly, carefully, tries to worm himself away from Niall’s tantalizing grasp. “Stop, stop.”

Niall adjusts his body across Harry’s, lies flat and makes himself comfy, presses his face into Harry’s neck and stays, breathes, holds Harry close to his heart. “I wasn’t going to get carried away.” He smears the words against Harry’s flesh, and Harry’s reminded about Niall’s ramblings over the possibility of getting tattoos, of getting matching tattoos. He wonders if Niall’s still on board for that. He thinks he wouldn’t mind having some ink on his skin to — to remind him of the summer that changed his life forever. He thinks this is going to be the one that all the others after are going to be compared to. “It’s awkward having them here, anyway.”

“In bed with us?”

Niall chuckles, pushes the noise against Harry’s neck to muffle the sound so it won’t disturb or startle their bedmates. “Most certainly.” His breath is warm and his words are whispered and it’s nice to feel whole, to feel wonderfully completed after all of this — after all of this fighting and forgetting and falling they had to do, with one another and without one another. “They took it… well, don’t you think?”
“Us being in — in a relationship?”

He’s not exactly sure how to word something they’ve not talked about.

Niall nods. “Yeah,” he says, crinkles his face; Harry can feel the movement of his facial expressions against his neck, knows that Niall’s smile has faded into some sort of strange and upturned frown, and he doesn’t like not having Niall happy. “I mean they… they — they really surprised me, I guess. About how they took it. I was really surprised they, um, didn’t, like — you know, hate us for it.”

“Hate us for wanting to be together?”

Niall sniffs, sort of. “Yeah.” His reply is quiet but Harry can hear it just fine. “I just — Janie was really cool about it, even helped me to come to terms with it all, and a few people we’ve met along the way have been totally supportive but I know tons of people won’t like it.”

“Does it matter what people think of you and me?”

“No. It doesn’t matter to me what a stranger thinks of us, no.” Niall shakes his head, a bit wildly. “But I care about Louis and Liam and I care about what they think and I don’t know how I would have reacted if they didn’t accept it.”

Harry thins his lips, shuts his eyes, spreads his legs so Niall can fit better between them regardless of the fact that he’s sure to be sporting a rather large bulge before too long should they stay in this position. And he kind of hopes they do, you know, because he’s got weight and he’s got warmth on him. It feels like paradise, lets him know that he’s alive and that the man he loves is a live, as well.

“Did you think they weren’t going to?” he asks, words his question as properly as he can; to say he thought there was a possibility Louis and Liam would turn their backs on the two of them and the budding relationship they’re trying so damn hard to keep above ground would be a lie. But. Here they are now, all of them, lying in the same bed and sharing blankets, half-naked and most certainly touching, for fuck’s sake. He’s glad to be able to say that they’ve got past this battle with flying colors, even if the engines cut out a few times over a rather frightening path of rocky earth. Maybe not all of them, all the colors, but enough for Harry to be able to feel full. “I mean… did you?”

“I don’t know if I thought that, specifically that,” Niall answers, makes a noise in the back of his throat. He’s quiet, then, for a moment, and moves his fingers on Harry’s shoulder, swirls his fingertips and draws stupid little designs that Harry wishes he could feel forever, that Harry wishes would stay forever. “Maybe something like it, but not — no, not that. Never. I just thought that… I guess I just thought that they wouldn’t see us the same and try to, like, change or something in order to accommodate us, I guess.”

“I don’t think they do. Or, well — yeah, I think they do. They do see us the same. But I also think they see us as — different, stronger than we were, smarter than we were. I highly doubt they’re going to try and change to fit us better, too. I think they see us as two boys who have grown up a lot over the few weeks that we’ve been gone. I think they see us as the kind of… the kind of men that they are supposed to be, that they want to be. I think they see us as heroes.”

“Heroes?” Niall’s voice is loud and he raises up, just a bit, to meet Harry’s eyes in the dimness, in the darkness of the room. “You think they see us as heroes?” Niall snorts. “How?”

Harry turns red, blushes so hard that his skin burns and he knows Niall can feel it, knows Niall can feel it against his own skin because he laughs a bit and presses a sweet, smiling kiss to the lavender-colored skin just beneath his eyes.
“I mean, I think that they think we’re heroes because… well, ‘cause we, um, you know — because we are still okay after it.”

“‘It’?”

“Yeah.” Harry hums, puts his hands on the bare flesh of Niall’s back, runs his fingertips up and down, up and down the hardness he loves so much. “Like, all of the stuff that you and I had to go through.” He bites his bottom lip, worries the flesh so he doesn’t worry himself to death. “We went through a lot, if you think about it. Like, really sit and let it all come to you at once. Especially you.”

Niall coughs, catches it with the palm of his hand and lays back down. “Especially me?” He traces his fingertips up the slope of Harry’s neck and tickles the place where his hair ends at the bottom of his head. “What do you mean by that?”

Harry shuts his eyes, presses them so tight he sees colors spark behind his closed lids. “Just that… that you went through everything that you went through, is all.”

*Great choice of words, H.*

“And what did I go through, silly boy?”

Harry shivers at Niall’s nickname for him, doesn’t think there will ever be a day that passes when he doesn’t have to quiet down his racing heart at Niall’s pleasant show of unadulterated affection.

“Everything that you said. All of what you told Louis and Liam. You had to… you had to do all of that by yourself and — and I didn’t know, at all, about the level of hurt you were having to swim through.”

Niall shrugs. “I’m quite good at the backstroke,” he replies, quips, and he isn’t taking any of this serious, is he? “But I fair better at the doggy paddle, if I have to stick with one or the other.”

Harry swats Niall’s backside, a bit harder than he probably should; Niall jumps, yowls, and Harry does it again, smacks Niall’s ass, lighter than he did before. “You can’t be serious for one damn second,” he says, chastises; he hopes it’s like this, hopes it’s like this all of the time, because he’s positive he won’t ever get bored. “I wish you would have told me about it all.”

“About all of what?”

Harry rolls his eyes. “About everything you were going through,” Harry answers, and it’s a whisper because he doesn’t want to wake Louis and Liam up, because he doesn’t want to blow something out of proportion when it doesn’t seem to be bothering Niall anymore. “I wish you would have told me about all of it.”

“I think going through all of that was something I had to do alone, by myself. I don’t know if it would have turned out like this if I didn’t go through it without you. And there’s the other thing that I didn’t want to bother you and weight you down anymore than you already were, too.”

“I want to be bothered, Niall. I want you to bother me all of the time with what’s on your mind, whether it’s a dog you saw walking down the street or what you want to have for dinner or what’s eating you up so horribly that you can’t sleep at night. I want you to tell me everything, even if you don’t think it means a damn thing.” Harry turns his head a bit, just a bit, and presses his lips to Niall’s temple and wonders how hard he’s going to have to kiss before Niall understands that Harry values every single little thing that passes through his mind and finds somewhere to stick in his heart. “I want you to bother me with it all.”
Niall sighs, flutter his eyes; Harry can feel the touch of them against the skin of his neck and it makes him shiver as if he’s just been dunked into the coldest tub of water in the entire world.

“I swear to God if you make me cry I am going to punch you in the stomach and I won’t even feel bad about it.”

Harry grunts, moves his hips and puts one of his hands on the fleshy bit of Niall’s waist, pinches his skin. “That was so rude of you, Niall Horan,” he says, berates, and he’s like Niall’s dad, sort of, and — oh, what would it be like if Niall were to call him daddy? Oh. Oh, shit. “I tell you something so sweet it’s nearly giving me a cavity and you say mean things and — and ugh!”

Niall laughs, giggles — giggles; fucking giggles — and puts the noise against Harry’s skin because that’s kind of where it belongs and Harry’s glad for it. “S’not like you’ve never done the same with me, silly boy,” he replies, presses the words where he engraved his laugh. “And you love me anyway.”

“Yeah.” Harry smiles, moves his hand up and runs his fingers through Niall’s hair; it’s thick and heavy, a little greasy, but it smells like roses and sex and heat and sweat and rain. Kind of. Harry likes it. “Yeah, I’ll love you anyway.”

Niall curls his finger, begins to draw on the sensitive skin just below Harry’s ear; he keeps his eyes closed, Harry does, and feels, just feels. Niall’s touch is gentle, so light and faint that Harry can hardly notice it; he thinks he feels the line and dot of a lowercase i followed by an l, thinks he feels the swoop of an o and the sharpness of a v and the sudden stop and half circle of an e, and then there’s the y and the o and the u.

And — oh.

*i love you.*

Harry doesn’t think the love he has for Niall is ever going to stop growing. It’s like a garden, one that can live even in the worst of droughts and the blackest of days, and it’s full of flowers and trees and bushes, and Harry wants to spend the rest of his life lounging in the plush softness and counting the petals and watching as the sun wanes down, down, down.

Hmm. A gardener? Harry could be a gardener. Is that a profession you have to go to school for? Well, probably, if you wish to start your own gardening business and then yes, it’s most likely the best choice to attend a few classes over how to establish and effectively execute aforementioned business.

So — business school? Or, well, business classes? And a degree? Sure.

Yeah. Yeah, sounds good. He could get a decent job with a few business classes under his belt. He thinks.

“We ought to get those tattoos,” he announces, Niall announces, and Harry bites his bottom lip to hold back the little laugh that begs to come out. “I mean, we’re in Atlanta, as far away from parental guidance that we possibly can be, and a tattoo would be totally cool. Don’t you think?”

Harry nods. “Yeah.”

“What would you get?”

Harry opens his mouth to speak, to reply, but there’s a noise, a rustling of blankets, and then Louis’s turning over and Liam is, too, and the former is saying, “I’ll get your name across my chest,” in a
voice that sounds suspiciously like Harry’s and Liam is adding to it, as well, in an Irish tone that definitely doesn’t sound as good as the original, “I’ll kiss it better for you, silly boy.”

And Harry and Niall are silent, still. Harry’s fairly sure he can hear the individual footsteps on the ground outside.

“How much of that did you hear?” Niall asks, sits up on Harry’s hips and reaches over for the bedside lamp; it flickers for a moment before spreading faint yellow illumination and lighting up everyone’s faces.

Liam chuckles, presses his chin against Louis’s shoulder where he’s at, laying on his side next to Louis’s who’s lounging on his back, splayed out and covered up to his chin. “All of it,” he answers, tries to hide the smile that is making his cheeks twitch. “Even the bit about us not seeing you the same way as we did before.”

“We’re only a little bit offended,” Louis adds, doesn’t try to hide the grin. “We’ll let it slide since the two of you are still getting used to be being boyfriends, but still — you ought to know that once we take baths together, we stay together.”

Harry frowns. “I never bathed with any of you.” He’s fairly sure the only baths he’s shared were with Gemma and even that’s something the two of them don’t speak about much.

“Going naked in the swimming pool last summer counts!”

Harry makes a noise. “Oh.”

“Also — is it possible for the two of you to tone down the love fest? We’re glad you’re talking things out and not lying to each other, but a bit of peace and quiet definitely never hurt nobody. We’re trying to nap over here.”

Louis’s words bring on another round of laughter from him and Liam, and Harry isn’t sure how they’re going to go back to sleep now that they can’t seem to stop finding Harry and Niall hilarious.

Niall groans, long and loud, and falls forward, falls over; he nestles against Harry’s side, tucks himself close. “We’re never going to live this down, Harry,” he muses, whispers in Harry’s ear and attempts to find the sheet that somehow got lost in translation. “Never ever.”

Harry sighs, wonders what the policy is on having guests in your room if they aren’t paying and how much he could tip the security to kick Louis and Liam out. “I know.”
“I know a really great shop just down the road from here,” Louis announces as he slides into the red-cushioned booth Harry and Niall have secured in the very front of the diner they’re in, hands full of all sorts of delicious and greasy food that smells just as good as it looks. “Like, the greatest. Even comes with its own recommending team or some shit. They walk the blocks with sign. And they say it’s the best place on this side of the city. Clean and supreme, too.”

Harry raises his brow, decides to take a bite of his dripping burger; he and Niall are on one side, opposite Louis and Liam, and Harry’s against the window, got his leg raised up and his knee pressed against the trimming of the table, comfortable no matter how odd it seems, and Niall’s leaning against him, conspicuous but also inconspicuous, and the sunlight outside is dark yellow and the food smells like pleasant laziness and Harry’s full in every kind of way.

“What are you talking about?” Liam asks, takes it upon himself to question Louis’s sudden bout of energy seeing as both Harry and Niall have stuffed their faces with one of the burgers they’ve got laid out in front of them. “You’re acting crazy. You need to give us a heads up before you start to fall off the wagon so we can catch you or something.”

Louis scoffs. “You wouldn’t catch me.”

Liam shrugs. “You’re probably right, Lou.” He takes a bite of his burger, speaks around the food in his mouth, and says, “Can hardly get your ass up out of bed never mind having to catch you.”

“Asshole.”

“Bitch.”

Harry sighs.

“Anyway, if Liam’s done being a little prick, I’m talkin’ ‘bout a shop, of course,” Louis replies, takes one of his onion rings out of the wrapper; they’re hot and oily, greasy, and he drowns the thing in a puddle of ketchup. Yuck. Harry doesn’t understand how people can like that nasty stuff. “They said it was the best one on this side of town, too.”

Harry hurries to chew the bite of his burger, reaches for his large cup of Dr. Pepper and takes a big swig to help wash his food down. “A shop for what?” he asks, wipes his fingers on the pile of napkins Niall grabbed for the two of them to share. He reckons they’re probably going to need more by the time they’re even halfway through the cluster of food they’ve got. “You’ve got to specify what you’re talking about.”

“Harry’s right, Lou,” Niall adds, dips a couple of his fries into a small flood of ketchup. Disgusting. He looks at Harry from the corner of his eye, turns to meet Harry’s gaze; he lifts a brow in question,
asks Harry why he’s looking. “What’re staring at, H?”

“I don’t know yet.” Harry shakes his head, points at the dipping sauce Niall’s got squirted out on the corner of a wrapper; it reminds him of the time he and Niall danced in the aisle at a stupid grocery store to a song after arguing over which condiment was the best to put on a hotdog. Simpler times, those, but Harry kind of prefers right now over the past. “That’s fucking nasty.”

Niall scoffs. “You’re fucking nasty,” he replies, and — well, yeah, Harry is kind of nasty, isn’t he? But nasty in bed, and that’s different, doesn’t compare to how gross it is to dip French fries in ketchup, of all things. “Anyway, Lou — what sort of shop are you talking about?”

Louis grins, and when Louis grins Harry kind of quakes in his boots because he knows — he knows Louis’s got something up his sleeve that’s most definitely a bad idea that’s going to turn into a memory Harry isn’t sure if he would like to share when he gets older, when he’s sat in a rocking chair on his front porch overlooking the yard and watching the sunset go down, down, down.

He thinks he wouldn’t mind growing old with Niall, living their shared lives on the outside of some unknown town with a lot of land and a lot of laughter and a lot of love. He doesn’t think he has to make something of himself as long as he and those he cares for know how much he loved, how much he loved them and how much they loved him. He thinks that sort of sounds like the best kind of paradise anyone could ever be given.

“A tattoo shop, of course,” Louis answers, finally answers, and wiggles himself, adjusts himself till he’s comfortable and nearly on top of Liam, who has paused in eating to side-eye the fucking hell out of his seatmate. “The lady up at the counter said it has won awards and that celebrities have even came in the shop for a bit of ink.”

Liam blinks. “And who’s getting the tattoo?” he asks, reaches for his lemonade; Harry reconsidered his choice of drink but then tried Liam’s and thought it was too sweet to be good, decided he’d stick with his Dr. Pepper. Besides, if he gets tired of it, Niall’s got a heaping cup of sweet iced tea and he’ll take some of that if he has to. “I mean, I wouldn’t mind having one on my forearm or something but, like, I didn’t know we were going today to get some ink. I’m not emotionally prepared for this.”

Niall tilts his head toward Harry’s, takes his attention off of the people walking along the cement sidewalks outside. He likes the style here, how it’s so colorful and so casual; people look like they don’t try, but at the same time that they tried a little. Harry likes that sort of thing. And they’re nice, too, and that means something.

“You wanting to get inked today?” he asks, Niall asks, and he flutters his lashes, makes himself look innocent and pure when Harry knows he’s just as devious and dirty as he is clean, as he is seemingly flawless; the yellow sun is shining in his eyes, though, making them seem luminescent and powerful and out of this world of favored normality and Harry fucking loves how the man that has his heart for all of time cannot ever be replicated again, loves how Niall was made just for him and nobody else. “I mean, I can’t say I won’t cry when we get it done or try to back out, but I’ll do it if you will.” He smirks. “I’ll even hold your hand if you hold mine.”

Harry swallows a bite of his onion ring, wincing as it catches on the way down. “So, like, today?”

“Well, that seems to be the plan Louis’s set out for us later. And you know arguing with him when he’s got his head set on something is like trying to charm a snake out of striking.”

Harry coughs. “That’s possible,” he says, remembers some sort of documentary he and a few backs from the football team watched after school for extra credit so they could keep themselves on the team during the latter part of their third year. “Dangerous, though. If you know what you’re doing,
"you’ll be fine."

"Possible, certainly dangerous, but most definitely unlikely."

Harry wants to prove Niall wrong but he doesn’t think he can; there’s no use in trying to fight facts with fiction, anyway, and Harry’s never been too fond of snakes or the idea of attempting to tempt one out of striking. He rather likes the way his entire body is constructed, for the most part, and he’s come to love all of the little things about himself that many others have probably long since determined as unattractive attributes.

Eh. He mentally shrugs. *Fuck ‘em.*

“And besides, it isn’t as if we’re gonna be going to bed early tonight, anyway,” Louis cuts in, rolls his eyes, and Harry wonders what the chances are of him kicking Louis’s shin instead of Liam’s and what sort of responses he would have to deal with should he hit his mark, should he not hit his mark. “Harry was right to call us on that.”

“Ah, well.” Harry rolls his shoulders, drops his shin from the trimming of the table and brings both of his legs up on the bench, toes off his sneakers and crosses his feet; his knee knocks into Niall’s thigh, overlaps onto Niall’s space, and Niall drops one of his hands, puts his fingers on Harry’s cap and rubs through the fabric of Harry’s jeans. It makes Harry shiver in the best kind of ways, makes Harry glad all of the fear and all of the doubt he suffered through most of this trip has dissipated and left him stronger than ever before. “I’m right a rather large majority of the time, but I’ll take this little win for right now till I take hold of the war from you.”

“You may want to take this win in flying colors, H,” Louis quips, arches a brow in Harry’s direction — and it just annoys Harry, more than it should, how fucking *easy* Louis can manipulate his facial features to get across his feelings. Annoyed and envious, that’s what Harry is, considering the fact that he can hardly put his thoughts into coherent words. “All the colors. Because you most certainly will not be winning any war against me in the future, young man.”

Harry blinks once, twice, three and four times; Louis’s calling him a young man when Louis himself is only a year and a half older than him.

(Well, a bit more than two and a half years, perhaps, because Louis turned three just a few months before Harry turned one, but that doesn’t matter, has never mattered; Louis got behind in school a bit — a lot — and he graduated late and that’s okay, it’s whatever. Harry just thinks Louis should remember that he isn’t *that* much older.)

“You keep saying that, old man.” Harry takes a sip of his drink, cuts his eyes in Louis’s direction; they’ve always been like this, mind you, always been competitive and overactive in their fake anger toward one another. Sometimes it isn’t fake, though, but it is now and that’s most certainly important to remember. “And you keep thinking that, too, but the fact is that I’ll still be in my prime when you’re keeled over because your stamina is shit and then I’ll win the war. S’not like you’ve won any major battles lately, anyway.”

“Harry, come on —”

“Just like your jokes.”

Louis frowns. “What?”

Harry sighs, wonders if he’s talking to a screen door or if he ought to work on his deliveries a bit more than he has been lately. “Your jokes are shit,” he replies, explains in a monotone that feels
heavy on his tongue. “I meant that your jokes are shit.”

And Louis does something then, something really mean — he picks up one of his onion rings, one of those that are slathered in ketchup, fucking ketchup, and tossed to the side because it’s gotten too soggy to eat and enjoy and flings it at Harry; it hits Harry right in the face, right on the forehead, and slides down, lands in his lap, and he’s got the stuff smeared on him now and he’s pissed, livid, nearly sick to his stomach from the mere thought of the nasty stuff and so, in retaliation, he grabs his drink, his large Dr. Pepper, and takes the lid off and tosses the contents at Louis.

But there’s a small problem.

(And by small problem, Harry means a raging fucking mess he definitely did not consider possible and he may or may not have ruined Liam’s burger but that’s not something he wishes to dwell on at the moment.)

Because the drink doesn’t fly right, doesn’t just hit Louis; it splashes on Liam, soaks him, as well, and Niall winds up getting elbowed in the cheek by Harry, as odd as that is, he doesn’t really know how that sort of thing came about, and some of the soda falls onto the floor right at the time that a little kid is walking by and he slips, trips, slams on the tiled ground and loses all of his food, and then there’s two beefed up, manly-men coming toward them along with the child’s dad and… and other dad (?) and Niall reaches down to grab Harry’s shoes and — and, you know, it’s a damn good thing they paid before they got their food because there’s no way in hell any of them were going back in the diner after they flipped over the back of the booth walls and fled outside, running and rushing around the corner to save their asses from being caught by the two burly men and the possible two dads.

Shit.

They stop around a corner, somewhere pushed off and a bit more secluded than they imagined; Harry leans over, puts his hands on his knees and tries to catch his breath, and then he looks up, sees that Louis is wet with soda and Liam is dirty with crushed fries and Niall’s face is red and he laughs, Harry just laughs so hard for a moment, for a solid moment, and it’s the best kind of joy he has felt in a while.

(He still feels the ketchup, still smells the ketchup, though, and he’s still pissed at Louis. He doesn’t reckon that’s going to go away any time soon.)

“I’m so fucking hungry.”

Harry leans forward a bit, tries to make eye contact with Louis; however, Niall and Liam are keeping them separated for reasons, obvious reasons — mostly because they’re on a rather congested part of the sidewalk in the more popular part of the city and a scene would not benefit any of them, nor would getting picked up by the cops do any good, either — and all Harry can see is Louis’s bare legs and how high he’s got his shorts pulled up and he wants to be an ass and ask if Louis can feel the straddle in his throat but he doesn’t, instead goes for:

“Maybe if you wouldn’t have mouthed off, we could have kept eating, but no — no, you have to be a fucking bitch and screw shit up all the damn time.”

Niall wraps his arm around Harry’s shoulders, stuffs his hand beneath the collar of Harry’s shirt and pinches at the sensitive skin there, leaves his mark and the smarting knowledge that he had better keep his temper locked away before something is said that will start yet another fight.
“You need to calm down,” he says, whispers, and Harry lays his head against Niall’s shoulder and wonders where Niall got the power to keep him grounded because he’s had it for what feels like years now and if God has been cheering them on since they were children or if that’s a new development. “And just remember that, at the end of the day, Louis’s still going to be a little bitch and there’s nothing we can do about it.”

“Niall!” Louis exclaims, steps forward, tries to circle around to step in front of both Harry and Niall and Harry’s ready. He isn’t going to do anything horrible, but he’s still ready. “Man, come on, I thought you were on my side!”

Liam slings his arm out, catches Louis in the chest at the same time that he smacks Niall upside the head. “Guys, come on, quit it now. Louis’s not going to calm down if you two keep building him up like this.”

“S’not my fault the little bitch can’t take it.”

“Harry Styles, I swear, I am going to shove my foot so goddamn far in your ass that Niall won’t be able to find it when he fucks you later tonight!”

(And that may or may not be the reason they were stopped by a young mother with six little children and berated on the sidewalk right outside of a bar that smelled a little bit rotten and sounded a whole lot cool.)

(It makes a good memory, though, and Harry knows he’s going to hold on to every one that he’s created over the length of this road trip so he can remember how it feels not be to alone when he will be alone.)

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“Hey.” Harry sips at his straw, sucks hard to get a bit of the ice through. “Hey, Lou.”

Niall looks at Harry, gives him a warming that he’s most certainly not going to listen to.

Louis looks toward Harry, takes the straw out of his mouth and wipes the crushed ice off of his lips. “What, Harry?” he asks, annoyed and overheated, hence the slushy the four of them got at a street vendor on the corner somewhere a few miles back: Harry got strawberry and Niall got coconut and Liam got green apple and Louis got banana and they’re like happy little kids again. “What do you want?”

“Guess what.”

Louis sighs. “What?”

Harry grins, smirks. “You’re still a little bitch.”

And Harry thinks Liam cried a little bit after that, maybe shed a few tears that he hurried to wipe away with his shoulder, but he can’t be sure seeing as Niall smacked him really, really hard on the back of the head and he sort of lost touch with reality for a good ten seconds.

Oh, well. It was worth it to see Louis all riled up and spitting mad again.

(Louis got him back, though, when he poured the rest of his crushed ice down Harry’s back like the biggest little bitch ever, and that was it, that was the end of it. After Harry threw his slushy on Louis, of course, and Niall had to give Louis his half-eaten cup just to shut up him.)
The tattoo parlor is large and well-hidden, tucked into the unnoticeable corner of a rather large department store; the lights in the windows are bright and clear, and Harry can hear LaBelle coming from the record player before they even enter the shop.

And once they do, Louis grabs Niall’s wrist and runs off, tugs Niall away and toward one of the workers, a short woman with pale skin and black hair and a traditional kimono that’s covered with all sorts of colors, and they turn a corner and fade out of sight; he makes a move to follow, to go after them, Harry does, but Liam puts his hand out and grabs him by the shoulder, keeps him there.

“Relax, H,” Liam whispers as another worker walks up to them; he’s a man and tall, dark-skinned with dreadlocks that fall down his back and are held out of his face by a dyed bandana. “Niall and Louis talked earlier, and they planned to go off by themselves as soon as we got here. There’s nothing you have to worry about.”

Harry frowns. “Why can’t I go with them?” he asks, and then says, hurries to say, “It isn’t that I don’t want to be with you. It’s just that...

“Relax, Harry.” Liam chuckles, shakes his head and wraps his arm around Harry’s shoulders, pulls him in. “All is good. And it’s a surprise.”

Harry hums. “What?”

“A surprise.”

Oh. What?

“For who?”

“For you, idiot.”

Harry opens his mouth to reply, to question just what in the world is going on, but then the guy is in front of them, smiling and holding his hand out for both Harry and Liam to shake. His grip is firm and calloused and he holds Harry’s hand as if he’s a delicate bit of glass that is sure to break.

“Hello, young men,” the man speaks, and he’s got a lilt to his tone, one that Harry’s heard a few times before. He’s Jamaican. Sick. “Mine name’s Charles. You’re here for a tattoo, yeah?”

Liam nods. “We sure are, if you’ve got time to see us today.”

Charles nods, smiles; his teeth are crooked, sort of, and his jean vest is undone and he’s not wearing a shirt beneath it. His skin is darker, very dark, and he’s got tattoos splattered across his chest, nearly the same color of his flesh, and Harry has to squint his eyes to see the swirling patterns and soft edges of flowers, of swords, of intricate designs, of castaway ships. They bleed and blend together so perfectly, all of them.

Cool. Or, well — fucking awesome and beautiful is better, really.

“Did you do any of the artwork for yours?” Harry asks, points at Charles’s chest — but then he remembers all of the times his mum told him not to point and. Well. Shit. He’s not the Styles that took to manners very well. “For your tattoos, I mean.”

Charles laughs again, hearty and rich and deep. “I did all of the artwork, yes,” he replies, swirls his words together like the beginning and end of each of his tattoos. “My wife, Meili, did the actual
tattooing part, though.”

“Is your wife the lady that we saw when we first came in?”

“Yes.” Charles nods. “We met in Jamaica when we were fifteen while she was on a trip with her school and we ran off and came to America. It wasn’t long before we both got a job under the man who used to own this place, and he left it to us when he retired last year.”

Harry blinks, can’t hide the grin that’s trying so hard to pull at his cheeks. “That’s amazing,” he comments, breaths, and it’s people like Charles and Meili that give him hope that he and Niall can make it work forever, can make it work till the end of time. Love is something that cannot lose. “She’s really talented.” He coughs, then, tries to clear his throat. “You are, too.”

“Complimenting us definitely isn’t going to get you any free tattoos, kid,” he jokes, Charles does, and he and Liam and Harry all laugh and the weight that was on Harry’s chest is gone because he’s got nothing to be afraid of, he’s got nothing to be ashamed off. “Now, do you have in mind what sort of tattoo you want?”

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The place is clean, sterile; the lights are bright and fluorescent and the chair Harry’s sat in is cushioned thickly with a back that molds to his spine in a comfortable, easy way. It smells nice, too, like roses and jasmine and vanilla with an undertone of spilled ink.

It makes him smile.

Charles finished up with him a few moments ago; he decided to go first, knew what he was going to get, and Liam had to spend a few minutes drawing out what he wanted, which is four chevron arrows on his forearm, by the way, and now he’s sat in one of the waiting chairs, Harry is, and he’s got his right hand in the collar of his shirt and his fingers are delicately, tenderly tracing over the small white bandage he’s got taped to his chest.

He got the year, this year. 1975. He got 1975 inked onto his left collarbone for far too many reasons to count — for the year he graduated high school, for the year he first saw the Rolling Stones, for the year he fell in love, for the year he ran off to partake in a road trip, for the year he met Janie, for the year he helped deliver a baby, for the year he realized all sorts of the things, for the year he became closer to God, for the year he discovered he likes boys just as much as girls, for the year he decided to spend the rest of his life with Niall.

He got it for a lot of reasons, many he would rather not have to explain for the simple fact that they’re his, that he’s the only one who can completely comprehend all of the whys behind the ink.

And it didn’t even hurt. Or, well. Yes, it did. But not as bad as he thought it would, and Charles was cool through the whole process, even gave Harry the liberation to decide what song should go on the record player next to calm him down, and he chose Pink Floyd, next best behind the Stones, and thumped his fingertips against the arm of the chair he was sat in during the process to the tune of Dark Side of the Moon, one of his favorite albums. In fact, he even sneaked in to their concert in LA in 1973, when he was sixteen-years-old and smoked pot for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

It was a wild fucking time.

But it’s in the past, so.

He’s just — curious, is all. About Niall, about Louis, about what this sort of surprise is they’ve planned and how it pertains to him. In fact, he kind of doesn’t even want to know what it’s over,
really, because he’s not the best person at dealing with surprises — Niall’s shit at it, handling the unexpected, but Harry thinks he’s worse.

Or, maybe not.

Niall, Louis, and Meili make their way into the spacious room Harry and Liam and Charles are in not a second later; the two latter people head toward Liam and Charles, awestruck as they watch the needle pierce Liam’s skin and create the chevrons he drew out.

He’s got the paper gripped in his hand tight, so tight it’s wrinkled and ripped; Liam’s inking is apparently hurting hell of a lot more than Harry’s, but it’s got a bit more detail than something as simple as numbers.

(But maybe it’s because Harry kind of likes pain. And if it is — oh, boy, if it is, Niall better watch himself tonight or Harry’s going to be doing the fucking.)

(Not that it matters to him either way. He doesn’t care who is in who, who is over who; he just cares who he is with, who Niall is with.)

Niall sits beside him, is holding his left hand against his chest; Harry sees the bandage and tape and reaches for Niall’s right and interlaces their fingers. “What’d you get?” he asks, whispers, doesn’t want to intrude in Charles’s concentration.

“Show me yours first, H.”

Harry sighs but does as Niall tells him; he pulls his collar down, peels back the bandage, and shows his tattoo off. “I got the year,” he says, doesn’t have to say all of the reasons. “For you and for me and for all of the memories.”

Niall smiles and there’s a molten warmth in his eyes as he leans forward, as he presses his cool lips to the hot, tender flesh. “It’s beautiful,” he replies, breathes the word against the tattoo and Harry shivers, fixes the bandage and adjusts his collar. “I like it.”

“What’d you get?”

Niall’s smile fades for a moment, dims, but then it’s back again, brighter and bigger than ever, and he is careful and methodic as he pulls off the tape and bandaging, as he holds his hand up to show Harry what he’s got tattooed on the length of his index finger, on the side of his index finger.

Harry’s heart cries once he understands. “Oh, Niall.”
rainbows all over your blues

i can show you the prettiest mountains that you’ve ever seen
you better run to your closet
and fish out your blue suede shoes
i’ll paint rainbows all over your blues

— John Sebastian, ‘Rainbows All Over Your Blues’

Harry blinks once, slowly, and watches as the flickering lights below his shared hotel room with Niall spread shadows of the wildest kind on the ceiling; it’s like lying on your back in a field of soft flowers in the middle of nowhere and observing clouds, sort of, because he’s been making shapes and connections between the lack of illumination while Niall’s dozing in and out of sleep on his shoulder and he wonders if this is the first step of losing your mind in love and if there’s any chance of finding his way back once he’s gone, once he’s too far gone.

He’s on his back, got his head on the mound of pillows he tucked up as soon as they arrived; his arm is wrapped beneath Niall’s neck and curled up, curled over, and he’s got his other hand interlaced with Niall’s, laid on the middle of his chest, and Niall’s taken the bandage off of his tattoo and Harry’s not stopped touching the ink, not stopped caressing the ink with a pressure that’s awestruck since they dropped Louis and Liam off and arrived back to their hotel.

He got Harry’s name on his finger, on the side of his finger — Niall got Harry’s last name tattooed on his skin, on his finger, and the ink is dark and shadowed and red around the edges and a little puffy, a little sensitive and hot, and it’ll fade, of course it’s going to eventually fade and he’ll have to get it covered again, sure, but it’s there; for right now, it’s there, it’s right fucking there, and Harry’s not had any doubts in a while, in several days, but they’ve been there, you know, resting and hiding in the shadows of his mind and waiting patiently, waiting impatiently for their time to come up, to take over his joy again, and they’re gone now, completely erased and never to be heard from again, forgotten like the shapes clouds of smoke make as they filter through the air.

Because Niall’s got Harry’s name tattooed on his finger — because Niall’s got Harry’s fucking name tattooed on his finger, on his hand, on his body where everybody and their mother can see should they look, should they look the right way, and the doubts are gone now that he knows Niall loves him, now that he knows Niall is always going to love him in one way or another.

And what’s he going to do? What’s he going to say? Niall, that is. What’s he going to tell his mum when she inevitably asks why he’s got Harry’s name on his body? What’s he going to say to his brother when Greg pushes for an explanation as to why Harry’s name is on his body? What sort of elaboration is he going to conjure and create and crow to random strangers, to not so random strangers; to people they know from school, to people they know from church, to people they know from work?

What’s Niall going to do?

Better yet — or worse yet; Harry reckons it all depends on what sort of thing you’re considering to be either — what’s Harry going to do? What’s Harry going to do he’s asked by Maura, when he’s asked by Greg, when he’s asked by his mother, when he’s asked by his sister? Or his friends, those from school and those from church and those from work? How’s he going to explain to the closed-minded patrons of the church he loves so much when they see that Niall has his name on his finger, when they see that Harry is standing a little bit too close to Niall during the sermon?
What’s Niall going to do, what’s Harry going to do — what are they going to do?

Of course, Niall’s got it easy. He’s got it so fucking easy that Harry’s kind of mad. Because he’s going to be in Oklahoma, because he’s going to be in Stillwater, and that’s away, that’s so far away and he’s starting new, starting out fresh with people he’s never met, with people he’s never thought about meeting. He doesn’t owe them an explanation as to why he has the name Styles tattooed on his finger; in fact, perhaps he can lie — perhaps Niall can lie about Harry, perhaps Niall can fib and say Harry’s a girl he once knew that got out of his grasp, say Harry’s a friend who passed away, say Harry’s a relative he doesn’t wish to ever forget, say Harry’s some random man he met on the streets in a drunken stupor that coerced him into getting an idiotic tattoo only to never see one another again.

He doesn’t have to tell people that he’s in love, doesn’t have to tell people that he’s in love with a man. He can be anybody he wants to come August fifth — he can be Niall from California, he can be Niall from New Mexico, he can be Niall from Oklahoma, he can be Niall from Louisiana, he can be Niall from Alabama, he can be Niall from Georgia.

Or he can be Niall from Stillwater, freshman student and hopeful walk-on with aspirations that are as long as the world is old. He can be who the world knows him to be, he can be who Louis and Liam know him to be, he can be who his mother and brother know him to be, he can be who Anne and Gemma know him to be, he can be who Harry knows him to be, he can be who he knows himself to be.

He can be — he can do that. He can do anything he absolutely wishes to and he won’t be questioned because he won’t be known.

And Harry?

No. No, Harry can’t. He can’t do the things that Niall’s able to, can’t do the things that Niall’s going to be able to do.

He’s going back home, going back to LA, and he’s going to attend one of the many junior colleges in the city, going to have his time full with electives and mandatory courses; he’s going to try his best to study business, to get his degree in business. And if that doesn’t work out, he thinks he’ll change his major and focus on the arts; hell, he may even do both, you know, business and art, music, and he could do his own thing, open up his own record label or record shop and — and yeah, his future isn’t going to be awful.

It’s going to be his, of that he’s sure, and he wants Niall to be there, wants Niall to be the one by his side, but if he’s not, if he can’t make it — that’s okay. He’s got this right now and he’s going to have this later, too, even if he has to pull it out from the recesses of his mind and dust it off to see the memories clearly and yeah, it may just be memories but it’s feeling, it’s reminiscing, it’s conjuring the consistency of sticky love that was made when it felt as if the world was turning the other way just to prove that it had the power to pull apart two people who are meant to be together till the end of time.

(If none of it works out, though, he may just enlist. The military can always use a few more soldiers, can’t they?)

Niall moves, makes a noise; he turns on his side completely, curls against Harry’s chest and puts his head higher on Harry’s shoulder, puts his mouth next to Harry’s ear. “What time is it?” he asks, groggy and hoarse and thick; so beautiful, so raspy and relentless in his effect and Harry never wants to sleep again for fear that he’ll miss little moments like this with Niall.

“Late.” Harry blinks, turns his head to the side to see that light is shining through the curtains; it’s pale and blue, sort of, and he realizes he’s stayed up all night without an ounce of sleep even as he’s
the one didn’t nap and he’s tired, yes, but he isn’t near as exhausted as he thinks he ought to be. “Or early. Depends on what you want to call six-twenty in the morning.”

“How long did I sleep?”

Harry wants to yawn, feels the heaviness of it in his jaws and cheeks but every time he makes himself fake the movement it adds a little bit more to the itch to have the real thing and so he’s just decided to hold it in and ignore the need.

“A good three hours, I think.” Harry blinks, slowly; it’s so silent in the room that Harry can feel the movement of his eyes as they fly side to side, up and down, and he isn’t sure how much he likes having that knowledge. “Maybe more. I don’t remember what time we got in.”

Niall yawns, and his breath stinks but Harry isn’t going to complain because he likes to be close to Niall and it isn’t as if people are without flaws. “Just a little bit after midnight,” he replies in a whisper, and Harry doesn’t know why he and Niall feel the need to be quiet when they are the only two in their room, thankfully, but he does, but they do. “I didn’t knock out till — what? Like, one-thirty?

Harry shrugs, as much as he can, and adjusts his grip on Niall’s hand so he can continue to run the tip of his index finger up and down, up and down the raised flesh of Niall’s new ink. He loves the feel of it, loves the heat of it; when he’s old and gray, when Niall’s old and gray, he knows he’s still going to think it’s beautiful even after all the years, even after all the wear and tear and worldly trials that it, that he and Niall are sure to face after their little bubble of summer pops and fall sets in, taking with it Harry’s favorite kind of happiness.

“Guess so, yeah.” Harry turns a bit, too, curls his body around Niall’s so they’re both on their sides, so they’re both facing one another. “Have sweet dreams?”

Niall’s face is hidden in the dim light filtering through the untucked curtains; his eyes are opened in a sort of slit and he’s got a loopy, dopey smile on his face that Harry imprints in his mind so he can keep it forever.

“I had the best dreams ever,” he replies with a grin, with a giggled laugh that churns some sort of primal affection seated deep within Harry’s bones. “Can’t you tell, baby?”

He does this thing, Niall does this thing where he wiggles his hips and raises one of his legs over the top of both of Harry’s and presses his groin in the pit of Harry’s stomach and he’s hard, Niall’s hard and ready but not leaking, not whimpering with the need to come.

Harry rolls his eyes, scoffs a choked off kind of laugh and tightens his grip on Niall’s hand, interlaces their fingers and slowly, slowly brings their shared touch down to the Harry’s stomach, where Niall is pressing and pressing and pressing so completely that Harry feels his cock start to twitch and harden, as well.

(He needs a shower. Maybe they’ll have one together. And maybe they’ve come together, too.)

He’s glad they aren’t wearing clothes. Or, that’s a lie. They are wearing clothes, but — boxers and big t-shirts don’t count as proper clothing. Especially since he can feel every single little edge and roll and angle of Niall’s body adhered to his from top to bottom; he doesn’t think he’s ever going to lay with another he fits so well against.

“Hmm,” Harry breathes, hums, and he shifts one of his legs upward, between both of Niall’s, and presses his knee just to the underside of Niall’s cock, right against the yummy skin between balls and
hole. “What was in your dream?”

Niall gasps, breathes in a bit too sharp at Harry’s sudden pressure. “You, of course,” he replies with a grin, with a smirk that makes Harry want to laugh until he can’t feel anything but the warmth of Niall’s love in his heart. “I dream about you more than I ever thought possible.” He untangles his fingers from Harry’s, wraps both of his arms around Harry’s neck and squeezes, holds on tight, and Harry doesn’t want to make love tonight. He just wants to be intimate. “The best thing about being asleep is that you’re in my dreams just as much as you’re in my real life, too.”

Harry’s heart jumps up into his throat and he shuts his eyes, hides the complete and total effect Niall’s words have on his soul. “When you say things like that,” Harry begins, finds that he has to allow himself to trail off because his heart has expanded so much, so much his chest is full and tight and heavy and he isn’t sure how he’s ever going to be able to breathe without Niall beside him again. “Oh, God, Niall — when you say things like that I… I just —”

Niall cuts Harry off by stuffing his hand in Harry’s long, tangled hair and pulling him in, pushing their lips together; it’s sloppy and not entirely angled right, too much tongue and too much teeth and not enough touch, and Harry’s got both of his lips trapped between Niall’s and it’s not the best kiss ever, not their best kiss ever, but that’s okay because they aren’t perfect, because they don’t have to pretend with one another that they are perfect.

It’s okay to not be perfect; it’s okay to be bad at certain things. Harry isn’t going to judge, and he knows Niall doesn’t care that he is sometimes the worst at kissing, knows Niall doesn’t care that he is sometimes the worst at fashion, knows Niall doesn’t care that he is sometimes the worst at being a— at being a boyfriend.

Oh.

Is that what they are?

Hmm. They’ve never really talked about it together, the two of them. They’ve got a label — together — and as simple and nonbinding as it is, he thinks… he thinks he kind of needs clarification. Not because he feels as if other people deserve to know, per se, but because he needs — because he needs a little bit of reassurance that they are each other’s, that Niall is Harry’s and Harry is Niall’s. He just wants the reassurance that they are one another’s, that they won’t let their happiness be taken away from them, that they won’t ever forget how hard they had to fight to have each other, to be with each other.

He pulls away, has to lick up a bit of saliva that bridges his lips with Niall’s because he doesn’t want to let it go to waste. “What are we, Ni?” he asks, blinks; the pale dawn light has shifted from faded blue to old yellow, like ancient sunshine, and he can see the shadows on Niall’s face and how they are brought together to create the best kind of artwork Harry’s ever seen.

Niall’s smile is wet and sloppy and so bold it’s nearly blinding. “Together,” he answers, and it’s a soft word that kind of chokes Harry up; he doesn’t know what he did to deserve somebody as wonderfully complexing and full of a lust and passion and love for life as Niall Horan. “We’re together, of course, silly boy.”

“I — I know that,” he says, Harry says; he brings one of his hands up, puts his thumb to the corner of Niall’s mouth and wipes at the glistening wetness that’s glowing from their messy kiss. “I just want to know if… if you’re mine.”

Niall blinks. “Well, you’re mine.” As if that’s an answer to Harry’s question.
“Yeah.” Harry nods, knocks his nose against Niall’s; he knows they’re close, physically, but he didn’t know they were that close. It makes him hot, prickly; he wants to come in his underwear before he gets on his knees and sucks Niall’s orgasm out of him but not now, not right now. “Yeah, I am yours.” Always. Goes without saying, really. “But I just don’t know if — if you’re mine.”

Niall blinks, again, and curls his fingers in Harry’s hair, scratches at the bottom of his hairline with the blunt tip of his fingernail. “What do you mean, Harry?” he asks, and yeah, this is kind of hard for Harry because he’s never been the best at getting his thoughts across with words, with useless words, but he’s over the moon with happiness that he and Niall can talk, that he and Niall can openly admit and then work through the things that are eating away at each other’s nerve and resolve.

He — he really appreciates that they’re so tuned in to one another that they can be like this.

“I just… I just mean that…” He trails off, Harry does, and pulls in a breath that stutters in his lungs. He can’t — the right way. He can’t find it, doesn’t know if there is a right way to bring his thoughts to words. “I just…”

“Breathe, Harry.” Niall soothes his hand through Harry’s hair, pulls Harry in to press their foreheads together. “Just breathe and tell me what you want me to do.”

Harry does. Breathe. And it’s Niall’s taste and Niall’s scent and Niall’s touch and Niall, Niall, Niall that goes into his body, that gives him the strength to find the words, to say the words.

Hmm. Maybe he still does need to borrow some of Niall’s strength every once in a while.

“I’m yours. I am yours, Niall, in every way that somebody can be someone else’s. Honest. And — even when you leave to go to… to go to school in Oklahoma, I’ll be yours then, too. There’s nobody else; I don’t want to lay with another. But I know, I know that when you go there, to Oklahoma, that so many things are going to change and we won’t be able to get it back and I won’t — I won’t be upset if you choose to move on from me and find somebody else and I won’t stop you, either, but now, right now, I just want to know that you’re mine in the same way that I’m yours, too. I just want to know that.”

Niall’s quiet for a moment as he allows Harry’s skewered words to permeate the air and sink in, and when he talks — when he talks, his words tip Harry’s world upside down.

“I’m in love with you, Harry,” Niall says, six words that Harry wants to get sewed into his mind so he will never forget how it feels to be the only person in the world to hold this man’s love. “And you’re the only man I swear I will ever have in my life because — because it’s you. For me, it’s you or it’s no one.”

Harry swallows, and it takes a lot of bravery and courage for him to keep his eyes open, to keep his gaze tangled with Niall’s.

“And I’m not… I don’t want to say that I — that I’ll never try with another person, with another female because I don’t want to lie to you,” he continues, slow and methodic; he’s picking his words, every one of them, and they’re kind of breaking Harry apart but they’re also making sure he doesn’t fall to pieces completely. He adores Niall’s raw honesty. “But it’s you. It’s always going to be you. No matter what happens in Oklahoma, no matter who happens in Oklahoma — when I come home, it’s for you. All of it is for you, Harry, and it always will be. I promise you.” He stops for a moment, catches his breath and moves closer, presses closer. “So yeah, I am yours. I am yours in the same way that you are mine.”

Niall presses a kiss against Harry’s cheek, makes sure in the softest way possible that Harry is okay.
He is.

“At the end of the day, it all comes back to you.” Niall smiles, presses his joy into Harry’s cheek, and the way it feels to have somebody’s grin against your skin is — is undeniably one of the best things in the whole entire world. “I don’t care if we never get married, even though I brought it up to you and pretty much proposed.” He laughs, kind of, and Harry does, too. “And I don’t care if we never have children, even though you would make the best and hottest daddy on this side of the world. I don’t care about any of that because all I care about is you.”

He moves his other hand to Harry’s cheek, cups the flesh in his palm and rubs the sensitive skin just beneath Harry’s eye, and Harry wants to say something, thinks he has to say something, but there’s nothing he can find to adequately explain why he is so lucky, how he is so lucky. And it hits him, too, that this is it — this is Niall telling him that it’s changed, just like he promised he would.

“It could be years down the road, Harry, and I’d look at you, just a small glance, and I’ll still the feel same at that point as I do now. The way I feel for you now is never going to fade.” Niall’s blunt nail scratches the soft skin beneath Harry’s eye, kind of, and it makes Harry jolt. “The way I feel for you now is never going to go away. I fought it — I fought it so hard and lost so many times and now I’ve accepted it. I’ve accepted that it’s never going to leave and I don’t want it to leave, either.”

He drops his hand from Harry’s face and puts it on Harry’s thigh, pulls his leg completely over Niall’s so they’re sandwiched and crisscrossed; Niall’s not hard anymore and Harry isn’t, either, and he’s kind of glad because the thought of — of being completely intimate right now in this moment of raw vulnerability kind of tosses his stomach and there’s time, there’s still time to make Niall flutter with an orgasm.

There’s more to being in love than just fucking, and he’s known that, has always known that, but he feels it now. He feels it now more than he ever has before.

“I love you, Harry. I’m in love with you, silly boy. There’s nobody in the world who can take better care of my heart than you, and I have yours, I know I have yours, and I know you know I’m going to mess up but I’ll never stop trying. I’ll never, ever stop trying my absolute best to keep your heart safe.”

Harry blinks, can still hear the sounds his eyes make, odd as it is, and trails his finger along Niall’s cheek as he draws stupid, stupid little doodles and wonders if Niall can feel the way his heart is beating singularly for him.

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“Thank you,” he whispers, and the words are loose and faint in the humid air that’s swirling between them, around them. “Thank you for being honest with me. Thank you for putting me at ease. Thank you for reminding me why I fell in love with you in the first place.”

Niall’s laugh is Harry’s favorite sound, but he thinks it must be God’s, too, because Harry’s been taught He loves the noise of happiness.

“And why is that?” Niall asks, shifts his face just a bit and slides his nose against Harry’s, puts his lips to the corner of Harry’s. “Why did you fall in love with me?”

“Because you’re my best friend. You’re my choice.”

Niall kisses Harry, makes it short and beautiful and just as shattering as it always is. “If you believe in soulmates, I think you’re mine.” He smiles, face bathed in the fading yellow of fresh dawn. “Want to know why I fell in love with you?”
Niall moves his hand off of Harry’s thigh, raises it up and puts the flat of his palm on the skin right beneath Harry’s heart. “This is why I fell in love with you,” he says, and his words remind Harry of smooth sandpaper. “You have such a big heart that’s full of so much love and you give it out to people who don’t ask and most certainly don’t deserve it. Like me.”

“You deserve it.” Harry finds Niall’s shoulder, digs his nails into the flesh and tries to send Niall his thoughts because he knows he isn’t going to be able to find the words. “You deserve all the love in the world. You’ve gone without so much… so much love and you say I have a heart full of it, of love, but it doesn’t compare to yours.”

“See? It’s this. It’s this right here.” Niall grins and fists the thin fabric of Harry’s t-shirt, pulls on it so hard it cuts into the back of his neck. “The way you make me feel, Harry, I swear. I’ve not known all the kinds of love you have and the fact that you can make me feel as if I have, as if I’ve never gone without is really, really important to me. You saved me. I don’t think I would be here if it wasn’t for you.”

“Niall —”

“I don’t think I would be right here, in this moment and feeling so very much alive, almost like I can take on the entire world, if it wasn’t for you.” He smiles. “I was planning on enlisting after graduation. Even thought of dropping out and just doing it a few times, as well. But do you want to know what stopped me?”

The fear of the thought of Niall being a soldier, being so far removed from his home and fighting in a war that should not even be happening grips Harry by the throat so hard that all he can do is nod.

“You. I remember, the summer of our junior year right before I turned seventeen and we went back to school, that we were lying in my yard and counting the stars, trying to name them after all of the people we knew. We ran out of people, of course, and then you started using military officers from every fucking war in history because you’re a nut like that and I said — I think I said it would be so cool for me to be one of those generals you were naming the stars after and you were quiet, just kept still, and then one of the stars fell and exploded and it was the color of your eyes, the explosion, and I told you to make a wish before it burned out.”

“Did I?”

“Yeah.” Niall nods. “You said it out loud. You said, ‘I wish for Niall to never go away to war’ and I don’t know if you were talking to yourself or talking to God, but I rolled over to look at you and you were crying so much that your whole face was red and you kept begging me not to be like the star that just fell and I had to put your ear against my chest so you could hear my heart beating.” His smile is soft and kind and tender.

“I don’t remember that,” Harry says, croaks, but his heart is a slow thud-thud-thud and his mind may not remember but his soul most certainly does. “I don’t… I don’t understand how my crying can change your mind just like that.”

Niall snorts, rolls his eyes. “You loved me for me long before I began to love myself,” he answers the question Harry didn’t ask. “You taught me how to love myself. I love you for that. And do you see it? Do you see it now, Harry?”

Harry shakes his head.
“You silly boy.” Niall leans forward, kisses him on the lips hard and fast and it’s an imprint he is never going to forget. “I was yours long before you were mine.”
Harry’s gotten used to the numb feeling in his legs and thighs that being on his knees brings, but he kind of likes how the water beats on his back and sort of massages the muscles and the knots as he relaxes his jaw and digs his hands in the fleshy bit of Niall’s yummy hips as Niall has his own shoved into Harry’s near-mane of curls, drenched and heavy and water-logged and pushing it out of his face as he goes down, down, down on Niall’s cock, slurping at the base where the pubic hair tickles his nose and face and swallowing it down his throat and hollowing his cheeks and concentrating on bringing Niall off before he blows himself.

And Niall tastes good, always tastes good. Like, it’s hard to explain — it’s the taste of skin, warm skin, sort of like a hand, and sweat too, kind of, and cleanliness, freshness, pureness; his precum isn’t too bad, either, only a bit sour where it pools in his mouth behind his teeth and creamy, thick in its texture.

He likes it. Probably loves it — the taste, the feel, the idea that he has this effect on Niall, a young man with so much virile strength he can command this entire part of the world with just a fucking look. And Harry has this effect on him, on that young man — Harry, who is so much less that he sometimes feels like half a person even though he knows he isn’t one — and he’s got this pull on Niall, one that can bring him to his knees with just a simple look and touch and smile. It’s never been likes this before, so vulnerable and raw and susceptible to every single tiny emotion; it’s fragile and faint but at the same time so strong and solid that it makes Harry wonder if everyone gets to find their soulmate.

He hopes they do. It’s — it’s something he can’t explain. He hopes everyone gets to be able to feel what he does whenever he looks at Niall at least one time in their life.

And he’s glad it’s Niall, glad it’s his best friend who is his soulmate. It’s the best because they’re best friends and it’s the worst because they’re best friends; Harry can’t hide but Niall can’t hide, either, and that’s great and it’s also awful, too, but he doesn’t want to ever be with anyone else and doesn’t want to think about ever being with anyone else.

He turns his head a bit, all of a sudden and extremely too abrupt, moves the tip of Niall’s cock in his mouth harshly; it tickles the back of his throat, irritates his gag reflex, and he chokes, pulls off, coughs into Niall’s thigh and wonders if it’s the water dripping down his face or if that’s salty tears burning his chapped lips.

Niall takes one of his hands out of Harry’s hair, puts it on Harry’s cheek and pulls his head away, angles his face up so they can meet one another’s eyes, green and blue, and Harry wonders if the love they have between them has the same strength as a powerful wave of water washing over onto a bit of land so hard and fast it knocks all the trees down — wonders if the love they have between them has more strength than a powerful wave of water washing over onto a bit of land so hard and fast it knocks all the trees down.

He thinks it does, thinks it most certainly has to.
Niall uses his tongue to wet his lips and Harry’s entire body shakes because he wants to have it all over his skin. “You okay, baby?” he asks, and his water-logged dark brown bangs are adhered to his forward and his face is red and his blue eyes are blown wide with the darkness of his pupil and his upper torso has a pink flush right on the top, just beneath the light brown smattering of chest hair, and he’s a body full of color and rainbows that Harry wants to always, always paint himself in. “You aren’t pushing yourself are you?”

Harry thins his lips in a smile and shakes his head; the water in his eyes is a mixture of the hot sprays from the shower and tears of having his mouth stretched and swallowing down an erection, and Niall’s body of colors blurs together and he puts both of hands on Niall’s thighs again because he doesn’t want Niall to ever fade, doesn’t want Niall to ever blend.

He doesn’t want to miss any of Niall’s colors. Every day, every hour, every minute, every second — there’s new colors, new hues, new universes that are little, tiny, and taking over Harry’s world and it kind of feels like the thought of a meteor hurling toward the planet.

“No,” he says, replies, and his smile is wobbly and weak and Niall’s got a tilt to his head that kind of makes Harry think he’s looking right through him entirely. “I was just thinking.”

Niall smiles, rolls his eyes and uses the pad of his thumb to rub the sharp skin stretched just across Harry’s jaw. “What are you thinking about while giving me the best head I’ve ever gotten, silly boy?” he asks, and his smile grows into a grin that wrinkles the skin at the corners of his pretty, pretty eyes.

Harry wants to make fun of Niall’s words but he can’t because he kind of thinks this is the best head he’s ever given, too — and not that he’s given a lot, mind you. All of his attempts have been with Niall, of course, and even then he’s fairly sure he can count them on one hand, as well.

And it’s not that he’s good, not that he’s the best. He knows there’s more than enough room for improvement in his… skills of giving a blowjob. But he also knows that Niall isn’t all that great, either, and yes, as men, as men who have been sexually active for several years, they know what they themselves like and what each other likes and what a portion of the other male population likes.

But. There’s always a forgotten ‘but’ that people sometimes choose to ignore.

That doesn’t mean they’re any good at it. Loving and being loved in return is something that you learn how to do over the years, and having sex is the exact same; no one is born with the knowledge of how to completely rock their lover’s worlds and it’s a stepping process — kind of like learning how to walk, kind of like learning how to talk, kind of like learning how to be yourself, kind of like learning how to love yourself.

Harry grins, leans forward to wipe his eyes against the thick flesh of Niall’s thigh. “I was thinking about how it’s okay not to be perfect,” he replies, hoarse and heavy and hot, so very hot he isn’t sure he can ever cool down. “I was thinking about how it’s okay not to be the best at sex.”

“You think this is sex?”

“No. I think this is — I think we’re making love no matter what we do. If it’s hard, if it’s fast, if it’s rough, if it’s slow, soft. But I meant it in a general point of view. It’s okay not to be the best.”

“So, like, not yours?”

“No. Not really. More yours than mine. Because you’ve been with more people than I have.”

“Ah.” Niall tips his head in a strange sort of nod and puts his hands on Harry’s shoulders, pulls him
up to stand; his legs are shaky and wobbly, wonky, and he has to slide his arms around Niall’s waist to keep himself from falling and — and really, he’s so fucking glad the pressure of the hotel’s showers are as good as they are, as are lasting as they are, because they’ve been in this thing for quite a few minutes now. “You know nobody I’ve ever had before can measure to you, don’t you?”

Harry’s grin doesn’t falter and he steps in, adheres his entire body to Niall’s and their bare cocks brush and rub and he wants to come but he wants to make Niall come first and he isn’t sure if he’s going to be able to last that long.

“I know that comparing myself to all of the people you’ve had before me isn’t going to do me any good,” he responds, ducks his head to press a hard kiss against Niall’s chest; the thud-thud-thud of his pulsating heart matches the rhythm of the water pounding on the tiled floor. “I know that what you feel right there in your heart for me is something you’ve never experienced with anyone else and even if they were better at bringing you off than I am now, they’ll never have this like I do.”

This — as in Niall’s love. This — as in Niall’s loyalty. This — as in Niall’s lust. This — as in Niall’s intelligence and quirkiness and idolization. This — as in Niall’s attitude. This — as in Niall’s awfulness. This — as in Niall’s affection. This — as in Niall’s brashness and encouragement and wrongdoings.

This — as in Niall’s heart.

Nobody’s ever had Niall’s heart. Nobody’s ever had Niall’s heart except for Harry. And it’s going to stay that way. Niall said so. And Niall lies, sometimes, Harry knows, but he also knows that Niall wouldn’t lie about this.

(Which, you know, is one of the reason why it’s the best thing and the worst thing to fall in love with your best friend, but. It’s something Harry’s proud of, can’t imagine rolling over onto his side one day and then seeing someone else’s face instead of Niall’s.)

“They kiss again, then, and it’s a little bit more wild and wet and whimsically wonderful than he expected. Niall sucks Harry’s tongue into his mouth, circles it with his own, and Harry massages his thumbs on the sharpness of Niall’s hipbones and grinds as much as he can, rubs as much as he can against Niall’s crotch with his own and he thinks they could probably come like this, just rutting against one another, and that everything would be as close to perfect as it would ever get because he doesn’t need grand displays of affection, of attraction, to know that he is loved and will be loved.

But. Harry wants Niall to come down his throat, wants to be able to taste Niall’s elation at the back of his tongue before it pools in his belly with warmth and welcome.

“I want to make you come.”

“Down your throat?”

Harry nods, so fast and so hard he bites his tongue and hurts his neck and he’s just happy that Niall knows what he’s trying to get across because he isn’t sure how he could ever be with someone who doesn’t know him like Niall does.
“I’m so, so glad you feel that way, too, H,” Niall says, and he’s got this grin on his face, one that
kind of looks like Louis’s when he wants to attempt to coerce Harry into doing something rather
illegal. Harry’s not sure how to feel about how easily Niall’s picked up a bit of Louis’s mannerisms.
“Because you are absolute shit at blowjobs.”

“What?”

Harry’s only a little bit ashamed to admit that his voice comes out in a pitched high squeak that could
surely rival the noise of a cracked speaker turned on full blast.

“Yes. Exactly what I said, silly boy.” Niall’s mischievous smirk turns into a heartwarming grin.
“Your — skills, for lack of a better word — are awful and atrocious and I may have to send you
away so you can learn how to properly suck a dick.”

Harry scoffs. “There’s no way you’d do that,” he replies with a grin, a wolfish grin, and he loves
how they can be like this — how they can be like this while doing that. “You would never. You
wouldn’t.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

Harry smirks. “Because the thought of me sucking somebody else’s dick will eat you up from the
inside and you’ll hate yourself for letting me go like that.”

Niall’s eyes narrow and he puts his hands on Harry’s shoulders, digs his nails into the fleshy skin just
beneath the grooves of the top of his spine. “I hate you right now,” he says, sneers, but he’s still
smiling, still grinning, and Harry knows what’s being said is just as much of a joke as well as the
harsh truth. “I would rather you give the worst blowjobs I’ve ever had than learn how to please me
from the hand of somebody else.”

And… this is strange and weird, you know, the conversation they’re having, but Harry kind of likes
it — kind of likes it? Yeah, a bit. Only a little bit. It’s refreshing and reassuring to know that, while
both of them are comfortable and secure in their relationship, Niall still has the capacity to be —
jealous. Of an unnamed, unknown man. That’s… flattering, in a skewed kind of way.

“I may not be the best at giving head, but I know damn well I make you come the hardest.”

Niall grins, pushes his tongue out between his pressed mouth and licks his lips. “Can you, though?”
he asks, teases, challenges. “Can you, Harry?”

“Of course, baby.”

Harry gets on his knees, eases himself to the floor; the drain is between his legs and he watches the
water swirl into it for a moment, remembers the time he pretended that stuff was Niall’s hands on his
body as he was showering — and look at him now, look at him now, and see that he doesn’t have to
pretend anymore, see that he doesn’t have to fake anymore, see that he doesn’t have to pine
anymore.

And, honestly, the real thing is so many worlds better than the fake ideal you conjure in your head
when you’re missing the reality, when you’ve not got the reality.

He flickers his gaze up, sees that Niall is looking down at him with a warm, welcoming expression
on his face. “You don’t have to, you know,” he says, Niall says, and he cradles Harry’s jaw with one
hand, pulls Harry’s hair with the other hand. “A nice hand job would bring me off just fine.”

“I know. But I want to.”

Harry drops his eyes, looks at Niall’s cock. It’s not as thick as Harry’s but is definitely longer, for the most part; the vein on the underside zigzags its way along the length and Harry puts his hand on the shaft, pulls the foreskin back so he can press his lips against the head.

He’s soft and gentle as he suckles the tip, the very tip. His tongue passes into the slit once, twice, three times; Niall lets out a harsh breath and puts both hands in Harry’s hair, splays all ten fingers on Harry’s head, and Harry swipes the opening again and again and again until he can taste the salty, sour dribble of precum that’s an endless stream flooding into his mouth. Niall’s making noises, too, of the prettiest kind — winces, moans, whines, groans, whimpers; Harry uses Niall’s sounds as encouragement, as direction, and he moves his lips just a little bit lower, takes the entire head into his mouth and sucks as hard as he can.

And sucks. And sucks and sucks and sucks.

Niall’s faint noises turn into little yells, little chants; mangled together, it’s a flurry of, “Yes, yes, yes,” and, “Oh, Harry, oh, Harry, oh, Harry,” and, “You’re good, you’re good, you’re good, you’re so fucking good to me, Harry, and I don’t want you to ever stop,” and loud gasps of stifled shock and extreme euphoria that seem to echo in the stifling shower.

Harry brings one of his hands up, puts his palm against the heaviness of Niall’s balls; they’re tight and he’s tense and thick, ready to explode, and Harry fondles the sack and reaches his fingers beneath, runs his blunt nails along the hidden skin between Niall’s ass and scrotum with as much delicate nastiness as he can.

“Oh!” Niall screams, yells, and he jolts, jumps forward; Harry relaxes his jaws and drops his mouth and allows Niall to shove himself inside, as far as he can go, and his tip hits the back of Harry’s throat, makes his eyes start watering, and Harry opens them, begins to hum to the tune of a fast-paced song, looks up at Niall. And he sees that Niall’s lips are parted and that his eyes are blown wide and that his cheeks are the same color as the tip of his cock and Harry’s happy he’s one of the only people in the world who has witnessed Niall this vulnerable and otherworldly raw. “Oh, Harry. Oh. I’m coming. I — I —”

His orgasm hits, then, chokes his praise off, and he comes in Harry’s mouth, down Harry’s throat; it’s weird and hard, kind of, trying to swallow every little bit of Niall’s jizz as it squirts in a stream Harry doesn’t think is going to end.

It just keeps coming. And coming, coming, coming. Niall just keeps coming. And coming, coming, coming.

Niall cries out, abrupt and booming, and smacks one of Harry’s cheeks just this side of harshly; Harry drops his jaw and allows Niall to pull his softening prick out of Harry’s mouth and he falls to his knees, Niall does, and puts both hands on Harry’s face and rubs beneath his eyes to catch the tears that are falling.

He’s breathing hard, Niall is, and Harry’s throat hurts and burns and he doesn’t know if the steam of the shower is helping the soreness any. “You’re so good,” he says, whispers, and his words are hot and harsh and Harry wants to smile but Niall’s holding his cheeks so tight, too tight. “You’re so good to me, Harry.”

“Yeah?”

“I love you. I love you so much.”
Harry’s chest sputters and stutters and he puts his arms around Niall’s neck to show him that he’s always going to have Harry to hold on to. “I love you, too, Niall.” He tips forward, puts his lips against Niall’s forehead and pushes his kiss against the skin, into the skin. “I’m never going to stop loving you, baby.”

Niall nods, whimpers in the back of his throat, and he kisses Harry as if the world is falling apart.

Niall doesn’t even allow Harry to dry off before he’s picking him up, bridal style, and tossing him onto the bed; the mountain of blankets break his fall and protect the sheets from his drenched body as he wiggles and wriggles to get comfy. He looks over, sees that Niall is pilfering through the drawer they’ve started to keep the lube in after Louis made a big fuss of it being kept out to see, and his heart jumps up into his throat and he can’t speak but he kind of thinks that’s probably a good thing seeing as he’s still sore.

“Roll over.”

“Huh?” Harry blinks, then does as Niall ordered, flips onto his stomach and spreads his arms out wide, turns his face so he can watch Niall kneel on the bed and move to straddle Harry’s waist. They’re both naked, bare and wet, and the skin on skin contact brings a shiver of gooseflesh that covers his entire body. “Good?”

“S’good.” Niall puts his hands on Harry’s shoulders and presses his thumbs into the dimples that are beneath the blades and rubs, hard, and Harry lets out a moan at the rough feel of pleasurable pressure. “You trust me, right?”

“Course.”

“M’kay.” Niall moves, slithers down Harry’s body; he knocks Harry’s legs apart and puts his hands on Harry’s hips and pulls, lifts. Harry’s bum is in the air and Niall caresses his fingertips along Harry’s sloping body until he’s got Harry’s cheeks gripped and pulled apart and Harry’s glad he feels beautiful no matter what when he’s with Niall otherwise he wouldn’t be this comfortable in his skin, against Niall’s skin. “I saw this in a Playboy once, read an article about how saliva works as a good lube and that this man used his spit as slick so he could fuck his wife like he got fucked in the military.”

Harry shivers, brings his arms up and around and stuffs a pillow beneath his face; he tries to turn, tries to look at Niall, but he’s not got the leverage to do so. “You’re going to use your saliva as lube to fuck me?”

“I’m going to try.” Niall leans down, presses a kiss to Harry’s right cheek and then his left. “I got the lube out for a reason, just in case. But the man said his wife loved having her ass licked and I’m thinking you will too.”

“Thinking?”

“Well, hoping, but still.” Niall laughs, smears the sound against Harry’s bum. “S’okay if I try?”

“I mean, it is my ass, so. And you’re putting your mouth there. We just showered, so you know I’m clean, and I’m up for it if you are, but it’s still all you in the end.”

Niall chuckles again, puts another kiss to Harry’s right cheek, just below the curve. “I love you so much, silly boy,” he replies, laughs some more, and then he’s got his face shoved into the space between Harry’s ass cheeks and his nose circles Harry’s hole, faint and soft, and Harry opens his
mouth and sucks in a breath as soon as he feels the puckered push of Niall’s lips against his entrance.

And it’s strange, really, the feel of lips on his ass. It’s… like a closed-mouthed kiss, kind of, but one that starts in the center of his body and explodes the further it’s fleshed out; Harry wonders what it tastes like, wonders if he can somehow convince Niall to let him do it to him, as well.

“You gonna fuck me, too?”

Niall hums, nods. “Uh huh,” he answers, breathes the reply against Harry’s entrance; he puts the flat of his tongue against the hole, licks up and down, up and down, and then presses the tip just inside and wiggles, flicks as much as he can. “If you want me to. Unless you can come by just this, and then I don’t think I will. Don’t want to wear you out.”

Harry grunts, turns his head and shoves his face into the ruffled pillow and breathes in the scent of linen. “Think I can.” He’s been hard for the better part of an hour, give or take a few minutes, and he’s been edging for what feels like forever. “If I, like, grind, too.”

“Come from me licking you?”

“Yeah.” He nods, frantically, and doesn’t have time to say another word because Niall’s got his tongue laid out against Harry’s hole again, and he licks harder, presses harder, and moves his hands, uses his fingers to peel apart and spread open Harry as much as he can.

He already feels the tightening of the orgasm in the lower pit of his stomach, has to open his mouth and let out a hoarse cry to keep himself from completely losing his mind because he feels so good and because Niall feels so good and because Niall is making him feel so good.

It’s all of sudden, too, when it comes; his climax hits out of the blue, out of nowhere, and he drops his hips from Niall’s hold and presses his groin against the pillow Niall’s shoved beneath and it’s wrung out from the very tips of his toes, from the very tips of his hair, from the very tips of his fingers, and spreads like wildfire taking to dry leaves and he feels completely enflamed with a passion that burns hotter than the sun.

Niall kisses Harry’s cheeks once more, the left and then the right, and then he falls forward, lays himself on Harry’s back and presses their bare, naked bodies against one another; Harry loves the weight, lets out a breath of relief and moans a bit, just a bit.

“You okay, Harry?”

He nods, weak and withered. “Yeah,” he replies, and his voice is heavy and thick. “I’m good. You were good.”

“Not great?”

Harry laughs, turns his head and sees that Niall has his face right next to his. “You’re always great.” He leans forward, puts a kiss to Niall’s lips. “I love you so much. You know that, right?”

“Yeah, you’ve told me so.” Niall grins and brings one of his hands up, puts his fingers in Harry’s hair to brush it out of his eyes. “I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of hearing you tell me, though, so keep it up if you want more mind-blowing orgasms like the one you just had.”

“I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you.” Harry smiles. “Think you’ll get that as your next tattoo?”

Niall hums, bites his bottom lip, and Harry wants to do that for him. “Maybe,” he replies, and Harry
knows he’s being honest. “I may, if that’s okay with you.”

Harry blinks. “It’s perfect with me.” He leans in again, puts his lips to Niall’s in an open-mouthed kiss that is tongue and teeth and slippery touch; he moves, wiggles, throws Niall off of him and leans up to lay across Niall, to lay over Niall.

They kiss lazily, languidly. Niall’s cradling Harry’s cheeks with both of his hands and Harry has one shoved in Niall’s hair, has the other right over the top of Niall’s beating heart and is drumming his fingertips in time to the beat. Their tongues touch and tangle and Harry whimpers and Niall swallows every single noise that comes out of Harry’s mouth.

Harry pulls back, attempts to catch his breath; his smile is wide and big and wet and so very slick with spit. “Let’s wear each other out for a little while,” he says, suggests, and Niall nods, grins, pulls Harry back in for another kiss and they don’t leave the bed for hours.
“I want to get my hair cut.”

At Harry’s admission, Niall ceases his ferocious movement of brushing his teeth — “Gotta get rough with it to get all the cum out, you know, ‘cause I’ll get a bad taste in my mouth if it’s not all gone,” as if he’s had jizz in his mouth on the daily — and spits the suds out of his mouth, turns on the faucet to wash it down the drain.

“So you’re finally deciding to cut off that mane of hair you’ve been growing since eighth grade, eh?”

Harry frowns and brings the towel up to rub at his hair again; a second shower was needed after the hours and hours and hours of extracurricular activity that kept them in bed and he and Niall have just got out — with little physical touch, mind you, because Harry’s body is still so so so reactive to any sort of contact and Niall’s grip is shaky and weak, and yeah, they’ve worn one another out quite well, for the most part. Harry never imagined he would be able to come so many times, but Niall’s proved him wrong entirely.

“It’s not that long,” Harry replies, attempts to offhandedly stick up for himself; his hair isn’t as long as a horse’s mane, no, but when it’s wet and brushed out, free of the annoying snarls and tangles that just love to make their home on top of his head, it reaches just past the middle of his back and hangs to tickle his skin. Dry, it’s a few inches shorter, but still clears the halfway point quite amply. “And it hasn’t been that many years. I started growing it sophomore year.”

“Freshman year, right at the end, but, I mean, I’m not going to argue with my boyfriend over the amount of time he’s been growing out his mane of hair because that’s not something too awfully important at the moment.”

Harry’s heart swells at the offhanded comment; “my boyfriend” is two words Harry never imagined would come out of Niall’s mouth, is two words Harry never imagined would be directed toward him from Niall’s mouth. It is… fulfilling and enlightening all at once. He’s floored by it.

“I thought you liked it.”

Niall grabs one of the towels off the rack and wipes his face down, wipes his hands dry. “Your hair?” he asks, clarifies, and Harry nods, draws his brows together. “Yeah, silly boy. I fucking love your hair. I’ve told you so thousands of times, and I think I’ve showed you, too.” He smiles, moves toward Harry, reaches out, puts his hand on top of Harry’s head, brushes through the thickness. “But I’m not going to tell you to cut it and I’m not going to tell you to not cut it, either. It’s up to you.”

Harry frowns, wrinkles his nose. “So you’re not against it but you’re also not exactly for it, either?” he says, tries to put into words the expression Niall’s attempted to give him. “Am I right or am I wrong?”

“You’re mostly right.” Niall leans down, puts a soft kiss to Harry’s forehead; hours and hours and hours of touching and caressing and tangling and kissing and making love have left both of them
stripped raw, naked and **naked**, and vulnerable in an intimate way that has got them feeling whole, that has got them feeling one with each other. Sort of. “But you know Louis and Liam are definitely going to want to be there when you get the locks chopped off.”

Harry sighs, tips his head forward. “You’re right,” he replies, yawns; not sleeping the night before and then having the living daylights fucked out of him as well as fucking the living daylights out of someone in return has left him drained to the bone and exhausted, but he isn’t in the mood to sleep and it’s still light outside, anyway, a few hours away from sunset. Going to sleep now will only serve to confuse his schedule all the more than it is, and he reckons a quick bite to eat and a haircut will have them back at the hotel plenty of time before midnight. He reckons he can get in a good sleep today if he plays his cards right. “They’re probably pissed we’ve not come to pick them up already.”

Niall laughs lightly, in the back of his throat. “You’re spot on, H.” He moves his hand to the back of Harry’s neck, grips Harry’s hair and tugs at it till Harry’s head is tipped up and he leans down; he kisses Harry very slow, very slowly, and is careful as he opens up Harry’s mouth, dipping his tongue just inside to taste Harry’s mouth before pulling out, before pulling back and smiling. “We can go pick them up, get a bite to eat, and then snip it off, yeah?”

“Yeah.” Harry nods. “Just — kiss me one more time, please.” And he reaches for Niall as if he would otherwise drown, puts their lips together and kisses Niall till he can taste the fresh bite of mint toothpaste in his mouth as their tongues circle and lick and play; Niall’s slow and easy as he pulls away, pecking Harry’s lips one and two and three and four and five times before he steps back and grabs the pair of jeans he’s got lying on the countertop next to the sink, swollen and wet and smiling as if he’s just won the entire world on a silver platter.

“You’re cute when you’re so fucked out you can hardly think.”

Harry turns pink, turns red, moves his head away from Niall to hide the grin that’s spreading across his lips. “You don’t think I’m cute all the time?” he asks, and maybe it’s a little bit vain and unappreciative of him to question it, but — he just wants to know. Is that so bad?

“You’re cute all the time, silly boy, but especially when you look so thoroughly fucked that I can’t even tell what color your eyes are,” Niall replies, entertains Harry’s vanity as he tugs his jeans on, wiggles both legs in the process, and does the line of buttons up and adjusts the waistband. “You look as spaced out now as you did when you tripped on that LSD last year, but particularly a bit more sober than then.”

Harry shivers at the memory, hates being reminded of the one and only time he decided to try acid; Louis has a way with talking him into doing some of the most ignorant things and, even as nothing particularly frightening or dangerous happened, he made Louis swear to never do it again. Some things ought to not be messed with; LSD and tripping on acid is one of them.

“I’m never doing that shit again,” he says, fierce and ferocious, and he feels like a lion but he knows he’s more of a large house cat than anything. And one that likes to have its belly scratched, as well. “Ever again.”

“Good. I’m glad.” Niall smiles, all teeth and gorgeous lips, and grabs his shirt from the floor, puts it on; it’s wrinkled, kind of, and a bit faded in certain places, but yellow looks good on him and Harry doesn’t want to say anything because he kind of likes how much Niall resembles the sun sometimes. “Brush your teeth and get dressed, H, and then we’ll head out for Louis and Liam’s place, if that’s cool.”

Harry blinks. “Can I have another kiss?”
Niall sighs, rolls his eyes, but he’s the one who pulls Harry up by his hands and connects their lips together, and really, Harry doesn’t think there’s anything in the world Niall wouldn’t do for him, doesn’t think there’s anything in the world Niall wouldn’t give him. And it feels good to know that the thought is mutual.

A hand is put on top of Harry’s head and roughly, aggressively rubs with absolutely no sympathy; he’s brushed his hair out a few hours ago in an attempt to keep the knots and snarls from tangling his curls again and now they’re back thanks to Liam — who, by the way, he’s been assigned to stay with while Niall and Louis walk a few blocks to pick up a couple of burgers for each one of them that they can eat on the way back to the hotel.

Because Harry is doing nothing — absolutely fucking nothing — tonight, after he gets his hair cut and after he eats the burger that his stomach is so desperately growling, groaning for. He’s sleepy, hasn’t been resting properly, and he and Niall have most certainly worn themselves out for today; exhaustion paired with tiredness is not the best mix and he doesn’t want to go out and be labeled as the grumpy one of the group tonight.

“So, you’re finally done with the long hair for a while, eh?”

Harry sighs, ducks his head, smacks Liam on the shoulder as he sits beside him in one of the plush waiting chairs; perks of being a walk-in at a relatively popular salon asking for a haircut means he gets to relax in comfy seats that are so soft it feels like sitting on a sack of detached feathers and thumbing through the most up-to-date catalogue of magazines he’s seen in a while.

“It’s not that I’m tired of it,” he replies, brings his hand up and runs his palm along the fluff of the semi-controlled mane of hair he’s nursing. It feels clean and light, free of all the dirt and grease that weighs it down more times than not. He’s forgotten what healthy hair feels like. “I just… think it’s time for a change, is all, and I’ve kept it long since Mum gave me the choice to decide what I wanted to do with it, you know? So. I just…” He trails off, shrugs. “It’s time for a change, like I said before. I’ve not seen my neck or ears in years.”

“Change of what?”

Harry smiles. “Everything,” he replies, and he thinks of Niall, of the gentle kiss he pressed against Harry’s cheek when he and Louis parted ways with Harry and Liam, and how it was out in the open, how it was not hidden, how it was able to be seen by anyone and everyone if they wanted to see, if they chose to see. “Neither of you ever did actually explain to Niall and me why you’re here in Atlanta, by the way.”

“Louis and me?”

“Yeah. I’m not going to be called up to the chair for a bit and it’s rather too wild when the four of us are together to ask something like this.”

Liam snorts. “You think we should take advantage of the time we’ve been given?”

Harry nods. “Might as well.”

“It’s simple.” Liam adjusts his feet beneath his chair and leans back, relaxes in the seat; he’s got on a pair of cutoff shorts, ones that have a bit too much fringe at the ends, and a floral-patterned shirt half tucked in and half tucked out. Nice. “Maura and Anne were worried, and they both wanted to come and wait for you two with a proper scolding in mind but Gemma has quite the talent for talking
people out of doing certain things and Louis — well, you know Louis. He volunteered for the job of coming to meet the two of you without any confirmation from me.” He shrugs. “Louis can get himself tied up into attempting to explain why things are the way they are and he would take it in stride.”

Harry grins, shakes his head; Louis is and forever will be one of his best friends, and the memories he’s got and the memories he knows he’s going to make are things he’ll never let go of no matter how much time passes. The amount of strength and time it would take to unlace roots that have grown and twisted together for years does not compare to the strength and time it takes to hold on to something you don’t have anymore.

“You know he lied about the money, right?” Harry asks, brings his hand up to rub at his face and shield his eyes from the yellow sun; it’s early evening now, about five or five-thirty, Harry guesses, and there’s no shade on the window to protect him and Liam from the glare. “Like, he told me Maura gave him permission to take it and go off to Atlanta. Said Greg gave his blessing to take the van, as well.”

“Yeah, I know. Louis does, too.” Out of the corner of his eye, Harry sees that Liam has a little tiny smile on his face and he kind of wants to ask what it’s there for but he quickly reasons the he would rather not know, in the end. “Maura told us, didn’t want us coming here blind and believing the things Niall might have said. And Greg’s pissed, too, but all the little hissy fits he’s thrown have been shut down by Maura.”

“She’s not a very good person.”

“What?”

Harry coughs. “Niall’s mum,” he replies, and then he realizes — it isn’t his place to be talking about this no matter how deep of a connection he and Niall have and he isn’t going to betray Niall’s trust and take for granted the fact that he is honest with Harry like he is no one else. He won’t do that to Niall. “I can’t — I don’t think Niall would want me to talk about it with you since he’s not here, but just trust me, okay? Maura’s not… the kind of mum any of us thought she was. Like, at all.”

Liam shuffles around in his seat, tries to get comfortable. “I’ve had my suspicions for a while, but I never brought it up to Niall because I didn’t think it was my place to question him about how he’s being raised and the way he was being treated at home.” He wets his lips, Liam does, and his words are quiet and calculated, whispered in the salon; there’s two other people inside besides them, a client and the only barber who happens to be working at this moment, and while Harry’s sure they can’t be heard he appreciates Liam’s mindfulness. “It’s good to know that I wasn’t wrong, though.”

“Am I a bad person because I never caught on?” Harry asks, picks at a hole in the knee of his jeans. “Like, even in the way you did. I never had any suspicions.”

Liam shakes his head. “No, of course you aren’t,” he replies, and he’s got this kind of tone behind his words, something that sparks a fire in Harry’s chest. “The way I look at it, Niall didn’t want you to know. He tried his hardest to keep certain things from you because he was afraid you would think differently or — or less of him.”

“I would — never, Liam. Never. Niall’s a good person and he doesn’t think he is, doesn’t think he deserves to be loved like I love him, and I would never think less of him for that. Ever. It isn’t his fault.”

“You love him, don’t you?”
“So, so much. He’s the one person in the entire world I want to spend the rest of my life with.”

“He feels the same.” Liam nods. “And when he’s with you — God, Harry, when he’s with you he is the happiest he has ever been and ever will be. I don’t think you understand what kind of effect you have on him.”

“I don’t. Not really.” Harry pulls his brows together, shakes his head. “I don’t think I ever will. But he doesn’t know everything he does to me, either.” And they make the perfect pair, don’t they? “I’m never going to leave him. He’s the best person in the world, and I’ve seen him at his worst, and I’m never going to go away from him.”

“He knows that, Harry. I think he has kind of always known that, as well, but he’s only just now believing it for himself.” He turns to Harry, then, and his big brown eyes are wide and open and bare and Harry feels like he can look into Liam’s entire soul and he isn’t afraid because he’s got no reason to be. “I don’t know what the two of you have been through over the course of this trip. Niall’s talked to me, sort of, and you and I are talking now, but, the fact is that, as a straight man, I can’t relate and I’ll never understand what it’s like to start… to start questioning yourself in the way that you and Niall did. I’ll never know. And I’ll never pretend to know, either.”

He shrugs, as if it’s not a big deal and — well, it isn’t a big deal, really, because Liam not understanding what it’s like to go from this to that, to fight tooth and nail from going from this to that, doesn’t mean shit. He’s here, sat beside Harry, claiming he’ll never know what it’s like to have to reach so deep inside of yourself that you feel like you’re getting lost but quietly, effortlessly reminding Harry that he is not going to go anywhere, either, and there’s nothing wrong with that. At all.

“I know you and Ni are going to have to deal with a lot of shit. And I think you know that, too.” Harry nods when Liam raises his brows in silent question. “Good. It’s good that you know things aren’t always going to be sunshine and rainbows in life, especially when it comes to the two of you being in love. But I also think you know that I’m not the only one who’s going to have your back and Niall’s, too.”

Harry grins so big it hurts his cheeks. “I know, Liam,” he replies, and he does know, does know that he and Niall have a following of people that will stand unwaveringly behind them and it may not be a lot but it’s enough and he’s always been told that quality is better than quantity, anyway. “I know. And I don’t think I’ll ever be able to thank you.”

“There’s no need for that, H.” Liam puts his hand on Harry’s head, rubs Harry’s hair like he did only moments before and he isn’t near as irritated now as he was a minute ago. “You’re my friend, a brother I chose to have for myself. The same thing goes with Louis. We’ll do anything to keep a smile on your face and Niall’s because we care about you no matter what.” He smiles and his eyes are like melted chocolate chips that Harry licks from the bowl when his mother isn’t looking. “And differing opinions is not an excuse for hate. Religion is not an excuse for hate. No god tolerates hate among their people.”

Except for the Greek gods, but that’s, like, whatever.

Harry has no words to say, kind of thinks that everything that may have needed to be brought out in the open already has been. Just like Niall, Liam has a way with words that Harry can never be able to replicate no matter how hard he tries; just like Niall — albeit a bit… weaker — Liam has a way with putting a blazing batch of embers in the pit of his stomach and stoking the flames till it’s a full-blown wildfire with no guarantee of ever being put out again.

“I’ll never be able to thank you enough for all the things you’ve done for me and Niall.”
“You don’t have to, Harry. I didn’t do any of it to get a heroic award or some shit — but, actually, I wouldn’t mind a few new shirts, if you were interested in paying me back in some way.” Harry scoffs, rolls his eyes, and Liam just laughs. “I only wanted you to know that Louis and I aren’t going anywhere just ‘cause you prefer dicks over chicks.”

Harry frowns. “Nice one.”

Liam grins. “Oh, I know.”

“You don’t think he can get into any legal trouble over that, can he?” Harry asks, narrows his eyes and wrinkles his noses and thins his lips. “Taking the money without telling his mum, I mean.”

“No. Legally, no, ‘cause his name is on the account, too.”

Harry lets out a breath of air he wasn’t aware he was holding; it’s been itching in the back of his mind, the thought that Niall could somehow be faulted with breaking the law by taking money without Maura knowing, but Liam is smart and Liam’s never been wrong and Harry’s going to believe Liam’s words.

“It’s for me, you know. This whole thing — the trip, the concert. All of it.” He sighs, drops his shoulders and crosses his arms over his chest. “It’s a goodbye gift for me because he’s leaving in early August for school in Oklahoma.”

“I figured it was something along those lines.” Liam leans back, leans over, makes sure Harry can feel him as he presses their arms together. “I’m leaving, too. Got into Stanford, and there’s no way I’m letting that opportunity pass me up.”

A little piece of Harry’s heart clenches and he has to control his breathing, has to dig his nails into his forearms to control his mind; he and Louis are being left behind by two of their best friends to fight off every kind of battle that is going to be thrown their way. He and Louis are being left behind.

“But you’ll still be in the same state.”

“I’ll be hours away.” He lays his head on Harry’s shoulder. “But I’m coming back. Always. To you and to Louis, too. It doesn’t matter where I’m at, doesn’t matter where you’re at or where Louis’s at or where Niall’s at — we can go for years without seeing each other and then meet up when we’re, like, twenty-five, and nothing would change for me. You feel the same, don’t you?”

Harry gulps, has to force himself to nod because he isn’t sure if he can tell Liam that yes, he does feel the same way without wanting to cry.

“Niall wants to get away. Niall needs to get away. From LA, from his mum and from his brother. And he’s smart, too, if he’s learning something he’s interested in, that is.” Liam slings his arm behind Harry’s back, puts his fingers in Harry’s hair and scratches Harry’s scalp. “The things he’s said about you, the way he is with you — Harry, he’s coming back. He’ll come back for you. He will. And you have to believe him when he says he will. You have to take his words for what they are — the truth. And you have to believe that he will be back for you.”

Harry wets his lips, sniffs; he isn’t crying, per se, but he isn’t far off from it, that’s for sure. “It’s kind of hard to believe him when he’s lied to me for so long.”

“I get that. But I also get Niall. And I know damn well that he would not lie about the way he feels for you, especially since he’s gone through so much inner hell to be happy with himself and happy with you, too. You have to have faith in him.” Liam chuckles. “He took the money and ran, and now you have to take his word and run, too.”
“Oh, baby. Oh, Harry, you look — you look different.”

Harry stops walking and turns around, sees that Niall and Louis are walking toward him and Liam; they’ve got two paper sacks and a cardboard cup holder with four drinks in their hands and smiles on their faces, big smiles on their faces, and Niall looks like the fading sunshine that’s shining behind him.

He brings his one of his hands up, rubs his neck; it’s the first time in years he’s been able to do this, been able to feel nothing but air and skin and his own palm. “Is it okay?” he asks, a little small and a lot breathless; Niall passes the paper sacks over to Liam, who takes them with a muted scoff that everyone chooses to ignore, and comes to stand in front of Harry. “Do you like it?”

Niall’s smile is big, brighter than the sun; Harry isn’t sure how he could ever think of comparing something as great as Niall to the sun, of all things, because he outshines everything. “I like it, yeah,” he replies, and his smile grows into a grin as he puts both of his hands out, sifts all ten of his fingers through the sides of Harry’s newly cut hair. It’s soft, too, having been washed thoroughly before the extreme trim; he hopes Niall likes the smell of coconuts. “There’s so much gone, though.”

“I know.” Harry nods his head, as much as he can while Niall cards his fingers through the shortness. “It feels… weird. Loads different than I’m used to.”

“But better?”

Harry nods again, smiles, and he may be blushing, too, a little bit, but only because Niall’s touching him — touching him out in public like this, like he’s wanted for what feels like forever. He isn’t sure if he’ll ever get over the warm feeling it leaves in his stomach to know that Niall doesn’t care what people think of them, to know that Niall doesn’t care what the world thinks of them. Harry knows this is going to be the mentality that will get them through the shit storm that’s sure to bombard them, but they can do it — they can do anything.

“Yeah, it is. I forgot what healthy hair felt like. And it’s soft.” Harry wets his lips and brings both of his hands up, as well, and puts them on Niall’s wrists, holds him tight. “It’s lighter, too. And there’s a lot of air on my neck I haven’t felt in a long time. S’weird.”

Niall laughs, shakes his head. “You silly boy,” he says, and he leans forward, puts a kiss just to the left of Harry’s mouth — in public. “I’m glad I can see your neck, too. I can finally kiss it when I’m with you.”

The words send a shiver through Harry’s body and yes, they’ve not been in separate bodies for long, what with being inside of one another earlier, both of them, but the tone Niall used makes Harry want to be properly fucked till he can’t feel anything else except for the scattering of Niall’s breath on his neck and the pressure of love as it fills his body.

“Later?” Harry suggests, raises a brow. “I’ll let you top, if you want.”

Niall’s smirk is what sex is made out of, really. “Later sounds perfect,” he replies, and this time he kisses Harry on the lips, slips his tongue into Harry’s mouth and licks tenderly, delicately, and Harry likes how Niall treats him as if he is the most prized thing in the world, likes to be the most prized thing in the world. Niall’s world.

“Hey, hey! Enough of that!”

Harry laughs against Niall’s lips, pulls away and sighs, wraps his arms around Niall’s waist in a hug
as he turns both of their bodies to look at Louis and Liam. “You have something to say, I suppose?” He raises a brow in silent question, in quiet challenge, but it’s all in good fun.

“Yes, I fucking do,” Louis says, and he’s so fucking sassy, so fucking opinionated that Harry finds it hard to take him seriously more than half of the time. “Niall said there wasn’t going to be any fun tonight, and fucking counts as fun stuff. If I can’t have fun, you can’t have fun.”

Niall chuckles, shakes his head. “What do you want to do, then, Lou?”

“I want to go back to the hotel room and eat these fuckin’ burgers and watch shitty television and make plans of how we’re going to waste time before the concert in a week and a half, and I don’t want to see the two of you eye-fucking each other, either.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Harry kisses Niall on the forehead, quickly, and pulls back, keeps one of his arms wrapped around Niall’s shoulders. Niall leans into him as if he’s the wall that’s going to keep him safe from everything. “No promises, though.”

Niall reaches down, grabs at Harry’s bum and smacks his ass through his jeans as the four of them fall into a haphazard line on their way back to the hotel.

Yeah, no promises. Harry smiles and finds Niall’s hand, interlaces their fingers. No promises at all.
i've had the time of my life

and i owe it all to you

— Bill Medley and Jennifer Warnes, ‘I’ve Had the Time of My Life’

Time flies by… rather quickly from then on, for the most part. And that saying is true, you know. The one that talks about having fun — time flies when you’re having fun. That one? Yeah, it’s true. So true. And it leaves behind a sort of nostalgic feeling, kind of, in the way that time is passing so fast, so fast, and the memories they’ve made and are making are the only proof that they’ve been here, that they’ve been there. He can’t get it back, won’t ever be able to get it back.

It’s not a great feeling to have, but the thought — the thought that he’s able to look back on it now, right now, makes the pain worth it, in a weird way. He doesn’t want to think about it for a long time, but — it’s there. And it’s sad and it isn’t the best, but it’s — it something. It’s something great.

Summer’s almost over. Not the season, really, but the summer — that three month period of time between May and August where you’re free to be the person you can’t be between the time school starts and ends. There’s a freedom, a strange sort of raw liberation in the back of his throat that recedes into the darkest corner of his mind where he yearns for it at the end of the summer.

And with the end of summer comes the loss of Liam, comes the loss of Niall, comes the loss of the best thing that ever happened to Harry. With the end of summer comes the loss of the only life Harry’s ever known.

But it also brings upon the gain of independence and a sense of individuality he isn’t sure he’s ever felt before. And what a way to start this new section of his life, you know, rocking out a concert that his… that his loving boyfriend brought him as a gift — as a gift to say goodbye.

And, well. They’re leaving a legacy, too, aren’t they? Harry and Niall, Louis and Liam — all of them are leaving a legacy. They’re legends, together and apart. And it’s strange because they’re always going to be remembered as the boys of summer, always going to be remembered as the boys who preferred the heat to the cold and swimming in lakes to sipping hot cocoa by the fire and listening to music late at night in the cabs of their vehicles to getting shitfaced at the drive-in.

Harry doesn’t mind it, doesn’t mind being one of the boys of summer whose tan will fade and whose hair will darken and whose joy will bubble at the knowledge that summer is one more day closer. Thinks that is always what he was supposed to be, for the most part — a boy of summer, one who can see all the colors.

And summers always come back around again, you know; there’s always going to be a lake to swim in and a kiss to be stolen beneath a sky full of stars in a field of colorful wildflowers and a song to be listened and danced to and a body to be touched with the gentleness of a calloused hand and a secret to be shared and a beer to drink and a smile to be given to a lover and a party to be had at the end of the day and a love to be made in the back of a truck, in the middle of a bed, in the deepness of a pool, in the bathroom of a bar.

There’s always going to be more — more summer, more love, more music, more peace; more Harry, more Niall, more of the relationship they’re nurturing.

He just has to be patient, just has to wait. Because he’s one of the boys of summer, after all, and all the colors may fade when Niall’s gone but they’ll be back when he sees Niall again.
And he will see Niall again, most likely even before the start of next summer. He will. Because Niall said so, because Niall promised he would come back. For Harry. And Harry believes him, will never not believe him because they’re in this together, the two of them, and when you have a love like they do you do not ever, ever let it go.

“I fucking hate rollerblading.”

Harry leans his head up, still not used to the fact that he doesn’t have to shake his bangs out of his face to see clearly, and watches as Niall walks over toward him where he’s at, sat on a wooden bench in the corner lacing up his skates.

“Do you seriously hate rollerblading?” Harry asks, wipes his nose on the sleeve of his shirt; he’s gotten a touch of hay fever, of course, and while he isn’t particularly sick his nose seems to be preparing to run a marathon. “We always went back in LA and you enjoyed yourself then. What’s changed?”

“Nothing particularly awful,” he replies and sits down, falls down; he kicks his sneakers off a little bit more aggressively than normal and shoves them under the bench, next to Harry’s boots and Louis’s sandals and Liam’s tennis shoes. “I just… LA was before I realized how hard it is to keep my hands off of you and now I just — I just don’t think I can do it.”

Harry shrugs, moves to the other foot to begin lacing the skate up; he gets them tight, likes them tight because if they aren’t he’s sure to turn his ankle and fall on his ass. “Then don’t,” he replies, gives Niall a sweet smile, and it’s that simple, really — why hide themselves away when they know there is absolutely nothing wrong with them; why hide themselves away when they know God intended for them to be like this all along? “I won’t complain, at all, if you want to put your hands on me, and I think that, if anybody does, Liam will take care of it.”

Niall’s grin is radiant and bright in the dim, neon lights that flicker from on top of the rink; there’s quite a few people skating around, dancing to LaBelle and ‘Lady Marmalade’, and Louis and Liam are in the thicket, goofing off with one another and laughing so loud, so hard, Harry can hear it over the blaring song.

“Liam is like our little guard dog, isn’t he?” Niall asks, comments, and Harry’s fairly sure it’s more to himself than anything and so he just nods, just leans back when he’s got both of his skates laced up the way he wants and puts his shoulder against Niall’s to let him know that he doesn’t care, to let Niall know that he shouldn’t care what people think about them — because they’re in love, and it’s the kind of love that not everybody is going to be able to experience, as disheartening and sad as that is.

They’re the lucky ones. He and Niall — yeah, they’re the lucky ones. And they’re going to make it.

“He just cares about us, is all,” Harry says under his breath, doesn’t feel the need to be loud anymore, doesn’t feel the need to be loud ever again. He thinks he would be absolutely happy just like this for the rest of his days — beside Niall, pressed against Niall. That’s all he needs. “And Louis does, too, although I don’t think he’ll ever really fight, for the most part, but still.”

“But still.” Niall leans forward, begins to tug on his skates and his shirt raises, just a little bit, and Harry can’t help himself as his eyes trail down; Niall’s back isn’t as dark as Harry’s, per se, and there’s a small gathering of hair at the bottom and Harry knows it’s just as soft as it looks. And he just. Loves Niall so much that he can’t find a flaw that he doesn’t adore. “I’m sure Louis can talk himself out of his own death, if he’s given the chance.”
Harry grins, raises his arm and puts it on Niall’s back, sticks his fingers in Niall’s hair, scratches Niall’s scalp. “I’m sure Louis and God are going to have the greatest conversations one of these days,” he muses, and it’s mostly to himself, really, because he thinks talking to God would be one of the coolest things. And he also wonders what kind of music God listens to, but, like, that’s beside the point. “I’m really glad that we — you know, were able to hold on to our faith through it all.”

“Me too.” Niall turns his head and faces Harry, gives Harry a sparkling smile that reflects and shines brighter than the flickering disco ball above the rink. “I think people get the wrong impression from Him, you know? All He wants is for everyone to love everyone else.”

“Love wins, Niall. Always.”

“I know.” Niall’s smile grows impossibly bigger, impossibly brighter, and Harry’s cheeks hurt as he tries to keep up with Niall’s unprecedented glory. “I know that now, Harry.”

They kiss, then, the two of them, and Harry fists his hand in Niall’s hair and Niall cradles his jaw and it’s so simple, so out in the open, and he hears whistles, Harry does, and he knows it’s Louis and knows it’s Liam and he smiles so big, so huge that he has to pull back from Niall’s mouth and when they look up, look over, they see that a few people are giving them unsupportive glances but Louis and Liam are jumping up and down with the joy of it all, and neither Niall or Harry are going to let the opinions of others drag them down when they’ve fought too hard to be where they are today.

“Hurry up, will ya?” Louis calls, and he’s the loudest, always has been the loudest. “We aren’t going to be young forever!”

Harry throws his head back and laughs, guffaws, and Niall finishes lacing up his skates and he stands, reaches to pull Harry up, and they glide over the carpeted floor toward the rink and as soon as they stop on the hardwood the song shifts to the Rolling Stones and Harry can’t help himself as he interlaces his hand with Niall’s and pulls him along, singing to the lyrics coming out of the speakers.

And it’s a mess. Truly. The biggest. Because Niall leans in and presses his lips to Harry on the cheek and it messes up Harry’s train of thought and he forgets the lyrics, forgets what he’s doing, forgets to breath, and he falls, takes Niall down with him since they’re holding hands, and it’s a flailing match of epic proportions as Harry tries to get up but Niall won’t stop trying to kiss him on any bare patch of skin he can find and holding him back by his waist and — and yeah, people can skate around the two of them because Harry would rather have his mouth on Niall’s than rollerblade around a rink, anyway.

-“You never told us about the trip, you know,” Liam announces as he sits down beside Harry on one of the lawn chairs crowded next to the pool; Niall and Louis are in the water, goofing off and splashing one another in the face with the chlorine-infested liquid, and he’s sat off to the side, cooling and relaxing and drying and waiting for the two of them to tire out so they can head up to the room and nap. “How was it?”

Harry wets his lips, adjusts the angle of his sunglasses and turns to look at Liam. “Didn’t see much of anything, really,” he replies, but then he remembers the bars, the railroads, the water tower, the creek, the towns, the people, the music, the smiles, the laughter, the miles and miles and miles of road underneath the tires, the clubs and the long stretches of highway and the tall trees and the gentle kisses and the scared touches and the colors, all the colors, and adds, “but we saw a lot of everything, too.”

And Harry doesn’t think he has ever seen Liam smile so big before.
“It’s not even been a week, boys, and the lot of you are already back for another tattoo?”

Harry grins sheepishly as he nods, as he steps into the tattoo parlor behind Louis and Liam; they find Meili almost immediately and she smiles when she sees Louis, waves him over, and the two of them follow after her into the room they went in before.

“Apparently we’re already addicted,” Harry replies, turns back to face Charles; he’s wearing a faded yellow button down with the sleeves cut off and hacked up jean shorts and — and, well, no shoes, as well. Cool. Plus his chest is on display, and Harry really enjoys the smattering of tattoos on his skin. “And matching tattoos seem to be a thing between us now, I guess.”

Charles raises a brow. “Between you?” he asks, and he has no right to ask, really, but he did and Harry isn’t uncomfortable and Niall isn’t upset and that’s what matters.

“Yeah,” Niall’s the one who answers, who replies, and he wraps his arm around Harry’s shoulders and pulls him in and kisses him on the temple and — Charles just smiles, just shakes his head, just motions for them to follow after him and Harry never had a doubt that Charles wouldn’t accept them.

“What’ll it be for you today, love birds?”

Harry turns red, always blushes when he’s reminded that he’s in love, that he’s Niall’s lover. “I want his last name on the inside of my finger like he’s got mine,” he answers, takes a seat in the chair Charles points at; he’s in the same room he was when he got his first tattoo, when Niall showed him that he was in it for real.

And forever.

“And I want the year on my… collarbone, like he has on his,” Niall replies, and he stands next to Harry, right next to Harry, and Harry likes the towering presence at his back and the feel it brings him to know that he isn’t ever going to be alone again is something that can help him live forever. “If that’s all right with you, of course.”

“Fine by me.” Charles holds up his hands, shrugs, scoots his wheeling stool over to where Harry’s sat at; he brings his eyes up, meets Harry’s gaze, and Harry isn’t sure if the man ever stops smiling, really. “I see you got yourself a haircut, as well. You look different.”

Harry grins, finds Niall’s hand with the one that isn’t about to get inked. “I feel different,” he says, and he kind of thinks that’s all he needs to say.

“What brought it on?” Charles asks, and maybe he’s being nosey but maybe he’s also trying to distract Harry from the buzzing off the needle as he begins his process. “The haircut, I mean. I know what brought on the tattoos.”

“I just wanted a change, is all.”

Charles raises a brow, moves his gaze from Harry to Niall and back to Harry afterward, where it settles and holds. “A change, eh?” he repeats, drops his gaze as he positions Harry’s hand just right. “I can say that you aren’t the first who has come in here during a weird time in their life and asked for something different.” His fingertips are calloused and worn as they brush against Harry’s hand. “I can say that you are my favorite, though.”

Niall coughs. “What’s that supposed to mean?” he asks, and there’s a little bit of an edge, little bit of
a tinge of jealousy in his words but Harry pays no mind to it because Niall’s the only person he wants and he’s going to have to learn to understand, to believe that.

“Exactly what I said.” Charles flicks his eyes to Niall and they stop, stare, stay, and Harry thinks that Charles has the kind of gaze that makes you feel like they’re looking right into your soul. “Now, what’s your lover’s last name? There’s no way I want to be responsible for messing something up that you’ll have forever.”

And ever and ever and ever. Amen.

“Horan,” Harry replies, bites his lip as he turns his head, as he looks up at Niall, who is smiling at him, smiling down at him, and he loves it, loves this, loves Niall. It will never be another. “My lover’s name is Horan.”

“I bet you twenty bucks that you can’t eat that whole burger in thirty seconds,” Louis says, wagers, and he’s shitfaced, so absolutely out of it that his finger is wobbling in the air as he points at Harry, who is the only one sober — because of the wretched hay fever and it’s liability to leave him with headaches in his temples and eyes, of all things — and handing out the food from the thick paper sack he’s got in his hands. “I mean, I’ve not got twenty —” hiccup, hiccup, cough, hiccup, “— twenty bucks, but I most certainly bet that you cannot eat one of those big ass burgers in thirty seconds.”

And really, Harry just wants to know how Louis can keep his speech from being slurred and smeared considering how fucking wasted he is and if it’s a skill that can be taught.

“That so, eh?” Harry replies, raises a brow, and he sits down on the foot of the bed, spreads his legs so that Niall can fit between and lean back against them as he unwraps his burger and goes to town on the greasy, dripping thing. Harry can’t taste much of anything, what with hay fever and all — and how fucking lovely that is — but he thinks it looks so, so much better than this soft, soggy taco he decided on. “Who’re you going to borrow the money from, Lou?”

“Niall!” it’s Liam who replies, by the way, and he’s actually behind Harry, sprawled out on the bed in nothing but his boxers and a faded t-shirt he switched a guy for after losing a game of pool. “’Cause Niall’s got money — Niall’s got all the money in the world!”

Niall giggles and turns his face, lays his head back against Harry’s thigh and smears his greasy laughter into Harry’s jeans. “I don’t have all the money in the world, you crazy dummy!” he replies, exclaims, and Harry loves when Niall’s like this — so easy, so pliant, so simple to be pleased and enjoyable to hear so, so happy. And genuinely happy, as well; faking it will not ever compare to the real thing. “I have all the colors in the world! Just ask Harry!”

And. Well, yeah, Niall does have all the colors in the world; the dark ones and the bright ones and light ones and the neon ones and the faded ones and the natural ones, the unnatural ones.

Harry thinks he could probably write a book about all the colors he sees in Niall’s pretty, pretty body and soul and heart and eyes and smile, but then there wouldn’t be enough paper in the world to cover it all.

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It’s quiet in the room, dark and hot, and Harry is pressed between Liam on his left and Niall on his right and he can’t sleep, is too hot to sleep, is too horny to sleepy, and he rolls over onto his side, puts
his leg up over Niall’s thighs and presses his hard cock against Niall’s fleshy hip.

“Hey,” he says, breathes, and he kisses the skin beneath Niall’s ear, right beneath Niall’s ear, and Niall lets out a small sound, a pitiful noise that churns something hot in the pit of Harry’s stomach. “Hey, you gotta be quiet, okay?”

“Oh, fuck, Harry.” Niall tosses his head to the side, faces Harry, and it’s dark, so dark in the room that Harry can’t see how utterly fucking beautiful Niall is. “Lou and Liam are literally lying right fuckin’ next to us.”

Harry grins and bares his teeth, scrapes them down from behind Niall’s ear and to the top of his shoulder, and he’s shirtless and without pants, thank goodness, and Harry has absolutely no problem with slipping his hand beneath the waist band of Niall’s boxers and gripping his fist at the base.

“So? S’not like they’ve not done this to us before, baby.”

Niall groans, brings his arm up and pushes his mouth into his elbow to keep the noises from falling out of his mouth as Harry begins to pull his palm up; it’s a dry job, one that doesn’t feel as great as it could, and Harry gathers a bit of sweat off the inside of Niall’s thighs to use as slick to move up, to move down, to tickle into the slit and scratch at the vein. Harry grins, toothily, and puts his mouth against Niall’s shoulder so he can feel how happy he makes Harry just by — just by being his gorgeous, unprecedented self.

“But we were never in the same bed,” Niall reminds Harry, reminds himself, and his free hand flashes down and sticks into his boxers, shoves them from his thighs and allows his cock to flip up and smack him in the tummy. “Not in the same bed.”

Harry kisses Niall’s shoulder again. And again and again and again, as he moves up, moves down, flicks his wrist and presses the pad of his thumb into the slit, gathering the precum and using it to swipe along the length. He knows Niall likes it wet, loves it wet, and he isn’t sure what’s about to happen but he hopes, he hopes he’s going to get to feel Niall come down his throat at least once.

“You aren’t fighting it very much,” Harry muses, and he knows that Niall knows that he will stop if one word is said, if one movement is made; he won’t force Niall, will never force Niall. They’ve come so far in so little time, and he knows Niall means everything he does but he is also aware that he has to take it slow. Slow, slow, slow. And he will, always. “You want it?”

Niall nods, hums, whimpers under his breath and brings his hand up, curls his fingers in the shortness of Harry’s hair; it’s still odd, mind you, so — well, so not there, for lack of a better term. He likes it, though. Thinks Niall likes it, too, which is just an added bonus.

“I want it, I want it, I want it,” he says, repeats, again and again and again, and Harry has to lean up and put his lips to Niall’s in a kiss to keep him quiet, to keep him silent, and Niall’s tough, you know, definitely isn’t the scrappy little kid he used to be, and he uses the hold he has in Harry’s hair to haul him up, to haul him over, and Harry sprawls out on top of Niall, worms his way out of his boxers and presses his naked body against every single inch of Niall. “I want it so bad, Harry.”

Harry moves his lips, puts kiss after kiss after kiss all over Niall’s face. “What do you want, baby boy?”

Niall arches, digs his blunt nails into Harry’s back and drags them down as Harry thrusts a bit, a little bit against Niall’s leaking, angry cock. “You — I want you,” he replies, and it’s a mangled mess and Harry nods because he knows Niall wants him, because he knows he wants Niall, too. “I want your mouth.”
“Oh, thank God,” Harry hisses beneath his breath and he licks his tongue inside of Niall’s mouth before he begins to descend, making sure to leave his marks all along Niall’s chest and tummy and hips and thighs before taking Niall’s crying cock in his mouth and holding it at the back of his throat till he comes in a river of hot cum that leaks out of the corners of his mouth, that Niall sucks off the edges of his smiling lips.

- And if Louis and Liam wake up? Well — so what?

- But if the entire hall wakes up upon Louis and Liam’s yelling? Well — that’s an entirely different matter, of course.

- “Shots, shots, shots, shots, shots.”

Louis comes over with a tray of shots in his hands; there’s dozens, it seems, and every four is a different color and Harry isn’t sure which one he picks up first, which one he throws back first, which one he slams down first, but it’s a burn in his throat that has him shaking his head and letting out a whistle as Niall puts his hand on top of Harry’s thigh and squeezes.

It’s been a wild week and a half, that’s for sure. Kissing while rollerblading isn’t the best thing to do and betting an entire wardrobe on a game of pool is smart if you want to start a new style; swimming in the pool is fun until you get kicked out by the hotel staff for cursing at each other in front of children and getting matching tattoos is something that is going to last long, long after this summer fades; attempting to eat an entire burger in thirty seconds when you’re sick with hay fever is a great way to toss up the entire contents of your stomach and trying to silently fuck each other into the sheets with Louis and Liam not even two feet from them is what you do to learn how loud Louis can actually scream.

“Are you having fun, Harry?” Niall asks him, and he kind of has to yell a bit, sort of, to be heard over the infiltrative ferocity of the music being played; it’s dark in the bar and Niall’s face is shadowed but Harry can see the red tint to his cheeks and he falls even more in love than he was before. “Are you excited for tomorrow?”

Harry nods to both. “Totally,” he replies, and Louis’s still yelling about all of the shots, shots, shots, shots and their table pressed into the back of the bar is quite a bit more popular than all of the rest. “I’ve had a blast.”

“This week?”

Harry wets his lips, finds Niall’s hand on his thigh and interlaces their fingers as tight as he can. “Not just this week, Niall,” he says, has to bite the corner of his lip to hold in the smile that wants to stretch far across his face. “I’ve had the time of my life with you ever since I first met you.”

And Niall kisses him, then, you know, as hard as he can, and it’s sad, really, how they’ve got to say goodbye to each other after they just learned how to be with one another like this, like that, and Harry holds on to Niall for as long as he can until there’s a tap on his shoulder and he pulls away, turns around, sees that Charles and Meili are behind and he stands up, pulls Niall up, and the four of them hug and Harry’s so confused as to why he’s here, why she’s here, and then he explains that he owns the bar, as well, of course, and summer may be ending for him in a few weeks but he will
always, always have all the colors of Niall’s love in his heart for the rest of his life.
juke box hero

standing in the rain, with his head hung low
couldn’t get a ticket, it was a sold out show
heard the roar of the crowd, he could picture the scene
put his ear to the wall, then like a distant scream
he heard one guitar, just blew him away
he saw stars in his eyes

— Foreigner, ‘Juke Box Hero’

“What the fuck do you mean you didn’t get the goddamn tickets?” Harry demands, and it’s a yell, really, and they’re in public, him and Niall and Louis and Liam, all four of them, and there’s a cluster of people around them, black and white and red and brown and yellow, all kinds, dressed in all sorts of pretty clothing that makes them pop out in the night, and they’re here for the same thing, for the same reasons, and they’ve got tickets in their hands, little tiny pieces of paper that will allow them through the gate of security that’s surrounding the arena on the outside of the fence and that’s what they’ve not got.

And Harry’s a bit upset. Understandably so.

“Exactly what I fucking said, Harry!” Niall replies, and he’s just as loud, for the most part, never be afraid of a fight and he surely isn’t going to step back from Harry even now, even after everything; he puts his hands in his hair, tugs at the thick strands, and it stands up every which way, heavy with the sweat and grease the humidity of late-night Atlanta always seems to dump on him. “I didn’t get the goddamn tickets.”

“Did you forget?”

“Well, shit, I guess so!”

Harry shakes his head, rolls his eyes, scoffs a laugh that hurts and burns in his throat. “How the fuck did you forget to get the tickets when — when we went on this trip to see the Rolling Stones in the first place!” he screams and he’s mad, okay, he’s livid and he’s heated — but that’s because they’re going home tomorrow, that’s because they’re going to have to say goodbye soon, that’s because summer is coming to an end. “How do you forget something so important, Niall?”

“You know goddamn well, Harry Styles, that this trip is more than this fuckin’ concert.”

Harry scowls and gosh, it’s hot and it’s humid and he’s heated and there’s so many people pushing passed him, pressing against him, and he wishes he could slip right into the middle of a rather large group of folks to sneak pass security and over the gate and into the venue where he shoulders his way till he’s front row so he can see his most favorite band in the entire world.

“This trip is for me, Niall!”

“No!” Niall replies, and he’s louder than he ever has been before; his fists are clenched and his eyes are wide and his face is red and Harry catches his mistake, knows he made a huge one, but it’s happened and he can’t take it back after it’s already been said. “No, it isn’t, Harry. This trip is for me to say goodbye to you, Harry — this trip is for me to have something to hold on to when I go away in less than a week and you know that. You know that, Harry.”
Harry opens his mouth, snaps it shut; he locks his jaw, grits his teeth, shakes his head, and then he
pivots on his heel and walks off, away from the crowd and away from the venue and away from
Louis, from Liam, from Niall.

He doesn’t understand why he’s so angry at the realization that he and Niall were having too much
fun with themselves and Louis and Liam to think to buy the tickets to the concert. He thinks he ought
to be happy, sort of, in a bittersweet kind of way, that he and Niall have — well, for lack of a proper
and better term, he thinks he ought to be happy that he and Niall have had the time of their life with
one another these last few weeks, these last few days, to truly remember the storm that was brewing
in the distance that’s sure to flood if not destroy.

Because this is it. This is the end of summer for him, for Niall, for every battle they fought and won;
the war’s coming to close and he’s afraid they’ve not scored enough winnings to bring in the actual,
overall victory — he’s afraid they don’t love each other enough to keep their head afloat while apart.

And that’s the thing, really, isn’t it? He loves Niall enough, knows he loves Niall enough; it can be
years and years and years down the road, and Harry could be married, could be a father, could be a
grandfather, could be a great grandfather, and if Niall came back, came to him and asked him of
anything, absolutely anything — Harry knows he would break himself to give it to him, knows that
no amount of distance or time will ever decrease the love he has in his heart for Niall.

It begs the question, though, doesn’t it?

How far is he going to go to keep the hope of a love with his best friend alive?

“It’s not that big of deal, H,” somebody says, and Harry looks over his shoulder to see that Louis has
jogged up beside him, to see that Niall and Liam are following the two of them a few paces behind.
“I mean — it’s just tickets to a concert. And I know the two of you drove all the way ‘cross the
fuckin’ country to see it, but does this concert really mean more to you than the fact that Niall wanted
to do this so he could have something to hold on to when he’s gone?’”

Harry sighs, stuffs his hands in his pockets and clenches his fists so tight that the trimming of his
jeans cuts into his skin. “No, it isn’t that important at all,” he replies, and he’s got no reason to lie or
fib, you know; besides, he’s hurt Niall’s feelings by what he said, by being selfish, and he knows
damn well that Louis will not stand for him to act as if he is in the right and Niall is in the wrong.
“It’s not important at all.”

“Then why the fuck did you have to scream at him in front of thousands of people, Harry?’”

He doesn’t answer at first, tosses his reply around in his brain for a moment; he stops walking once
he’s a safe distance from the ever-expanding crowd and leans against the chain link fence
surrounding the venue. It’s dark outside and particularly so here, where there’s no streetlight in
working order for a few miles on either side; he can see the ground well enough to notice that there is
several stains from spat out gum on the sidewalk and wonders how many people have tracked the
sticky stuff far, far away.

“Harry, what’s wrong?”

“I don’t want him to leave, Louis. I don’t want to have to watch him leave me behind.”

The sound of people approaching forces Louis to keep his response to himself; a scuffed up pair of
sneakers appears in Harry’s line of view, red and white, dirtily so, and one side of Harry’s mouth
curls into a halfhearted grin that burns in his soul.
“Do you think I want to leave you, Harry?” he asks, Niall asks, and he reaches out, puts his hand on Harry’s hip and curls his finger into the belt loops on his jeans and jerks, tugs them together so they bump and press and lean and touch. “Do you think I want to watch you while I leave you, Harry?”

Harry shakes his head, and this is the first time he misses his long hair and the precious security it always gave him from the scrutiny of the world and his best friend. “No, I don’t,” he replies, and it’s soft and sweet, said into the warmth of Niall’s neck; he brings his arms up, wraps them around Niall’s shoulders and wonders how hard he has to squeeze to keep Niall here with him till the end of time. “I don’t think so at all.”

“They why do you think it’s going to be easy for me to tell you goodbye in a few days?” Niall asks, and he puts his mouth against Harry’s cheek, whispers the words in Harry’s ear. “I love you, Harry. I love you so fucking much, silly boy, and I know it’s taken me a long time to accept that I… that I want to be with you for the rest of my life, but I have, finally, and now it’s time for you to accept that I’m coming back, Harry.”

Harry shuts his eyes and breathes in, breathes out; the air rattles in his lungs and he reckons that he cannot find it in himself to care that they are in public, to care that they are in front of their friends, to care that they are holding on to one another as if they are on the verge of completely losing each other.

And they are. Sort of. Losing each other, that is. Niall is going to be leaving in — in five days. Five days exactly, and that’s all he has left with the love of his love. That’s all he has left.

That’s frightening.

“I don’t know how to do that, Niall. I’m not as strong as you are.”

“Bullshit.” Niall laughs against Harry’s cheek, slathers the wettest kiss on the skin. “You’re the toughest man I know, Harry, and there’s nobody in the entire world who is going to bring you down, baby.”

“Niall —”

Niall shakes his head, pulls back; he keeps his fingers stuffed into one of Harry’s belt loops but brings his free hand up, presses his palm flat against Harry’s chest, right over his heart.

“I fell in love with you because of this right here, Harry,” Niall says, and it’s a whisper in the hot wind of Atlanta but Harry catches it and he’s burning from the inside out. “And I’m going to come back to you because of this right here, too.” His smile is what happiness and joy are made out of. “And I promise you — I promise you, Harry, that I am going to come back to you. Always. You have to believe that.”

Harry wets his lips, keeps his gaze trained on the darkness of Niall’s face; his cheeks are flushed and red and his eyes are so very large and so very blue and Harry leans in, puts their mouths together, and he doesn’t think it’s fair that they have only just gotten used to kissing each other and now summer was ending.

He pulls back, Harry does, and through hooded, heavy-lidded eyes, sees that Niall’s face is so vulnerable and so raw and so, so beautiful. “Don’t break my heart, Niall,” he says, and it’s a whisper, as well, and it isn’t that he cares if Louis and Liam hear him, per se — he just wants to be quiet, is all, doesn’t think yelling is the best way to get a point across. “Don’t hurt me.”

“I’ll take care of your heart.” Niall smiles, and it’s higher on one side than the other, as it always is,
and a pain strikes in the middle of Harry’s chest and he’s going to miss seeing joy paint itself across Niall’s face in the all the colors when he’s gone. “I promise.” He curls his hand in Harry’s shirt, fists the fabric and pulls him in for another kiss, albeit a bit quicker than the last. “As long as you take care of mine, too.”

Harry grins. “I swear,” he says, and he kisses Niall again, again, again, over and over and over, and it’s how he says he’s sorry to Niall, how he says he believes in Niall, how he says he’s in love with Niall. He’s quite awful at communicating with words, really, but he has found that getting his point across through actions is much, much more effective than attempting to talk his heart out.

“If you two are quite finished,” Louis intervenes, taps Harry on the shoulder till he pulls away from Niall’s lips with the biggest grin he thinks he’s ever had, “Liam and I have found a way to get the both of you in to see this goddamn concert.”

Harry raises a brow, looks around and sees that the four of them are utterly alone on this bit of the sidewalk save for the few dozen people parking in the lot across the street, not paying much attention to anything happening around them.

“And how do you plan on doing that, boys?”

Liam coughs, attempts to discreetly point at the ten foot tall chain link fence just directly in front of them. “Well, it isn’t a foolproof plan,” he begins, shrugs, and there’s a grin on his face and Harry thinks they’ve been spending entirely too much time with each other lately because he’s almost got the mischievous smirk down better than Louis himself, “but we’re going to climb this fence and sneak into the arena and hopefully not get caught on our way in.”

Niall chuckles slightly, tries to hide the noise under his breath. “Hate to break it to you boys, but that’s illegal.”

“S’okay, Ni,” Harry says, bumps his shoulder against Niall’s once before he walks forward and grabs hold of the chain; the toes of his boots fit perfectly in the slots and, really, his upper body strength is something he’s always been quite proud of. It comes in handy when he and Niall are doing extracurricular activities — when he and Niall are doing each other. “It’s only illegal if you get caught.”

Niall throws his head back and laughs and my, oh my how the tables have turned.

“The good thing is that we’ve gotten over the fence without being caught,” Louis announces in a tight, pinched whisper as the four of them adhere their backs to the stadium wall and inch their way toward the back entrance in hopes that staying in the shadows will keep them from getting caught. “The bad thing is that I’ve ripped a tear in the crotch of my favorite pair of jeans.”

Harry, smashed in the middle with Liam on his right and Niall on his left, who is leading this infiltration, accidentally trips over a bit of uneven ground and nearly takes everyone down. There’s a vicious round of ‘shut the fuck up’s and ‘goddamn shit hell’s that makes him blanche and grab Niall’s hand for sturdy durability.

“Mum can sew, Lou,” Harry replies, offhanded and a bit winded; he’s a mixture of excited and frightened and right now, he can’t properly say which emotion is getting the better of his heart. “And, like, Gem can, too, but she’s quite shit at denim and I would not trust anything to her to fix.”

“Shut the fuck up, Harry. Your sister is amazing.”
Harry frowns. “Do you have a crush on my sister, Louis?” he asks, a bit miffed, and pokes his head out from against the wall and turns his gaze to look at Louis’s shadowed face. “Like, do you genuinely still have a crush on Gemma, of all people? She’s got a boyfriend, Lou.”

“You have no right to call me out on having a crush on that beautiful woman.”

“That beautiful woman is my sister, Louis.”

“So?” Louis scoffs. “Lottie’s had a crush on you since you were fourteen and I’ve never thrown a fit at her like you are me.”

“Lottie —”

“That’s a damn lie, Louis Tomlinson,” Liam interjects, intervenes, before Harry can say anything in response; he knows Lottie dotes on him, and he cares for her, as well, but he never picked up on her any romantic feelings she apparently holds for him. “I was there when you yelled at her for liking Harry, and I was also there when she reminded you that you liked Gemma.”

“I did no such thing, Liam.”

“You lie again, Louis, and I’ll thump you on the end of the nose.”

“I fuckin’ dare —”

“Boys!” Niall hisses, yells — or, well, sort of yells, that is — and stops walking, allows the entire line to smack into his back and wow, what a situation they’ve found themselves in, really. “If the lot of you don’t shut the hell up, we’re going to get caught and frankly, I don’t want to spend my last days with the three of you in a fuckin’ jail cell, all right?”

Louis snorts. “You’re just pissed that I have a crush on Gemma.”

Niall cackles, low in his throat, and, for a moment, a bit of blazing hot jealousy burns in the top of his chest because — because what if Niall did have a crush on Gemma and he’s only in love with Harry since he’s the next best thing?

“Oh, hush up, Lou,” Niall replies, scoffs, and he holds Harry’s hand a little bit tighter, as if he knew just what odd thought Harry was beginning to entertain in his mind. “Gemma is a definite brilliance of a woman, but she is no Harry and she’ll never compare to him, either. Harry is the better Styles.”

And — oh, Harry never thought he would blush and enjoy somebody calling him better than brilliant in the same breath that they downplayed his sister’s magnificence. Oh.

Just wait till Gemma gets an ear of this; she’s sure to drive all the way to Stillwater, Oklahoma, to give Niall a piece of her mind, and Harry wonders if he can catch a ride with her on the way because being away from Niall is like never seeing the sun and he doesn’t know how well he’s going to survive.

“You can’t say that,” Louis replies, and he’s such a little bitch, honestly, and it makes Harry shake his head because he never knew he would be friends with somebody as utterly annoying and aggravating and amazing as Louis Tomlinson. “You can’t say that because you’ve fucked Harry — like, literally while we were in the same fuckin’ bed — and your opinion is biased.”

Niall shrugs. “Opinion for you, fact for me,” he replies, and he brings Harry’s hand to his mouth and presses his lips to Harry’s knuckle and Harry thinks he may faint if Niall doesn’t stop this blatant show of complete love. “And it isn’t as if you and Liam have never pulled with somebody while we
were in the same room, Lou.”

“The same room does not mean the same bed!”

“Well, fuck, it ain’t my fault you’re such a light sleeper!”

There’s a noise, then, a sudden bang, and a solid line of bright luminescence is lighting up the concrete only a few feet in front of them and there’s a tall silhouette of a person and they stop, all of them, and — and really, Harry thinks they would be shit burglars, every single one of them, because they don’t know how to be quiet when faced with a difficult situation and he and Louis always fight and Liam tries to be a father and Niall just laughs.

He isn’t sure if that’s a good thing, thinks it’s rather bad, most of the time.

“If the four of you are trying to sneak into the concert, you damn sure aren’t doing a very good job,” someone says, a man says, and it’s an accented sentence, Jamaican, one Harry’s heard quite a few times over the last few weeks, and he peels himself off of the wall and walks forward into the light and sees that yes, Charles is standing in the doorway sipping at some sort of liquid in a white plastic cup with a lime green patterned vest and rolled up shorts. “I’m glad I’m the one that caught the lot of you, and it’s a wonder, too, ’cause none of you know how to be quiet.”

Harry shakes his head, can’t help but laugh as he motions for Niall and Louis and Liam that everything is fine, that everything is okay. “That would be us, I’m afraid,” he replies, and he’s grinning so big it’s hurting but he kind of likes this pain. “How are you — why are you here?”

“I like the Stones.” Charles takes a sip of his cup, leans against the frame of the door; one of his feet are stepped outside and is holding the thick metal thing open. “And being able to get in free and hang out backstage before the concert is a perk that comes with being the tattoo artist that did up a few members of their crew.”

And, as if on cue, Mick Jagger and Ronnie Wood abruptly saunter up behind Charles, grinning and smiling and laughing, and they slap him on the back, both of them, and — and Harry isn’t sure if it’s appropriate to cry in front of all of these people but he also kind of doesn’t care, either, and he’s sure he can’t be blamed since he’s, you know, seeing two men in front of him he never thought he would meet.

Harry’s jaw drops. “Are you fucking serious?” he asks, and he’s not got a filter — especially when he’s faced with an epic situation such as this one.

Mick shakes his head, tosses a laugh from his mouth. “Absolutely not, kid,” he replies, and he sounds every bit the fucking rockstar he is. “We ‘eard you out here goofin’ ’round and we aren’t nothin’ if not curious.”

“Come on in, boys,” Ronnie says, and he motions for Harry, for Niall and Louis and Liam to come inside. “The show’s ‘bout to start and you just can’t miss it.”

It’s loud. It’s loud, and they’re right in the front, all four of them, and there’s two bulky bodyguards standing behind the line they’ve made against the railing to keep them protected since they’re VIPs — fucking VIPs — and Ronnie’s killing it on the guitar and Mick’s vocals are out of this world and Bill’s smashing the bass and Keith’s never sounded better on the drums and the keyboardist is out of this world.

(Harry doesn’t quite know the man’s name because the Stones are notorious for switching out their
keyboardists quite a bit, but the guy is talented and he’s not missing any beats and that’s all that matters.

And it’s a party. The best party ever — there’s music and there’s liquor and there’s dancing and there’s fireworks and there’s colors and there’s friends and there’s Niall, and he’s smiling, and it’s a see you later, really, to him and to them and to summer and to the kingdom that they’ve built with one another but it isn’t goodbye for good and Harry knows that, Harry believes that.

He does. He believes it with his whole heart, with the entirety of his soul; Niall is in love with him and he is in love with Niall — Niall is coming back for him and he is going to wait for that return.

Always.

And he’ll never forget this, either. Ever. He’s cried and he’s fought and he’s hurt and he’s lost so much, gained so much; he’s lied and been lied to, loved and been loved, not been loved, and he’s had doors open for him but he’s also had doors close right in his face and break his nose and he can’t really find it in his heart to care because this is it, this is the end and this is the beginning and he’s letting go and he’s holding on and he’s losing Niall and he’s never losing Niall at once.

It’s… everything.

Niall turns to him; they’re holding hands, all four of them, and Niall brings Harry’s knuckles up to his lips. “Are you having fun?” he asks, has to scream, and he’s sweating and his face is red and his smile is bright and his eyes are blue, so very blue, and Harry is never going to let this feeling go.

He nods, can’t find the words, and tugs both of his hands out of Louis and Niall’s grasp; he puts his palms on Niall’s cheeks and holds him still, aligns their lips, and it’s an awkward kiss because Harry is trying to mouth along to the lyrics and Niall can’t stop smiling and this is the absolute greatest way to end the summer that has changed their lives.

A boom echoes and shakes, rattles the ground, and Harry pulls back and he and Niall tip their heads up, look up at the same time. There’s fireworks billowing up into the sky as the final song begins, as Harry slides both of his hands down to cup Niall’s jaws, and they’re bright and brilliant, entangling and intertwining and thundering with a resounding boom, pop, crackle. Harry moves his face back down and sees that Niall is already looking at him and — and yeah, the concert is beyond words and the fireworks are the perfect way to fade out of season in a blaze of glory but neither have got anything on all the colors in Niall’s eyes as he smiles for only Harry to see.
in the air tonight

well i remember, i remember don’t worry
how could i ever forget
it’s the first time, the last time we ever met
but i know the reason why you keep your silence up
no you don’t fool
the hurt doesn’t show
but the pain still grows
it’s no stranger to you and me

— Phil Collins, ‘In the Air Tonight’

“Take care of this vehicle, Louis,” Niall says, warns as he shuts the driver door of the van and tosses the keys into Louis’s lap, who’s sat in the seat with the biggest grin on his face Harry thinks he has seen in a while. “This isn’t my van. This isn’t your van. This is Greg’s van. This is Greg’s van that I never properly got permission to borrow.”

“I know.”

Niall sighs. “And I expect you know that if anything happens to this van, Greg most certainly will kick my ass and yours, too,” he says, and Harry has to laugh because Niall’s fairly good at acting the part of an exasperated parent to the point where it’s equal parts entertaining and adorable.

And Harry kind of wants to know what Niall would be like as a father, as a daddy, both of them together and happy and in love, and if the two of them would cuddle their child, their children in bed between them.

He knows they’ll not be able to have children together — he isn’t mental. But there is… possibilities. Harry’s heard of surrogates, which, okay, that means only one of them would be the father, but he’s sure the cost of such a thing would knock them to the floor and then there’s also the concept of having to find a female who would be willing to share her DNA.

Which — Janie is the only one Harry can think of. And maybe Gemma, too, although it would most definitely have to be her egg and Niall’s sperm should that happen and that’s really just a mess he would rather not think of.

He doesn’t think he ought to be worrying over something like this right now, though; having children with the love of his life, possibly having children with the love of his life is a long term goal that takes its priority behind that of the short term accomplishments he would love to get out of the way.

Like making love to Niall, with Niall, one last time before the summer is over and they have to pack up and head back to L.A, back home, where everything is sure to resume its boring and lackluster chaos now that his and Niall’s pause is finished, now that his and Niall’s halt has come to a close.

“Niall, if you remember, you are the one who, quite literally, blew up the engine less than a month ago.”

Niall scoffs. “And I got it fixed, didn’t I?” he replies, and Harry yawns, wraps his arm around Niall’s waist and leans against his solid frame; Niall melts into Harry’s side and shakes his head and they’re truly perfect for one another, really. “Just take care of it, yeah? And bring it back filled up with gas
and not stinking of reefer, m’kay? We’re heading out before noon tomorrow, and I don’t want to have to deal with any more problems than we’ll surely have to.”

Liam leans up from the passenger seat, has a grin on his face that makes Harry smile, too. “Don’t worry, Ni,” he replies, gives a messy thumbs-up that doesn’t exactly soothe the worry Harry knows is thrumming through Niall’s veins. “We’ll take good care of it, and we’ll be back here to pick you two up at ten.”

“We’ll see you then,” Harry says, slowly and sleepily, and brings his hand up to wave Louis and Liam off. “Be careful, take care, and — just, like, don’t do anything stupid ‘cause we’re on a time precious schedule, m’kay?”

He doesn’t wait for them to respond, instead uses the hold he has around Niall’s waist to turn and pull him along; it’s dark outside, well after midnight, and the streetlights along the pavement are the only thing illuminating the way toward the entrance of the hotel.

“Think they’re going to be all right?”

Harry shrugs, looks over and meets Niall’s eyes, gives Niall the biggest smile he can muster right now and hopes it helps to ease the apprehension he can almost feel vibrating inside of Niall’s body.

“I think they’re going to be careful,” Harry replies, pulls open the door for Niall to walk through and then follows himself. “I think they’re going to find somewhere that’s open after midnight to get a bite to eat. I think they’re going to pick up a few cases of beer and get shitfaced. I think they’re going to get too fucked that they’ll forget to wake up and come after us.”

Niall grins, lopsided and crooked, and finds Harry’s hand to interlace their fingers as they stride through the dimly lit, golden lobby and toward the elevators. “I think we’re going to have to catch a bus to their hotel and wake them up,” he adds his own thoughts, presses the up button on the panel between the two elevators. “I think we’re going to be pressed for time and won’t be able to take a break on the way back to LA.”

“I think you’re right.”

There’s a soft ding, and then a second later the doors are opening; the elevator is big and wide and yellow and shiny and bright and the music that’s playing from the speakers is soft and peaceful, and Niall pushes Harry against the wall and wraps his arms around Harry’s waist, lay his cheek against Harry’s shoulder as they ascend.

“This is our last night,” Niall says, pushes the words against Harry’s collarbone and how he can stand to be so close to Harry when he smells of thick sweat and spilled liquor is beyond Harry’s comprehension. “This is our last night before we have to go back.”

Harry sighs and tucks his chin against Niall’s head. “I know,” he replies, whispers. “S’weird, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Niall nods. “We’ve got, like, five days to get back to LA and then pack everything up and I have to catch a flight out.”

“You’re flying?”

Niall nods again, snuggles himself closer. “Yeah, I am,” he replies, and again, the words are said against Harry’s collarbone, against Harry’s tattoo, and he looks down, sees that Niall’s last name is bold and dark and black and permanent on his body forever. “Mum and I… talked before she left for Ireland and we decided that flying out and in would be much better than having to drive back and
“I don’t understand your mum at all.” Harry scoffs, shakes his head; he looks up, sees that they’re nearing the floor their room is on. “She knew you were going away at the end of July and yet she still got on that plane and flew out to Ireland when you could have spent all this time with you.”

“I think she knew. I think she knew that I didn’t want to spend my last few months with her. Or Greg. And so she left. I think she knew that you are the only person I’m truly going to miss with all my heart when I’m gone and I don’t think she wanted to see me choose my best friend over the person that gave birth to me.”

“She loves you. In a weird way.”

“Yeah.” Niall yawns. “She does. I think she loves me a lot. But it’s — the way she shows it, tries to show how much she loves me that’s wrong. When her and dad split, it was bad — or, I don’t remember, but Greg says it was and he’s still fucked up over it, so he probably isn’t lying. And I think he broke her heart.”

“You think your dad broke your mum’s heart and made it to where she couldn’t love properly?”

The bell dings yet again and Niall pulls back, blinks away the bleariness of sleep from his eyes as he looks into Harry’s. “I think so, yeah,” he replies, and they find one another’s hands again and interlace their fingers as they step out and turn left toward their room. “I think dad and her splitting kind of, like, broke something in her. And not just her heart, either. And I think that her going back to Ireland every year is either her way of coping with the fact that she’ll never have what she had again or… or it’s her trying to get over the fact that she’ll never have what she had again.”

Harry blinks, fishes the key to the room out of his jean pocket and hands it to Niall. “That’s so sad,” he says, and it’s mostly to himself, really, and he contemplates Niall’s quiet admission silently in his head and wonders if Niall knows just how lucky the two of them are to be able to still love like they do after everything they’ve been through. “I — I still don’t know if knowing this will help me forget the way her and Greg have treated you, but I think it could help me forgive her. I think… I think I understand, in a weird and fucked up way, what she had to go through.” He walks in, kicks the door shut, toes off his boots and looks at Niall’s pretty, pretty face and wonders if he’s the center of the world because everything seems to be revolving around him. “What she’s still going through.”

Niall walks forward, puts both of his hands on Harry’s cheeks. “We’re so lucky,” he says, and it’s a whisper against Harry’s lips as Niall presses their mouths together, dry and chapped and closed and so damn perfect Harry isn’t sure if he will ever be able to breathe properly afterward. “We’re so fucking lucky, Harry.”

“I know.” And he does; he knows he knows he knows. “I promise I know.” He kisses Niall’s lips, over and over and over, one and two and three and four and five and six, and Niall just lets him, just gives him the freedom and liberation to use him in any way he wants.

And he wants it. Just one more time — because that’s all they have time for, really. And he wants it to be slow, wants it to be easy, wants it to be so gentle and so tender and so soft and so loving, so in love. He wants to crawl all over Niall’s body and imprint himself against Niall’s skin; he wants to jump Niall’s bones and step into his flesh and stay there for the rest of his life.

“One more time?” Harry asks, whispers, and his lips are wet and hot and swollen, and Niall’s cheeks are colored red with the prettiest kind of blush Harry’s ever seen. “One more time before all of this ends?”
Niall breathes Harry in, parts his mouth and suckles at Harry’s lips, eliciting a haggard moan ripped from deep within Harry’s heart. “Nothing’s ending, Harry,” he says, slurs the words against Harry’s lips and maybe, just maybe Harry can let go of all his worries and allow Niall to love him the way they’re both craving for. “Summer’s coming back — I’m coming back. And I’m never, ever going to let you go.”

Harry thinks that’s… good. Great, even, because — well, to be honest, Harry doesn’t like being alone, doesn’t think he can handle being alone without the hope that he won’t be by himself forever.

And Niall gives him that hope, the kind that starts out as a little fire in the pit of a stomach and then abruptly fleshes out once it’s been fed, once it’s been stoked, and he’s nothing more than a blaze of flames that will never be put out and he thinks that’s the kind of epic love everyone is searching for.

He’s found it. He and Niall have found it. With each other. And he never thought, never expected it would be Niall, of all people — Niall, who cares and who learns and who tries and who fights and who begs and who sobs and who prays and who talks and who loves him like he has never been taught, like he was always wanted to feel.

He never thought it would be Niall. But he’s glad — he’s glad it’s Niall because the thought of it being somebody else just doesn’t feel right.

“I love you,” Harry smears the words against Niall’s lips as he puts both of his hands on Niall’s hips, begins to push him backward till the bend of his legs hit the bed and he falls back. “I love you so much, Niall.”

Niall smiles, laughs lightly, and spreads his legs as he scoots up, as he scoots back; Harry lays down, fits himself against Niall completely, nuzzles his face into the warm flesh of Niall’s throat.

“I love you, too, silly boy,” Niall replies, brings both of his hands up to run his fingers through Harry’s hair, gripping the short strands and tugging, hard, to pull Harry away from suckling at his throat. Their eyes meet, hold, and Niall looks just as beautiful now in the dim light coming from the bedside lamp as he did while fireworks painted in all the colors were exploding above their heads. “Always.”

Harry grins, can’t help but feel happy when he’s with Niall, and leans down, puts their lips together; he keeps himself held up with his hands on either side of Niall’s head and allows the rest of his body to adhere and flush against Niall’s.

He can feel Niall all over — he can feel Niall everywhere. Against his skin, in his heart, screaming in his head; he never wants to be empty, never wants to be bare, never wants to be cold ever again.

“I wanna —” Harry begins, meshes the words against Niall’s lips; he pulls back, shakes his head and giggles as Niall follows, licks at the sloppy string of saliva that connects their mouths. Niall looks so fucking hot doing that, too, and Harry can feel his stomach begin to knot and his groin begin to stir. “I want to make love with you.”

Niall swallows; Harry watches it, Harry hears it. “All the way?” Niall asks, blinks; his eyes are big and his lashes are thick and Harry knows how soft they feel when they flutter against his skin and he thinks he’s going to miss the little things the must — but, then again, it is the little things that add together to form the big picture and he doesn’t want to focus on that right now, right now. “You want to…”

“Yeah.” Harry nods, pushes with his hands and maneuvers his body until he’s sat up and straddling Niall’s hips; he can feel Niall’s solidity beneath him, against his bum, and it makes him shiver as he
tugs off his shirt and throws it to the floor, discarded and forgotten. “Yeah, I’d like to. If that’s okay with you.”

Niall smiles. “My silly boy.” Niall reaches up, uses one hand to caress along the acute sharpness of Harry’s cheek while the other gentle scratches at the light freckles on Harry’s shoulder. “I’ll never love anybody as much as I love you.”

His touch moves from Harry’s shoulder and slips along Harry’s clavicle; his fingertips trace the numbers, the date on Harry’s collarbone and it’s a light touch, a faint glance of a sensation that makes Harry whimper in the back of his throat because he knows this is going to be the last time he’ll be able to physically feel the love Niall has for him for a while.

He puts his hands on the hem of Niall’s shirt and begins to pull and to tug; Niall leans up a bit, bends his core and allows Harry to remove the fabric and toss it to the side where it lands atop his, completely out of their minds. His fingertips press against the little pudge of Niall’s tummy, right at the bottom where there’s a small triangle of hair leading down from his bellybutton to his cock, and he digs his nails into the flesh and wonders if Niall will remember this night, will remember this very second whenever he’s shirtless and looks down at his stomach, wonders if Niall will smile like Harry is now.

“You’re so beautiful,” Harry says, whispers, and he trails his fingertips to Niall’s sides, up along his ribs and across his chest and toward his nipples, where he rubs at the little nubs with the pad of his thumb until they’re hard and pebbled and hotly perfect. “I’m going to remember the way you look in this moment for the rest of my life.”

Niall’s mouth opens and he lets out a ragged, choked gasp; his hands move to Harry’s hips and around his waist, and he pushes his fingers beneath the band of Harry’s jeans. And Harry isn’t wearing underwear, so it’s probing fingers against hot, dry flesh and Harry smiles as big as he can when he sees the way Niall’s eyes begin to twinkle.

“You dirty boy,” Niall comments, smirks, and he’s sultry and hot and sexy, too, just as much as he is beautiful, and Harry admires how Niall can be more than one thing at once. “You’ve been naked under these jeans all day and I didn’t even know.”

Harry bites his bottom lip, shivers as Niall’s hungry gaze drops to his mouth. “You never asked,” he replies, and it’s all he has time to get out before Niall’s bucking his hips up harshly, holy fucking shit, and tossing Harry to the side; Niall raises up and leans over, slots one of his legs between both of Harry’s and brings his knee up, grinds the sharpness of his kneecap against Harry’s hardening prick and rubbing his ass on Harry’s thigh. “You want to be on top?”

Niall shakes his head. “I want you to be inside of me,” he says, strong and steady, and then his lips are on Harry’s and they’re kissing, licking into one another’s mouths and flicking each other’s tongues and Harry moans so loud, so hard, and puts his hands in Niall’s hair with a harsh grip to keep him there, to keep him still.

With a muffled curse, Niall begins to undulate his hips on Harry’s thigh, rubbing his hardening cock up and down, up and down, up and down the length of Harry’s leg; Harry pulls away from the kiss and drops his mouth completely open as he spreads his hips, as he begins to buck and grind against Niall’s knee.

“No mouths? No hands?”

Niall shakes his head again and puts his cheek on Harry’s shoulder, puts his face in Harry’s neck, puts his mouth against Harry’s throat and kisses, suckles, bites, sucks at the flesh. “No, absolutely
not,” he replies, and his words are heavy with something and Harry can feel the weight of it on his heart, in his soul. “I just want it to be you.”

Harry nods and whines, cries out with a yell that comes from the very back of his throat; he gets his hands on Niall’s hips, gets his fingers on Niall’s fly, and he dexterously begins to undo each of the buttons, all five of them, till he can shove his fist into the top of Niall’s underwear and grip the base of his cock.

“Fuck, you’re hard.” Harry throws his head back and allows Niall more room to nibble at his throat, at his collarbone, at his tattoo. And he hopes Niall leaves a mark, too, one that won’t fade after a few days — one that he can show off to the world so they know he is no stranger to the feel of love in every form. “Goddamn, baby, you’re so fucking hot.”

Niall hums, moans against Harry’s collarbone as he nibbles on the sharpness. “This is the first time I’ve heard you talk like that,” he says, presses the words into Harry’s skin and he hopes it fucking stays there till the end of time. “I love it — fuck, Harry, I love you so fucking much that it hurts.”

“Oh, God.” Harry takes his hand from Niall’s underwear and wraps his arms around Niall’s waist, arches his body till they’re both flipped over and in the position they first were in. He kisses Niall, hard, all over his face and neck and chest and stomach, drags his teeth along the contours of Niall’s body till he’s standing and panting, sweating. Niall hasn’t taken his eyes off of Harry’s. “Take your pants off and roll over onto your stomach.”

Niall raises a brow, leans up on his elbows; he bites his bottom lip, tries to hold in a smirk that twitches at the corners of his mouth and makes his cheeks hollow and — and maybe a quick blowjob in the back of the van on their way home won’t be too much to ask for.

And besides, it isn’t as if Louis and Liam have never seen or heard Harry and Niall together.

“Do it, Niall.”

It doesn’t properly register in Harry’s mind how — how completely dominating he’s being, really, but Niall does as Harry ordered him to do, and with a smile on his face as well, while Harry rounds the bed and fiddles through the drawer of the nightstand.

“Hurry, H.”

Harry looks over his shoulder, sees that Niall is bare, completely naked, with a pillow under his dick and his ass in the air, oh my, and he looks entirely too good, entirely too beautiful and Harry drops the lube and spills the packet of condoms because he is still able to be blindsided by Niall even after all this time.

“Condoms?”

Niall shakes his head, gives Harry a small grin. “We’re clean,” he says, blinks slowly, so slowly. “And I want to feel you inside of me again.”

Oh.

Harry nods, gulps, and rounds the bed; he kneels on the foot with one knee and puts a palm on Niall’s ass, presses his fingers into the flesh and squeezes. “I wish we had more time with each other,” he muses as a red mark imprints itself onto Niall’s skin from his hard, harsh grip. “I wish I could touch your entire body in all the ways I’ve been dreaming about.”

“When I come back for you, we’ll do it. We’ll do it all.”
“I’m going to miss you so much, Niall. I’m — I’m going to call you every day and I’m going to write, too, and I hate writing because my t’s and r’s look like f’s and I got failed on my eighth grade writing test since the teacher thought I was cussing but I’m going to send you letters even if you can’t read them.”

Niall turns his head, looks over his shoulder and watches Harry’s hand as he continues to mold his fingertips into Niall’s plump ass. “Stop talkin’, baby, and just make love to me, please.”

“Okay.” Harry’s face is red and hot as he fiddles with the cap on the lube; Niall reaches around and grabs his ass, spreads his cheeks, and Harry can’t breathe for a moment as he just stares at Niall in all of his naked, vulnerable glory, and he winds up squeezing out a bit more slick than he meant to.

“This is gonna be cold, Ni.”

“S’okay.”

Harry grins and scoots closer, presses two fingers against Niall’s entrance and begins to rub; Niall jumps, just a bit, and then lets out a sigh as Harry caresses his hole before pushing one finger inside, barely, past the ring of muscle, and curling it up, which brings out a short gasp of shocked elation from Niall.

“You’re tight.”

Niall grunts, pushes back against Harry’s finger. “You only fucked me twice, silly boy,” he replies, rasps, and Harry pulls his finger out, adds another and effectively shuts Niall’s smart mouth up because he doesn’t need to be reminded of how it feels to have Niall inside of him, doesn’t need to blow his load before he gets both of them properly ready to come undone.

“I’m gonna make sure you don’t ever forget the way I feel against your body when you’re away from me.”

Harry scissors his fingers for a moment, adds a third soon; Niall’s loosening and whining, and he squeezes a bit of slick out to make Niall a bit wetter because he likes it so much.

It doesn’t take long, never takes long — Niall’s begging for Harry, begging to be fucked, and Harry hoarsely promises to deliver, pulls his fingers out and attacks his button, undoes his zip, and he’s not got enough patience to wait for completely removing his jeans so he just pulls his length out, lubes it up and squeezes the head for a moment, till he sees stars, and then braces one hand on Niall’s hip, uses his other to hold himself steady as he presses against Niall’s entrance, as he pushes through the ring of muscle.

And it’s tight inside, a bit difficult for Harry to completely thrust his way in, and he has to buck his hips one, two, three, four, five times before he’s bottomed out and flush against Niall’s bare back, gasping his pleasure in Niall’s ear as Niall whines low in his throat at the erotic intrusion.

“Move, Harry.”

“But you’re —”

“Do it, baby.”

Harry nods, puts his lips to the skin beneath Niall’s ear in a kiss as he pulls out, as he pushes back in, over and over and over; he’s slow and steady and solid in his rhythm, wants to take and appreciate, admire all of the little noises Niall makes as he’s fucked good, so good, and grinding against the coarseness of the pillowcase he’s got pushed under his hips and goddamn, Harry’s so sad this is the last time he’s going to have with Niall to himself but he thinks this is the best way to say goodbye.
He keeps at his pace for what feels like hours and hours and hours; he’s breathing hard, panting, and his sweat is mingling with Niall’s and the sheets are damp and his thighs are chafing from the jeans he’s still got on and Niall’s not stopped singing, not stopped moaning and praising and whimpering and asking for more more more more more.

And Harry gives it to him, gives Niall his all. And it doesn’t take long, either, for Harry to build up a certain fire in his stomach and Niall jolts once, moves his entire body backward and Harry's coming before he knows what’s hit him, spilling his cum into Niall in a splash of heat, and he bites down on Niall’s shoulder blade to muffle the yowls that’s building in the back of his throat from the sensation.

“Oh, my, Harry —”

Harry eases out, peels his sticky chest off of Niall’s back and leans away; he situates his jeans as he shimmies down, as he presses his face into Niall’s ass and licks, laves at the hole and gathers all of the cum that’s squeezing out, that’s being squeezed out.

Niall kicks, jerks, and Harry grins, inhales sharply and continues to kiss and suckle at Niall’s hole till he’s clean, till he’s empty, and then he’s grabbing Niall’s hips and flipping his over, opening his mouth and showing Niall the pool of spit and cum on his tongue as Niall fists his cock and jerks himself off, squirting with a yell as he paints Harry’s face with his jizz.

He reaches for Harry’s shoulders, pulls him up, and their mouths catch and hold and he and Harry exchange and swap and share and Harry feels dirty, feels sticky and nasty, and he wants to take one last bath with Niall but right now he just wants to kiss Niall till the only way they can breathe is if it’s one another’s air.
the boys of summer

nobody on the road
nobody on the beach
i feel it in the air
the summer’s out of reach
empty lake, empty streets
the sun goes down alone
i’m driving by your house
though i know you’re not home
but i can see you
your brown skin shinin’ in the sun
you got your hair combed back and your sunglasses on, baby
and i can tell you my love for you will still be strong
after the boys of summer have gone

Harry combs his fingers through Niall’s damp hair and picks out the snarls that laying on it wet never fails to bring as easily, as carefully as he can. “What’re you thinking about?” he asks in a whisper as he opens his eyes, as he takes in the utter darkness he and Niall are bathed in as they lay, as they lounge, as they silently love one another with skin against skin and souls intertwining in the air around them. “You’ve been too quiet.”

After kissing for what felt like hours, the two of them stripped the bed and requested for a clean set of sheets; thankfully and fortunately, the maids were happy to oblige no matter how late it is and Harry greeted them at the door and helped them do up the bed as Niall prepared a hot, hot, hot bath for the two of them.

And it was pleasant, pleasurable. Niall braced himself against the back of the tub and Harry climbed in, grinning and goofy and sloshing water over the side, situated his back against Niall’s chest and allowed Niall to wash his hair, to clean his body, to kiss at his shoulders and neck and spine as they silently soaked in the rose-scented water till it was cold and Harry was wrinkled like a prune and Niall had to wrap him up in the fluffiest, thickest of towels and dry him off completely to get him warm again.

It was perfect — this trip was perfect. Yes, it’s had its good times and its bad times; Harry’s cried a lot and Niall’s fought a lot, and they butted heads a lot, too, and at one point Harry was sure that this would be the last of them, as friends, as brothers, because he knew then what it was like to kiss and be kissed by Niall and he didn’t think he could ever go back to being anything short of forever with one another, but they’ve come together now, are still the same halves of the perfect whole they were before, only stronger, only tougher, only lovelier, and he’s glad they came out of the war with only scars and memories to remind them of how hard they had to push to win.

The memories made are moments Harry’s never going to let go. Ever. He’ll never forget about Niall actually crawling through the window of his bedroom and waking him up with a large grin on his face and a hitch in his voice as he begged for Harry to come with him; he’ll never forget about Niall making his way out of the hot tub and giving Harry his very first thought of ‘what if?’ that sparked the fire that’s rumbling and simmering deep in Harry’s stomach, deep in Harry’s heart. He’ll never forget jerking off to Niall in the bathroom; he’ll never forget Niall’s confusion at being the center of Harry’s sexual arousal; he’ll never forget Niall coaching him to an orgasm; he’ll never forget Niall rejecting him; he’ll never forget Niall telling him a relationship between the two of them won’t work;
he’ll never forget the hurt and the pain and the heartbreak at the thought, at the confirmation of knowing that they probably wouldn’t make it anyway brought on to him.

But he’ll also never forget Niall’s initial touch, the hesitance and the impatience that seared Harry’s skin as Niall began to slowly, slowly give in to the bombardment of emotions he was brewing and stewing for Harry. He’ll never forget all the nights Niall stayed up to read his Bible in hopes of finding answers, he’ll never forget all the lingering glances Niall offered him when he let his walls down, he’ll never forget the glow in Niall’s eyes as he faced his biggest fears, he’ll never forget the battles Niall had to win and the war he had to conquer just to be where he is right now, right at this very fucking second — and with Harry, with his best friend, with the one person in the entire world that he would do anything to keep, with the one person in the entire world that he will keep.

And those memories are not stored in photographs, in drawings, in words that are faded, smeared, crooked and warped around the edges. Photographs don’t hold a damn bit of relevance when it comes to living, when it comes to have been there; a picture may be worth a thousand words, but the memory is worth a million more.

Those memories are stored in the smell of heat and sweat as the windows are down and they’re driving along the blacktop in some backwater town with only one stoplight; those memories are stored in the smell of dirt and sky and dry sun and spicy man, spicy flesh and sex.

Those memories are stored in the feel of shaky fingertips on bodies as both of them pushed through their fear of loving, of being loved; those memories are stored in the feel of the sun pricking behind their eyelids as they cuddled in the backseat of the van with one another.

Those memories are stored in the touch of life, of love, of fearlessness, of an inky needle tattooing forever on flesh; those memories are stored in the touch of sheets on bare skin, of gravel digging into their limbs when they wrestled on the side of the road after Harry took a wrong turn, of relentless need to be close, so close.

Those memories are stored in the taste of a hot mouth, of warm liquor, of perspiration that beaded on top of their lips and creek water that flowed into your lungs after the first kiss that made Harry want to sink to the bottom and hold Niall with him forever; those memories are stored in the taste of home-cooked meals, of sour cum, of sweet candy licked out of each other’s mouths.

Those memories are stored in the sound of laughter when they were happy, of yelling when they were mad, of crying when they hurt, of moaning when they were pleased, of whining when they were stimulated, of groaning of when they touched, of whimpering when they came, of promises when they declared their love, of screaming when they thought it wouldn’t work out, of joking when they realized it would work out, of arguing when they sneaked into the stadium, of singing at the tops of their lungs while they held one another’s hands at the concert, of all the songs and all the colors that will still make Harry think of Niall every time he hears them and every time he sees them no matter how much time passes.

He’ll never forget any of it. And they’re going to make it, too, because they’ve fought harder battles than the ones that are going to come up and neither of them are afraid of getting a little bruised, a little bloody, a little battered.

They’re in love. They’re lucky, and they’ll take care of each other — that’s what you do when you have somebody that will stand by your side forever.

And he thinks — kind of thinks that good things, great things are often ruined before they even begin. It’s overthinking, it’s fantasizing, it’s comparing, it’s imagining, it’s judging, it’s expecting, it’s worrying, it’s asking, it’s doubting, it’s fighting, it’s arguing, it’s reaching. It’s more. It’s all of those
things and more that ruin the great things in life before they even begin.

It almost ruined Harry and Niall before they even began.

You just have to let it evolve naturally — you just have to be patient, be resilient, be tough, be smart. You just have to let it happen naturally.

Harry and Niall did, after the roughness of the initial battle, and look at them now — look how far they’ve come with one another, with their own selves; look at the people they’ve become, at the men they’ve become. Look.

You can’t force love, you can’t fake love. That’s something Harry’s come to realize, something Harry’s come to believe. It’s either there or it isn’t there. If it’s not there, you have to be strong enough to admit that it isn’t and move on; if it is there, you have to be strong enough to fight like hell, to do whatever it takes to keep it there.

Love isn’t about letting something go and waiting for it to return to you — no, love is about letting something go and knowing it will return to you; love is about letting something go and holding your arms open when it returns to you. Love is about fighting, love is about arguing, love is about looking fear in the face and telling it to fuck off with a grin and your hand held by the person you want to live forever, by the person that will live forever in your heart, in your mind, in your body, in your memories.

Love is about holding on when everything is falling apart — love is about giving somebody your heart and knowing that they will treat it tenderly; love is about being afraid, about being so fucking scared you tremble at the very thought of the person you care for but knowing that, with one touch of their shaking fingertips, that you will be as still as the center of the ocean.

“I’m thinking about you,” Niall replies, and it’s a gentle whisper that’s warm against Harry’s chest where it’s breathed against his bare skin, right above his tattoo. “I’m thinking about how you gave me forever in a limited amount of time and how I’ll never be able to repay you for everything that you have done for me. I’m thinking about how grateful I am to know and be loved by you.”

“Please keep talking.” It’s almost dawn, Harry thinks, turning his head to watch as the darkness outside turns to pale blue, and he wonders where all the time has gone even though he knows he’s given it to Niall. “Keep talking and tell me why you love so much.”

Niall laughs, faintly, and presses his lips against Harry’s ribs in a kiss that he can feel all the way to his soul. “You’re my best friend and you’re my lover, as well,” he continues on, just like Harry asked of him. “I don’t know which one is my favorite, which part of you is my favorite. I don’t think I can pick a favorite side of you — I don’t think I can pick a favorite memory of you.” He blinks; Harry can feel his long, thick lashes on the side of his stomach and he shivers. “I appreciate every part of you just like I appreciate every memory I have of you.”

“If I cry, it’s your fault.”

Niall chuckles. “Sorry for saying things that make you feel like you have to cry. Sorry for staring at you all of the time, especially when you’re staring at me, too. Sorry for having to learn how to control the itch I have to touch you at all hours of the day. Sorry for laughing too loud when you do something funny. Sorry for making you wait so long to love me. Sorry for having a cracking voice when you talk so beautiful to me and use words that I know aren’t supposed to be for people like me.” He stops, breathes, and Harry turns his head away from the window and presses his face into Niall’s damp hair and allows his tears to fall knowing that, if Niall feels them, he’ll not say a thing and he’ll never poke fun at Harry for showing his emotions, for wearing his heart on his sleeve.
“Sorry for loving you with my whole heart.”

Harry swallows. “How much do you love me, Niall?” he asks, needs to know the answer because he loves Niall like the sun loves the moon — Harry is fire, is passion, and he thinks Niall loves him like he loves Niall, so fiercely and so completely, and sometimes people are content to just be, to not give, and Harry respects Niall, admires Niall for his ability to care for Harry just as much as Harry cares for him.

They are one. They are both the lover and the beloved; the intimacy they share between the sheets, no matter how cherished, is second to the intimacy they share between their hearts, the proof that they will last.

Harry thinks he knows, just wants to hear it come from Niall’s mouth. He loves to hear Niall speak.

“Too much. And not nearly enough.” Niall curls his hand around Harry’s side and grips the waistband of Harry’s boxers in his fingers, claims Harry as his own and it makes Harry absolutely hot to know that he will never be anybody else’s. “Just know that I will love you the same from a million miles away as I do when I’m right next to you.”

Harry isn’t sure if he will be able to hold everything in when he really does have to tell Niall goodbye, isn’t sure if he will be able to keep himself in check when he really does have to hug Niall tight around the neck before he boards the plane and flies off to begin his future.

“There’s a little corner in my heart that’s for you. And I don’t mean right now, when you’re beside me and I’m in love with you, but when you’re not beside me and I’m still in love with you. That little corner in my heart is yours forever, no matter what happens; it’s quiet and it’s strong and it’s something that only you will have.”

“I’ll take care of that little piece of your heart, Harry, ‘cause you have all of mine. I promise.” Niall smiles. “It’s kind of beautiful, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“The fact that we can lay right here and say goodbye,” Niall replies, blinks again, and Harry wants to keep this moment for the rest of his life. “I think it means we’ve won. I think it means that we’ve won the war we were fighting.”

Harry coughs. “Do you regret it?” he asks, and he’s kind of ashamed at the crack in his voice as he talks, as he tries not to cry, but he doesn’t think Niall would care if he sobs because this is something to be sad about, because this is something to be happy about. “Any of it.”

“Any of it?” Niall repeats, leans up and lays his chin on Harry’s chest; it’s light enough in the room that they can see one another’s face but not the fine details and Harry likes that. “No, I don’t. I don’t regret any of it. Just because we aren’t going to be able to be together in the way we both want doesn’t mean I regret spending my last days with you, doesn’t mean I won’t love you. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me and I’m not going to let you ever forget that.”

Harry reaches for Niall’s jaw, pulls him up; their lips meet and hold, touching lightly, loosely, and Harry keeps his mouth closed and Niall’s not stopped smiling and Harry doesn’t want to say goodbye, doesn’t want to think about saying goodbye, but he has to, but he is.

And it’s okay, really, because Niall’s coming back, because Niall’s not going to be gone forever. It’s okay. It… hurts. A lot more than Harry thought it would, but — but he and Niall love and have loved with a love that is definitely more, that is definitely so much more than anything either of them
have ever seen before.

“You know, Harry, I didn’t fall in love with you,” Niall says against Harry’s lips, leans back with a soft sound so he can speak without having his words muffled and Harry loves how they can talk, loves how they can be honest with one another. “I didn’t walk into love with you. I didn’t slide into love with you.”

Harry’s mouth twitches into a grin. “You fought.”

“I did. I fought the whole way. I didn’t walk into love with you — I shut my eyes and I closed my fists and I screamed the whole fuckin’ way. I wanted you, but I didn’t want to want you. And I fought that, too. Even though I chose you, I fought you. I fought myself. And now — now I see you in lifetimes and universes and falling stars. Now I see you in all the colors. I see you in all realities. And I know that I would still choose you in every single life, no matter how I come to love you.”

Harry cups Niall’s cheek, puts his thumb in the soft hollow beneath Niall’s eye and rubs as softly as he can, as gently as he can, and he isn’t as solid as he wants to be but he doesn’t think that matters. “Would you change it?” he asks, wets his lips. “If you could go back in time, would you change anything at all?”

“No. No, I wouldn’t change a thing. I would go back, though — not to change anything, like I said, but to feel certain things for a second time and appreciate them more than I did at the time they were happening.” He grins; Harry can’t see it but he can feel it and he thinks he understands just what Niall’s talking about. “I knew when I met you as a little kid with a bad attitude that we were going to have an adventure with each other.”

“Have we?”

“Yeah.” Niall’s smile is big, so big and so bright and so brilliant, and Harry’s going to miss it, going to miss the way Niall makes him feel as if he can take on absolutely anything the world throws at him — together, they are kings, they are legends, they are heroes, they are the boys of summer who see all the colors. “It’s not over yet, either. And I can’t wait to discover every single secret of the universe with you by my side.”

“Oh, Ni.”

“Because it’s you. I know for you, it’s me — it’s kind of always been me. But it’s you for me, too, Harry, and it always will be.”

Harry’s heart swells at that moment, makes his chest so full he feels as if he’s going to explode; Niall puts his hand on top of Harry’s collarbone, curls his fingers against the black ink on his skin, and they kiss with open mouths and bare souls, and Niall rips Harry to pieces and puts him back together again and it’s something that will follow the both of them long after summer ends and all the colors fade.

There’s a knock on the door a while later; Harry’s lips are swollen, thick and numb, as he detaches himself from Niall’s grip and does his best to not trip as he walks forward. Louis and Liam are stood on the other side, ragged and wide awake, and Harry lets them in, and he and Niall hurry and dress and pack because they’ve got something to show both Harry and Niall before they kiss the last night of summer goodbye and Harry doesn’t think he would rather do anything else than this.
“How’d you find this place, Lou?” Harry asks as he begins to climb up the ladder after Niall; it’s rusty and creaky, bent and broken in a few places, kind of flaky with old metal under his hands, and he’s quite afraid that if too much weight is put on it that it will surely snap. Good thing Louis and Liam have already climbed up. “S’off the beaten path and all. And I don’t think taking the van off road is what you would call being smart.”

Louis huffs from above, kicks at the ladder and makes it shake; Niall stops, curses, and Harry has to grab Niall’s leg before he falls from the fright of the sudden movement.

“Do that again, Lou, and I swear to God that I will pull every single bit of your hair out one at a time so you can feel everything.”

Louis laughs, throws his head back and guffaws. “Liam and I pulled over to have a quick cry as the sun was coming up,” he answers, and Harry frowns at that, wonders why Louis and Liam were crying and if it has anything to do with the reason he had tears in his eyes, too, when he answered the door. “We saw the light hit this tower and thought it would be cool as fuck to get a twelve pack and drink it before we hit the road to go home. Thought maybe it would be awesome to go out just as the day comes in.”

Niall looks down at Harry over his shoulder with a small smile on his lips and a big sparkle in his eyes. “Only makes sense to end this with a water tower since we started it with one, don’t you think?” he muses, and Harry remembers the hitches in his soul when he saw what Niall had painted on the tower when they were saying goodbye to Janie and wild hearts don’t break, don’t shatter, don’t crack in two and fall to the side, never to be mended again.

Wild hearts burn with the hottest kind of blaze, of flame, and he thinks that makes sense, really, since he and Niall have been stoking each other’s fires all summer long.

The lot of them are silent as Harry and Niall continue on up the ladder; Niall pulls himself up and through the square hole first, adjusts his knees on the ledge and puts his hand down for Harry, who takes it and allows himself to be helped in climbing beside him. Louis and Liam are on the other side, sat on the ledge with their legs swinging and their arms placed on the lower bit of the metal railing, and Harry reaches over, grabs one of the six packs and sets it between him and Niall, opens the first beer and takes a sip.

It’s a bit hot, a bit lukewarm; it fizzes and burns as it settles in his stomach and he sighs, leans his head on Niall’s shoulder as he thinks, as he attempts to count all the colors that are streaked across the sky from the rising sun. It’s a mix of green and blue and yellow and pink and orange; he wants to pick them from the sky and keep them with him at all times so he can look at them and remember how happy he is, how happy he was.

And — and oh, God. He’s happy. He is happy. He is happy, isn’t he? He is. He is, and he didn’t even know it.

And he thinks, knows that the worst thing in the world can happen to him, to them, to somebody, but the next day the sun will come up and replace the moon and he will still put his pants on one leg at a time, will still try to smile at the strangers he passes on the sidewalk, and he wishes he would have realized how happy he was when he had the time to appreciate it.

Because you can’t get a feeling, a moment back after it’s gone. And he thinks that’s why Niall wants to go back — not to change anything, like he said, but to experience and appreciate a few things for a second time.

He thinks that would be perfect. Because he’s got a strange weight in his stomach, because he’s got a
sour taste in the back of his throat; he’s going to miss the people, he’s going to miss the memories, he’s going to miss the person he was.

He’ll never be this way again. How odd.

“Why did the two of you stop to have a cry with each other?” Niall asks as he takes Harry’s beer from him, as he brings it to his mouth and gulps the entire neck out; he shrugs Harry looks at him, gives Harry a slick grin of suavity that he wants to kiss off of Niall’s face. “You’re driving first, silly boy. Can’t have you drinking.”

Harry sighs.

“Nothing too awfully bad,” Liam replies, and he’s on the other side of Louis, has his head laid down on his arms which are resting on the railing and he’s smiling softly, so simply. “Louis just got a little upset about me and Niall leaving in a few days, is all.”

Louis coughs, looks down at the ground thirty feet below, and Harry’s heart goes out to him because he knows how Louis feels, because he knows what Louis’s thinking; they’re in the same boat, kind of: their best friends are leaving them behind to pursue their dreams and it’s… odd to be alone. Strange; not necessarily unwelcome but most definitely uninvited.

“It’s just that — there’s a whole world at their waiting for us, boys. All sorts of cities and all sorts of towns and all sorts of art, music, beauty, history. It’s there for us to have, if we want it.” Louis takes a drink of his beer, lets himself have a second. “And I guess I always thought the four of us would be doing it together. All of it. But Liam’s going to Stanford and Niall’s heading off to Oklahoma and Harry and I are staying behind and the four of us have never been far away from each other for long ever since we were children and that’s… scary to think about. Not having all of us together anymore.”

Harry bites his bottom lip, searches with his fingers and finds Niall’s hand to hold; he thinks he understands what Louis’s thinking, what Louis’s attempting to say.

“It’s — it’s kind of scary, isn’t it?” Niall asks, and he’s slow and contemplative and holding Harry’s hand tightly. “It’s scary that all of this, all that we have with each other could be gone so… so fast. So soon. The way we’ve felt, the places we’ve seen, the people we’ve met while we were with each other — all of that could be gone. And we would be just memories to each other, just become a chapter or two in one another’s lives with dog-eared pages ‘cause we love to reread it so much.”

Harry blinks, thinks that there’s something about the viscidity of new days sunrises bring on that makes saying goodbye so fucking hard and all the more worthwhile than ever before.

Because the little things, the little moments, the little words? They aren’t little. And life kind of becomes more meaningful, more beautiful, more colorful when you realize that you’ll never be able to experience the same moment again after it’s gone.

And you never really think that the last time will be the last time, either. You think you’ll have more, think you’ll always have more — you think you’ll have forever but forever turns out to be the last month of summer before college starts spend on the road heading to a concert and friends separate and you don’t have it. You don’t have forever.

All you have left is the memories. And he wants to choke on them, on the memories.

It’s a thousand moments, a million moments, too, that Harry’s taken for granted, that Harry’s not appreciated as much as he should have — and all because he thought he was going to be able to
have thousands more, millions more.

One day, you’ll just be a faded, smeared, crooked memory to some people; one day, you’ll just be a loose thought or an abstract concept to some people. And they’ll forget all the words you said and all the things you did and all the ways you moved, all the ways you lived, but they’ll never forget the way you made them feel and Harry thinks if he’s going to be nothing more than a memory, nothing more than a chapter or two in the lives of the three boys sat around him, he’s going to be a fucking good one.

“You know, I don’t know where I’m gonna be in five, ten, fifteen years from now,” Liam begins, and Harry shuts his eyes as the colors of the sunrise begin to broaden and stripe the sky with neon. He misses the blue because it was the same hue as Niall’s eyes. “I don’t know if I’m gonna be a doctor or if I’m gonna be living with my mum or if I’ll be dead. And I don’t really care, either, as long as I’m with you, with the four of you.” He smiles and Harry hurts and he doesn’t like that they have to say goodbye to each other right now. “And a nice view and good skies, too.”

Harry grins, laughs, turns his head and muffles his chuckles into Niall’s shoulder; Niall smells like him, smells like the both of them, and he brings his free hand up, grips Niall’s shirt and clutches on to it for dear life because this is one of those last moments and he doesn’t want to forget a single detail.

“But also, even if we don’t come back to each other after this day, I want all of you to know that the one thing that will last forever is the fact that you’re important to me, all of you,” Liam continues; Louis makes a noise and Harry opens his eyes, raises up, sees that Louis is wiping furiously at his face to hide his tears but he doesn’t think Louis ought to be ashamed of the way he feels right now. “We came for a good time, not a long time. And I want to look back on my life and say that I did the best I could while I was stuck in this place, that I had as much fun as I could while I was stuck in this place, that I lived my life the way I wanted while I was stuck in this place.”

Harry takes his head off of Niall’s shoulder and leans up to meet Liam’s eyes. “Did you?” he asks, wets his chapped lips.

“I did.” Liam nods, smiles. “I think we all did. And I think we’re never going to stop.”

Harry’s chest burns. “Why do I get the feeling that we’re saying goodbye to each other for good?” he asks, and his words are quiet but his reluctance to do so, to say goodbye for good is strong enough to move mountains and dry up the oceans.

“Because we could be.”

Harry turns to Niall quickly with wide eyes, with a racing heart. “If that’s so, promise me one thing.” He swallows; it’s so loud he can hear it long after it’s over and he wonders if pain fades into the background like a consistent noise buzzing at the back of his ears. “If this is goodbye for good, promise me one thing, all of you.”

Niall nods; he turns, looks at Louis and Liam till they do so, as well.

“Promise me you’ll always remember me,” he says, makes them swear, and Louis and Liam nod again before he turns back to Niall, before he meets Niall’s eyes. “Promise me that you’ll never do the things we did with another person. Promise me that you’ll never forget me. Promise me that you’ll remember everything we did, everything we saw.”

Niall’s smile is slow and soft. “You’re simply unforgettable, silly boy,” he says, grabs Harry by the back of the head and pulls him in; their lips meet in a kiss and Harry closes his eyes, whimpers brokenly, holds on, and behind him he can hear Louis and Liam moving, talking and whispering
amongst themselves, and Harry appreciates that they are giving him and Niall a few moments alone.

He pulls back first, Harry does, and takes a deep breath. “You are all the colors, Niall,” he says, and his words are shaky and his voice is hoarse and he thinks that this is the only time he’s ever been afraid of the fire Niall’s broiling in his body. “You turned my world from black and white into all the colors and I’ll never look at anything the same again.”

Niall smiles, rubs the tip of his nose against Harry’s. “You know, I think that bad timing and honest feelings is one of the worst and most painful combinations in the world.” He presses a quick kiss to Harry’s lips. “But I also think that people with the wrong timing can get a second try, too, and we’ll have that. We’ll have our second chance when I come back for you. And if it doesn’t work? We’ll have our third, we’ll have our fourth, we’ll have our fifth. I’m never giving up on you — I’m never letting you go.”

“I’ll wait.” Harry smiles, tries to smile, but there’s tears in his voice and there’s tears in Niall’s eyes, too, and he thinks he can hear Louis and Liam crying, as well. “I’ll wait for you. I love you.”

“Everything’s changing, but nothing’s going to stop, Harry.” Niall’s smile is so sharp Harry thinks it could cut glass — and it is. Cutting glass, that is. The thick wall Niall had up around his heart, made of glass, is gone, and he did that himself. “We’ve still got next summer, don’t we, boys?”

Louis and Liam nod, and Harry laughs and Niall shakes his head, leans forward, kisses Harry on the lips and when he can’t continue with the touch because he’s laughing too hard, because Harry’s giggling too much, he puts his mouth against Harry’s neck and Harry can feel Niall’s joyful, elated smile.

And Harry kind of thinks that there’s no better time than the approach of an impending autumn to start letting go of all of the things that have held you down, that have brought you down, and allow them to fall off of your back like dead leaves that slip from sleeping trees.

No summer ever comes back, and no two summers are the same; time goes on, rolls on, and people change like the seasons, going through stages and coming around full-circle, only to do it over again and again and again.

And they spend this last night, this last morning together, sat on top of a water tower in the middle of nowhere and drinking expensive champagne that tastes an awful lot like cheap beer. And it means everything. Or maybe it means nothing at all, too. All Harry knows is that it means enough to make him happy.

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i \text{never will forget those nights}
\]
\[
i \text{wonder if it was a dream}
\]
\[
i \text{remember how you made me crazy}
\]
\[
i \text{remember how i made you scream}
\]
\[
i \text{now i don’t understand what happened to our love}
\]
\[
i \text{but babe i’m gonna get you back}
\]
\[
i \text{i’m gonna show you what i’m made of}
\]
\[
i \text{can see you}
\]
\[
i \text{your brown skin shinin’ in the sun}
\]
\[
i \text{i see you walking real slow and you’re smilin’ at everyone}
\]
\[
i \text{i can tell my love for you will still be strong}
\]
\[
i \text{after the boys of summer have gone}
\]
\[
i \text{on the road today i saw a deadhead sticker on a cadillac}
\]
a little voice inside my head said
don’t look back, you can never look back
i thought i knew what love was
what did i know
those days are gone forever
i should just let them go but

i can see you
your brown skin shinin’ in the sun
you got that top pulled down and that radio on, baby
and i can tell you my love for you will still be strong
after the boys of summer have gone

i can see you
your brown skin shinin’ in the sun
you got that hair slicked back and those wayfarers on, baby
i can tell you that my love for you will still be strong
after the boys of summer have gone

— Don Henley, ‘the Boys of Summer’
any colour you like

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

five years later

The wooden steps leading up to the second story entrance are creaking and whining, complaining loudly under his weight and that of the bags he’s got on his shoulders; he takes them two at a time, anyway, even if the dimness of the moon shining up above isn’t near enough light to keep him from tripping. He’s excited, though, and he doesn’t quite care about the amount of safety he uses as long as he isn’t another minute late, as long as he isn’t another second late.

He’s quick with the keys, jerks them out of his pocket and fiddles with the lock; the door swings wide and he walks in, shuts it quietly and turns the deadbolt and hopes he’s silent enough to keep the rest of the house sleeping. The apartment built on top of the bar is large, spacious — the living room is to the right and the kitchen is to the left; there’s a corridor dividing the entire space that leads to the master bedroom at the end while there are two other rooms on either side, adding together to make five plus the three other little areas used for certain things, as well.

It’s… nice. Big. Roomy and spacious and comfortable, cozy. Decorated without color scheme, without mind or matter; there’s ugly lamps stashed all around that are too frilly, too much, and the wallpaper is different in every single room because nobody could decide over anything. It smells good, though, like spice and cinnamon and fruit all rolled up into one, and he thinks this is probably Janie’s doing more than his.

And, speaking of Janie, she’s sat on one of the three sofas in the living room, glasses perched on her nose as she reads from a thick book by the dim, yellow light of her favorite lamp, the one Niall bought her last year for her birthday. It doubled as an anniversary gift, as well, which she whined and griped about, but Niall’s a college kid still trying to work his way through med school and while he’s doing his best, sometimes it isn’t enough.

She raises her eyes from the book and gives him a strange kind of glare that makes him stop in his tracks and drop the bags he’s got in his hands. He reasons he’ll pick them up later, when he isn’t frazzled from the speedy car ride

“How’ve you been, sweetheart?”

“You’re late,” she replies, snorts; she dog ears the page she’s on and shuts the book, puts it on the table the lamp is on and takes off her glasses afterward. “I’ve been up worried sick about you because you never think to call when things like this happen.”

She stands up — or, well, tries to stand up, that is, but it’s quite hard to do with the rounded, pregnant belly she’s nursing, and he kind of thinks it’s doubled in size since he was last here.

Niall rushes to Janie’s aid, nearly trips over the rug she’s got laid out — it’s new, wasn’t here last month when he came back for a long weekend visit — and holds his hand out, helps to pull her to
her feet when she takes hold of his forearm with both of her palms.

“The baby been givin’ you trouble, eh?”

She nods. “Unfortunately, our little bean likes to use my bladder as a pillow and I’ve had to change the sheets twice this week because I’ve pissed myself,” she says, and Niall isn’t really sure if he wanted to know that but he does now and there isn’t anything he can do to change that. He thinks Janie’s pregnancy is tied with Gemma’s for the worst time of his life. “I can’t even enjoy tomato soup or hot chocolate anymore without her getting upset at me for it.”

“You do know that it’s May, right? And that we’re in Oklahoma, too.”

“I don’t give a goddamn what month or state we are in. I have craved two things for six months, and now that I’m nearing the end of the second trimester the little baby wants to throw a hissy fit whenever I eat tomatoes or chocolate. She can’t have it both ways.”

Niall chuckles lightly as he drops to his knees to kneel in front of her, puts both of his hands on her stomach. “You gotta be nice to your mummy, baby girl, because you aren’t the one that has to deal with her,” he says to Janie’s stomach, rubs the firmness through her nightgown and giggles when she kicks faintly, joyous and easy; he leans forward, presses his lips just above Janie’s bellybutton and then stands, holds her cheeks and kisses her on the forehead. “I’m sorry she’s giving you problems.”

“Yeah? You should be.”

Niall cackles at that. “It isn’t my fault you’re pregnant, Janie,” he says, shakes his head; he’s just the uncle, really, who was given the task of naming the “little bean”, as she refers to her baby as since her husband has decided on the middle. “I’ve thought of a name, by the way.” He grins, remembers the night he offered to babysit for his roommate’s sister and wound up enjoying putting together a puzzle better than he did going out for drinks. “Arielle.”

“Arielle Isabelle?”

At that, Niall blanches; maybe he still isn’t on the right track to naming his niece. “Okay, the important thing is that we still have time come up with one,” he replies, tries his best to backtrack as Janie gives him a glowering look full of total malic. “And it isn’t as if we’ve not got a book of names to look at, either, so. Everything will be okay.”

Janie scoffs, rolls her eyes; she’s dressed in a lavender-colored nightgown that makes her hair seem lighter than he knows it to be and he kind of likes how soft she’s gotten since becoming pregnant, since getting married, since settling down.

“Don’t you dare try to change the subject on me, Niall Horan,” she says, smacks him none too lightly on the shoulder; she may be soft, but she’s still just as fierce as she used to be, as well. And maybe even more. Niall’s the one who’s always bringing her vicious side out, anyway. “Louis and Liam have been beside themselves with waiting on you to call, and when you never did they were so worried that I had to send them and Freddie away to Cheryl’s before they talked too loud and gave away the plan to Harry.”

At that name, Niall smiles and doesn’t try to hide it from her no matter how upset she is with his lack of communication. “He still doesn’t know, does he?” he asks, and he’s giddy, kind of, and he thinks that he can feel his hair raising on his skin at the thought of seeing that precious smile Harry always gives him whenever he comes back from school, as if he isn’t sure there will be a time after for them. “That I decided to take the summer off of classes to spend with him, I mean.”
She shakes her head. “He’s been suspicious lately, asking a few questions that none of us were able to give him the answer to, but as far as I know he has absolutely no idea,” she replies, and she’s smiling, too, and Niall’s overcome, all of a sudden, with the purity of the life all of them have together — all five of them, Niall and Harry and Janie and Louis and Liam. “Louis and Liam are the two who I’ve been having to keep a close eye on so they didn’t ruin the surprise.”

He laughs, throws his head back and guffaws; five years later, down the road, and Louis and Liam still haven’t changed even with fatherhood and the maturity it tends to bring. He’s kind of glad, though — because a lot of things happened all at once, hit all at once, and the one thing that has stayed the same is the way they all are with one another.

That’s… something he didn’t expect. Not after that summer, the one where he felt himself be peeled away and broken down and then built right back up again. He wasn’t sure what he expected after saying goodbye to Harry in the airport, but he damn sure knew what he wanted and — and, well, he kind of thinks that this reality he has with Harry, with the love of his life, is better than anything he could have ever dreamed of.

“That doesn’t surprise me at all.”

She rolls her eyes. “I wish it did me,” she replies, but she’s got a smile on her face and he kind of thinks that everything is okay even as she’s pretending to be angry about the whole ordeal. “He’s sleeping, though. Harry is, I mean. Went to bed a bit earlier than normal because he had a rough night and a bad headache after serving for seven hours straight.”

Niall frowns. “It’s not healthy for him to be in constant movement that long,” he comments, and he knows how busy the bar the two of them built two years ago, the two of them own gets at night — especially on Friday nights, as it is today, what with college and high school letting out for the summer and young kids just trying to get their first taste of freedom. “I wish he would take better care of himself when I’m not around. He always worries me when I’m away and not right next to him.”

“He does take great care of himself. It’s just that sometimes he misses you, and the only way to get you off of his mind is if he works himself into exhaustion. And it doesn’t help that we’ve been understaffed ever since I got pregnant and you went off to med school and Gemma flew back to LA.”

Niall thins his lips. “I’m gonna start advertising for a few more bartenders tomorrow to help with this problem,” he replies, makes the decision as he says the words. “Maybe part time kids from the community college just up the road would be okay with having a job to keep them busy this summer.”

Janie nods. “Sounds like a good idea,” she says, offers him a smile. “Now, get in that room and love Harry up — he’s missed you something fierce lately and I read somewhere in a Playboy that sex is a natural remedy for headaches.”

He blushes at her words, at her suggestions, but — well, she isn’t exactly wrong; he is definitely going to love Harry up as much as he can and as quick as he can, too, before the sun rises in the morning, because he misses Harry when he’s gone, misses Harry’s touches and Harry’s scents and Harry’s feel and Harry’s sounds and Harry’s tastes and the way Harry can calm him down, can bring him back, can keep him still, can remind him that everything’s going to be okay even when it doesn’t feel as if things are ever going to settle and cease.

“Thank you for waiting on me, Janie,” he says, praises, and he kisses her on the forehead again, is overly glad that he has somebody he can think of as a sister. “Thank you so much for keeping
everything a surprise for Harry.”

She nods, rolls her eyes, swats at his bum until he’s chuckling and jogging away, jogging off; the corridor is long, kind of, and he has to turn right at the end to find the door of his and Harry’s share room. It’s pulled to, not shut, and Niall pushes it open; it creaks, of course, every single door in the bar and apartment does, and he kicks it closed and turns the lock when he’s in, when he’s surrounded by darkness that smells like him and Harry and something altogether spicy, sweet, soft and sexy.

Hmm. He takes a deep, sharp inhale; he’s missed this, missed this so much, and he comes back, comes to visit Harry often, but seeing each other every other weekend when Niall’s able to get away from classes isn’t something he particularly enjoys.

It was worse when Harry was still in California, though, and taking classes at a community college to get his degree in business, something that came up all of a sudden — it was worse when Harry called Niall, ignored the time difference, and talked to him for hours about what he’s missing, about how he’s being missed.

Those first two years were… bad. And lonely, dark, kind of lost and depressing; he’s glad they’re here now, glad Maura gave Niall the liberation to spend the rest of the money however he wanted, glad he and Harry talked one another into purchasing a rather large lot of land, five hundred and twelve acres, glad the two of them were supported by their mothers, by their siblings, by their fathers — which, yeah, what a fucking development, one that neither really saw coming — in building a bar five hours south of Stillwater in the mountains of Oklahoma where all of them could live together in peace forever.

And ever and ever and ever.

He’s quick to kick off his shoes, to pull his shirt over his head, to undo his belt and shove his jeans down his legs. Once finished, wearing only his boxers, he walks forward, blindly, only guided by the dim yellowness of the moon shining through the gaps in the long red curtains Harry’s got hanging up over the large windows to the left, till his knees hit the edge of the bed, and he falls on top of the mattress, falls on top of Harry.

Harry is startled, caught off guard, and he jumps a bit, yells a bit, but then Niall’s got his mouth on Harry’s bare tummy after feeling around with his nose for a short second and he’s kissing Harry’s stomach, kissing Harry’s chest, kissing his way up Harry’s hot, hot skin till he’s at Harry’s mouth and he’s tugging Harry’s bottom lip between his teeth to lick at with his tongue as Harry whines in the back of his throat and wraps his arms around Niall’s shoulders and holds him so close, so tight, so completely tough.

And they stay like that for a moment, swallowed up by the darkness and the deepness of the room, of their room; Niall slots himself between Harry’s legs, fits himself against Harry’s body, groin to chest, and he takes his time with Harry’s mouth, kisses him slow and kisses him fast and kisses him soft and kisses him fierce.

After a while, when there’s a trail of spit leaking from Harry’s mouth and pooling in the hollow of his throat, Niall pulls back and blinks, breathes; he’s panting, out of breath from the intensity of the kiss, and he reaches over, manages to tap the switch on the bedside lamp and turn it on.

The room is bathed in yellow light not unlike the moon outside and he looks down, sees Harry’s face. It’s been a month, give or take a few days here and there, since they’ve last seen one another, and he’s not changed very much, really, since he was eighteen. They’re twenty-two now, both of them, and while they’ve gotten harder, gotten leaner, gotten heavier, gotten longer, not much has
changed — Harry’s hair is still the color of chocolate with red tints, rich like cherry, still wild no matter how short or how long he wears it, and Niall’s smile is still higher on one side than the other, still trembles when he thinks about all the colors Harry never fails to paint him in even when he feels like he’s nothing but the darkness.

He grins. “Hi, Harry,” he says, breathes, moves down and puts his lips to Harry’s again in a quick, chaste kiss that’s wet and sloppy. “I’ve missed you so much.”

Harry smiles, all sorts of sleepy and soft and so easy, so effortless, and wets his mouth, licks off their amalgamated spit from his lips. “You scared me, baby,” he says, whispers, and his voice is hoarse, hard around the edges, and it sends shivers of joy down Niall’s bare back where Harry touches with his fingertips. He’s missed this graceful intimacy. “Why are you here? I thought you were coming back next month.”

Niall lays his face down, puts his cheek to Harry’s chest and listens to his heart thud-thud-thud in his ear. “I’m not taking any summer classes this year.” His grin grows and he feels the right side of his mouth lift higher than the left but it doesn’t bother him anymore because Harry’s helped him learn to love every single bit of himself even if the world tells him he probably should not. “You’ve got me to yourself till the tenth of August, and I don’t plan on going away till the very last second.”

“Oh, Niall.” Harry sighs and his heart is calm, cool in his chest; it’s steady and gentle, thud thud thud thud, and Niall loves it, missed it when he had to fall asleep without Harry and the sound of his heart. “I have you all summer? I have you to myself? And you aren’t going to go away too early? I get to — I get to keep you for a little while longer than usual?”

Niall nods; it’s been so long since they’ve had a summer together, since they’ve had more than a few stolen weeks together — five years ago was the last summer, the last time, and look where that got them, look how far they’ve come since then.

They’re still in love, still just as much infatuated with and captivated by each as they used to be — only more, only much more. So much more. He isn’t sure how he still feels on fire and frozen in the deepest part of the coldest ocean at the same time and, if ever asked, won’t be able to explain it, either. Can’t explain it, really.

The memories from that summer — the one that each summer is compared to, the one that each summer is going to be compared to, always — haven’t faded, haven’t fallen away; Niall will never forget the spontaneity of it all, of the idea and of the drive and of the feelings and of the pain and of the hurt and of the laughter and of the tears and of all the touches, of all the tastes, of all the colors. He and Harry brought something great out in one another five years ago — something colorful, something large, something that infiltrates through the black and white world and paints strokes of beauty that everybody can see if they would just look, if they would just try to look and not be afraid of what they see.

And it’s not gone away. Oh, no. Never. It’s only gotten bigger, only gotten stronger. Like their love.

They’re it for one another. They’re the lucky ones. Just like Harry thought so five years ago. Niall’s glad he understands it now, glad he understands that love wins. Always.

Niall smiles; Harry’s always right. “I’m not leaving any time soon, silly boy,” he says, presses a kiss to Harry’s throat and then pulls back, smiles down at the love of his life and he’s still got a few years left in school and apprenticing under a veterinarian but soon he and Harry can be happy and together just like they’ve always wanted. “Janie said you’ve got a headache.”
“Yeah.” Harry nods, frowns, wraps his arms around Niall’s waist and pulls him in, pulls him close; they’re touching from top to bottom and Niall can feel everything, physically and mentally and emotionally, and he wonders if their souls twist in the same way that their bodies do. “Had a hell of a time serving today. It’s been rough.”

Niall hums, presses his lips together and nods his head; the bar has been going strong for two years, for the most part, and Niall tries his best to do his fair share in managing the business even when he’s away but Harry is most definitely the brains (and the balls) behind this establishment. It’s not been easy, no — and of course, chasing your dreams are never easy; otherwise, nobody would work hard — but they’ve fought long, fought hard, and they aren’t out of the woods yet, really, but they’re definitely above water now and the sun is warm in their eyes.

“I’m hiring at least two more bartenders soon so you don’t overwork yourself and I don’t have to worry about you when I’m gone,” he announces, leans down and puts his lips to Harry’s forehead; he’s at a good angle, a nice angle, and he can feel Harry’s half-hard morning wood through his boxers. It makes him smirk against Harry’s skin, makes him remember all of the times he and Harry were too excited at being united again to keep their hands off of each other — even had a wild encounter in an airport restroom, as well, but that’s a story they’re going to keep to themselves. Maybe. “But we can talk about that later. Right now, I just want to talk about how much I’ve missed you.”

Harry laughs, giggles, and Niall adores how inspiring it is to hear his lover’s joy in person instead of over the phone and wonders if he can bottle it up to keep with him forever. “You want to talk about how much you’ve missed me?” Harry asks, repeats, and he’s a little minx, really, and wiggles his hips and thrusts up a bit, just a little bit, and — and, oh, Niall thinks Harry’s idea is so much better than talking, yes it is, and hopes the two of them can keep quiet enough to not disturb any occupants in the house tonight. “How about you show me, baby boy?”

Niall needs no more prompting, instead drops his lips on Harry’s in a gentle kiss that’s just mouth on mouth, so soft and so light, and Harry smiles, laughs, spreads his knees further and wraps his legs around Niall’s waist.

It’s a compromising position, really, because Harry’s already more than half-hard — he’s always getting horny even when he isn’t asleep, something Niall loves and hates all in the same breath — and Niall feels himself growing, feels himself tightening, and he wonders how long he can drag Harry’s pleasure out, wonders how many times he can make Harry come till they’re both lost in the sensation of each other.

He pulls back, Niall does, and his mouth is wet and his eyes are wide and Harry’s face is red, a bit pink, and his hair is messy where Niall’s hands were running through it and really, he’s seen a lot of beautiful people — even more beautiful than Harry, too — but they don’t compare to Harry’s grace or amount to the thick effect he has always had on Niall.

He’s… different. He’s a mess. He likes sunrises better than sunsets but hates waking up early just as much as he hates going to sleep late; his eyes are shaped strangely and his hair is always greasy and his nose is big and his lips are thin and his chin is small and he’s got a mole to the right of his mouth and his body is large, lean, thick, and he’s always so clumsy he nearly falls over himself all the time.

And he’s beautiful. To Niall. The most beautiful, that is. It’s his heart, Niall thinks. Something he knows is there but can’t readily explain. He’s okay with it.

“Want me in you?” he asks, deep and hoarse, and Harry nods and it’s a quick movement of limbs, really, as Niall reaches for the bedside table and digs in the drawer for the lube while Harry goes to work taking his boxers off with one hand while his other attempts to pull Niall’s down his legs, as
Harry grins, huffs, and he’s sweating, got damp little droplets on his forehead and temple that Niall leans down to lick off and Harry’s sweet and sour all at once and he loves it and he loves Harry more.

“I don’t want to wait any longer,” Harry says, and he’s whining, got this catch in the back of his throat that Niall feels deep inside of his stomach where it spreads out into a fire hotter than the sun. “You’ve been gone for a month and a half, Ni, and my hand doesn’t feel near as good as you do.”

Niall makes a noise then and he hurries the process along; one finger turns into two and then three and then four, because Harry can take it and because Harry needs it, and he’s curling them up, petting Harry’s prostate, dragging noises out of Harry’s mouth that bounce and echo in the atmosphere they’ve created, and Harry’s leaking against his stomach, painting his tummy with creamy precum, and Niall removes his digits and grabs the lube and squeezes a large dollop in his hand and slicks up his cock from tip to top and puts the head against the rim and pushes inside and when he’s in enough he grabs Harry’s face by his cheeks and kisses him as he fills Harry up, up, up.

And Harry opens his mouth against Niall’s, allows Niall to slip his tongue inside for a bit of tasting before he removes it and instead focuses on kissing Harry’s lips as he waits for Harry to adjust.

It doesn’t take long, never truly does now that they’re used to being this way with one another, and Harry pulls away when he’s ready, puts his face against Niall’s throat and breathes into the hollow between his collarbones, licks at the tattoo he’s got on his clavicle, and Niall shivers as he pulls out, as he pushes back in, and they’re quiet, have to be quiet, and Niall knows neither of them are going to last very long and he reasons that they’ve got the entire summer to push their limits and take each other as high as they’ve ever gone before.

Harry comes a few minutes before Niall, smears his cum against Niall’s tummy, and he’s a whimpering, whining mess with bright tears in the corners of his pretty green eyes as Niall fucks him slowly till he hits his climax, as well, and it’s exploding stars and dried oceans and Niall’s gentle when he pulls out, shudders at the noise of Harry’s hole as it lets him go, and then falls to the side, grabs Harry in his arms, and they cuddle, legs intertwined and souls tangled together so tight it’s impossible for them to be pulled apart.

Harry yawns, nestles against Niall’s chest and raises his hand, puts the tips of his fingers against Niall’s tattoo on his collarbone, tracing the faded ink of the year the two of them fell in love.

It’s been five years since then, and while Niall’s kept his body free of ink save for the two tattoos he got while in Atlanta, Harry’s added to his matching set, as well. They’re everywhere — tattoos, that is. And some of them are weird, some of them he can’t explain; sometimes he would come home and Harry would have a new tattoo and, well, it was always the same reason — it seemed like a good idea at the time. That’s how Harry lives his life.

Everything about their lives, about their shared lives are just made up of ‘it seemed like a good idea’ moments, if you think about it.

Niall has his favorites, of course. The fern leaves are nice, something Niall likes to trace with his fingertips when he’s cuddling Harry from behind; the mermaid is beautiful, depicting the average woman’s body and showing the beauty in all shapes and he likes the details of her physique. The
butterfly is intricate and detailed, and one time, when Niall was drunk and Harry was feeling too happy to say no, he allowed Niall to color in all the corners with a set of markers they got for Freddie.

And he used all the colors, of course. Harry was painted for a few days, and — and Janie took a photo of it, of the moment, and he has one copy folded in his wallet that he takes everywhere and Harry has the other copy tucked on the headboard of the bed right above the spot where Niall sleeps whenever he’s home and it’s just a captured moment of them, just the two of them, and Niall’s coloring away at Harry’s tummy, bent over a bit, and Harry’s got one arm tucked under his head and the other reaching for Niall, scratching at his head, and they’re happy, so happy.

Niall smiles, combs his hand through Harry’s hair; he let it grow out after the first haircut and then got it trimmed again, and now it’s in that awkward stage where it curls too much to be controlled properly. “Hi,” he says, breathes, and the smile on his lips is so big it hurts and he wants to give Harry his entire heart and then he remembers that he already did.

“Hey.” Harry presses a kiss to Niall’s collarbone and flicks his eyes up, gives Niall the softest smile he’s ever seen, and Niall doesn’t understand how Harry’s eyes are so vibrant with elation from seeing him every time he comes home. “I’ve missed you.”

“I know.”

Harry’s smile grows. “A lot.”

“I know that, too.” Niall puts a kiss to the tip of Harry’s nose, keeps his mouth against Harry’s skin for a moment; Harry laughs, giggles, and he turns away, swats at Niall’s arm in a fit of laughter that they both share. “How’s everything been?”

Harry sighs once he’s sobered, shuts his eyes, lays his head against Niall’s chest. “Everything’s okay,” he replies, shrugs — as much as he can while being wrapped up in Niall’s arms. “Freddie’s getting big, walking now; little lad keeps getting into all sorts of stuff and Louis and Briana are having the time of their life with him. Cheryl isn’t due till November and Liam is already so excited that he’s up more nights than he’s sleeping. Gemma’s got her hands full with Elijah and Mum and Robin are planning a wedding for December. And Janie’s been — well, Janie’s been her sweet, usual self.”

Niall laughs, presses the sound against the top of Harry’s head. “I’ve missed so much,” he says, a bit nostalgic, really, because everyone’s living their lives back here while he’s sweating for the exams back in Stillwater. He knows he’s going to have to take when school starts back up soon and it’s kind of upsetting, in a way, that he isn’t here to experience everything in the pure and raw way that he wishes he could. Soon, though — he’s not got much schooling left, he doesn’t think, and then he can officially begin laying the foundation of his clinic while he practices under a few veterinarians around town. “I can’t wait till I finish.”

“You either.”

Niall lays his chin on top of Harry’s head. “Have you talked to your dad lately?”

Harry nods. “He said he’s planning to fly out for the Fourth, and I’ve talked Mum into driving out with Robin to spend a few weeks in July with us, too,” he answers, and it’s weird, really, for the both of them to be on good terms with their fathers after so much time has passed but even that doesn’t cover up the weight that’s off their shoulders and they missed a lot of time, both Des and Bobby, but — but it’s better late than never, you know, and Niall isn’t sure how he could have stayed sane without his father’s advice through these last few years. When you love somebody like
he does Harry, when you’re away from somebody like he is Harry — you need someone who can listen and counsel you. Bobby’s been great at that. “You should ring your dad up for a trip out here. Maura and Greg, too.”

“I do miss Theo. The little boy’s been growing up like a weed a pictures can only do so much to keep me tied over till I hop on a plane to visit.”

Harry chuckles. “I know.” And Niall supposes he does, for the most part. Niall loves babies, loves children, and — and maybe someday soon he and Harry can have a little one of their own. Or two. Or three or four or five or six. Or more. Adoption is always an option, and having two fathers wouldn’t be that big of a deal, especially when the child will have a maternal influence as well, what with all of the women that’s running around the place. “You want to know a secret, Ni?”

Niall hums, drags his fingertips across Harry’s skin. “What’re you hiding from me, baby?”

Harry leans away, uses his body to push Niall onto his back; it’s a process of movement but soon Harry is straddling Niall and somehow he’s got the sheets wrapped around his waist, hiding his groin from Niall, and they’re white and Harry’s all bronzed from being outside, and he’s smiling, beaming, and he looks kind of like an angel in the yellow light coming from the bedside lamp and Niall’s never seen anyone as beautiful as Harry is in this moment.

“There’s a concert coming up in Atlanta in June,” he announces, and he’s sneaky, really, and there’s a gleam in his eye, a grin on his lips, and Niall’s mind begins to race. “I think you’d like it.”

Niall tries not to grin, tries not to entertain the explosion of thoughts and situations that are erupting in his mind at this very second but he kind of can’t help it, especially with Harry’s hands pressed on his chest, right above his heart.

“Harry.”

“Niall.”

“Harry.”

And he’s going to say yes, knows he’s going to say yes. It’s been far too long since the two of them have had time to themselves, have had time away from everyone; he thinks maybe a trip would do them good, would remind them of that summer when they were as free as the wind and as fearless as a god.

Harry grins, says, “Let’s get out of this town,” and Niall opens his mouth to speak, to decline the offer, but he finds that he can’t tell somebody painted in all the colors like Harry no.

Chapter End Notes

So, yeah. This is the end of this little story I’ve got. I kind of like it, probably a lot more than I should. And, like, I may add to this ‘verse somewhere down the line; I don’t really want to put it away just yet, you know? And maybe that’s why I’m going to try to get it published, ha. Eventually. I’d like to pass chemistry first, lol. Thank you loads, all of you.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!