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### Poor Little Rich Boy

by [capriciouslouis](http://archiveofourown.org/)

#### Summary

Louis’ dare is simple: to find some sad little rich kid stupid enough to fall in love with him, and win him over by the end of the holiday. In every figurative sense. It’s a challenge that Louis is completely confident he can carry out. So when the perfect, pretty little Harry Styles crosses his path with a seemingly endless bank balance and a head full of romanticism, it looks like Louis has found his idiot.

#### Notes

I’m posting this under duress....I mean REQUEST ;) I don’t like this one but oh well
Chapter 1

The sun was warm, but not unusually so. There were a couple of clouds floating lethargically above the square. People milled about, bumping into each other and shooting each other nasty looks, waving at old friends, having conversations at a volume which was deemed necessary because of the masses of people all gathered in one place, and the hubbub which made it hard to have a chat at normal volume. And very few people noticed the attractive young lad with the feathery caramel hair and the pleasant voice, who was making his way through the crowd like he was used to it while his friend, a young man of a similar age who seemed constantly on the verge of a smile and whose cheeks were almost always pink with enthusiasm, trailed slightly behind, like he couldn’t quite keep up.

As crowds went, this was a large one; close to a thousand people crammed together in the centre of Doncaster, churning and babbling as friends talked to friends and people socialized and every unfamiliar face blended into the next and little attention was paid to them. Louis expertly slipped through the masses, inserting a charming “excuse me” or a sweet “I’m sorry!” every now and then, easily negotiating his way through the crowd with Stan clinging to his sleeve so as not to be left behind. They had little interest in the festivities, but rumour had it that there would be alcohol there, and since when had Louis ever refused alcohol of any sort? It would be rude, he decided, to not show up when there was booze being passed from hand to hand at a discount price. Luckily, Stan agreed with him. But then again, Stan usually did.

“It’s mad around here,” Stan panted. “Absolutely bloody bonkers!”

“My kind of place,” Louis called back to him, and he neatly dodged a woman with two whining toddlers while Stan was left struggling to edge around them without getting himself into trouble.

There were old people mumbling disapprovingly to each other, and a couple who were still young enough at heart to be having fun. Louis kept a constant stream of glances towards his ankles to make sure he wouldn’t step on any of the little toddlers running around, even though he was almost completely certain that he would hear them weeks before he saw them, what with the amount of noise they were making. Some of the people there were his age; some of them he knew, and these he awarded a sociable wave because Louis was friendly to everyone, and he would have waved to someone he’d only met once in his life, just to be nice.

He wasn’t sure of the exact nature of this particular charity event, only that it was a big one, and the big prize that everyone wanted was apparently an excellent one. That was about as far as his inquiries went; raffles and games and the like held little interest to him. Louis wasn’t the type to buy an entire book of raffle tickets just on the off-chance of winning a prize he’d probably hate. In fact, his motives for being there in the first place were simple; discounted alcohol. Louis wasn’t an alcoholic, but he was definitely hovering dangerously closely to the borderline.

According to Stan, Niall and Hannah were waiting on the other side of the square beside the alcohol coolers, ready to start insistently demanding as much alcohol as they could afford to buy and probably begging for a whole lot more to be put on the side so that Louis and Stan could buy even more once they arrived. Zayn was keeping an eye out for disapproving parents who could bob up at inopportune moments, such as while the other four were attempting to smuggle a dangerous amount of booze out of the town centre without being spotted. Louis had a reasonably loose leash, but Niall’s parents often worried about him (not his fault, poor kid; he had one of those cute faces that you couldn’t help but be concerned for) and Zayn’s mother would have been horrified if she knew what he got up to most nights. They were all rebelling, basically. It made things more fun, anyway.
Louis kept a watchful eye out as he cut smoothly through the crowd, clearing the way for a huffing, panting Stan who was shuffling behind him in a state of near exhaustion. Across the street, he caught sight of a tall boy with soft brown eyes and black hair that he loved, and they exchanged curt nods before turning away. If any parents were to turn up, everyone would be looking to distance themselves from Louis – Stan excepted of course; his mother had fallen prey to the Tomlinson charisma years ago – because very few people approved of him. Not that Louis was surprised. Most of them preferred to blame Louis for sudden outbursts of rebellious behaviour from their kids, and it wasn’t something he discouraged. It made the local kids respect him a little, and he felt that respect made him safer. If they respected him, they were less likely to punch him.

As he rushed past another stall – some kind of table bedecked in achingly bright streamers and dripping with balloons and ribbons – he felt someone grab at his arm, snag his shirt by the sleeve, and Louis jerked to a stop with a low cry of surprise. Hot on his heels, Stan ran straight into him, stumbled, and nearly fell backwards and landed right on his backside. Louis neatly caught him with his free hand, then turned his attentions to the person who had grabbed him so quickly.

Auburn hair pinned neatly on top of her head with an assortment of pins poking out so that she slightly resembled a porcupine. Thickly outlined eyes which were dangerously close to giving her the appearance of a racoon. An assortment of cinnamon coloured freckles dancing on the bridge of her nose. Louis paused and examined her for a while, taking her in.

He wasn’t particularly interested in her, but then, his interest in women had always waned rather quickly from the moment the initial interest faded. She was blandly pretty; nothing special, but plenty of guys would be happy to have her. He wondered if it was worth the effort of flirting with her, for the practice if nothing else. Certainly, she was planning to make an advance; her chest was being promptly pushed out and she stood up a little straighter with her lips curving into a well-rehearsed smile. Louis regarded her with interest; she was getting ready to flirt, but he wasn’t sure whether or not she would be any good at it. It would be amusing to see, in any case – so he returned her smile and tilted his head backwards a little bit.

“Can I help you?”

“Yes!” she said eagerly, quickly tucking a strand of loose hair behind her ear. “Yes, you most certainly can. Can you spare a moment?”

Oh. She was one of those. He’d mistaken her appraising glance for flirtation – really, she was going to attempt to coerce him into buying a product he neither wanted or needed. Immediately beginning to back off, Louis started with an extremely earnest-sounding and believable “Well actually, Stan really needed to find the –”

The girl wasn’t going to be put off that easily. “It won’t take a moment!” she insisted determinedly, tugging him closer to her table.

“Louis!” Stan hissed, “what are you doing?”

He shrugged helplessly, finding himself completely at the mercy of the redheaded girl, who had frogmarched him over to an enormous glass jar filled with pale blue raffle tickets that had black numbers printed starkly on them. Proudly gesturing at the jar, she let go of him and took a seat immediately behind it – then shook it vigorously underneath his nose.

“Pick a ticket,” she said grandly, “and you could win a fabulous prize!”

“Right,” Louis said. He scratched his nose. He looked doubtfully down at the jar full of paper slips. “What’s this prize, then?”
“Oh, it’s absolutely brilliant,” she assured him.

“What is it?”

“You’ll love it, trust me. Everyone wants to win. This is the kind of prize that absolutely everybody wants, no matter who they are. This is the prize to end all prizes!”

“Yeah, but…what is it?”

“It’s absolutely brilliant,” she repeated brightly, violently shaking the enormous jar so that the tickets were wildly jostled around. “We were ever so lucky to get it. There were some very generous sponsors this year!”

“What is it, though?”

The girl had gone off on a tangent; he’d lost her. “It’s an excellent charity case,” she assured him earnestly; “it’s the best prize ever! I bought twelve tickets, I’m so desperate to win! Oh, trust me, you’ll absolutely love it! Go on, pick a ticket – you won’t regret it!” She aggressively brandished the jar right underneath Louis’ nose.

“Right, fine!” Louis snapped impatiently, plunging one hand in almost up to the elbow. Quickly withdrawing a ticket, he dropped several coins into the palm of her hand, shoved the jar back at her and then thrust the ticket into his pocket without looking at it. “Thanks. Bye!” Turning around, he grabbed Stan’s arm and hauled him off into the crowd.

“Wait!” called the girl. “I didn’t tell you what the prize is yet!”

But Louis had already vanished into the crowd, and he didn’t hear her faintly irritating voice calling after him.

They found Hannah by the liquor stall, looking around for them and critically checking every single bottle to work out which one she wanted, and which ones were actually within a reasonable proximity to her budget. Her long nails tapped on the bottles as she ran her fingers over them, like she could taste the wine through the cool glass.

With an enormous, goofy smile unfurling across his face like a flag, Louis announced his arrival by yelling “All right, tossers, what’s occurring?!?” at the top of his lungs, and causing everyone within a hundred metre radius to flinch at the assault on her ears. Everyone, of course, except for the blonde girl he had directed his yell towards.

“About time!” Hannah yelled, and Louis grinned as he pushed past an obese, sweaty, glaring man, who had been hovering around eyeing both Hannah and the bottles in equal measure. Louis grabbed her by the arms and kissed her jokingly on both cheeks.

“Ah, Hannah. Lovely as ever. Now –” he clapped his hand briskly together “ – did you manage to get the goods?”

“Working on it,” she promised, “Niall’s putting that pretty little face of his to some use and trying to haggle, but I don’t know if it’s doing any good.”

Louis nodded and banged Hannah cheerfully on the back in a matey way. They’d dated briefly a couple of years ago (well, Louis called it briefly; most people argued that eight months was hardly brief, but it had flown by in a heartbeat) until they’d chosen to split over their differences, which mainly involved Louis’ inordinate interest in anything that was male and had either a pulse or a nice backside – but they were still mates, and good ones at that; his friendship with Hannah could only be
rivalled by his friendship with Stan. Or his relationship with alcohol. Still, he was comfortable enough with her to be able to treat her like one of the guys, which was what Hannah liked – she liked her nail-polish and eyeliner, but she also liked the opportunity of being able to replenish them on a regular basis, whenever her rough play-fighting with the guys got her into a mess. She was great.

"Whoa, man!" Niall protested loudly, "you’re joking! That’s never a fair price; never ever!"

That was Louis’ cue – he edged past Hannah and started bounding towards where Niall stood, hotly arguing with the man on the stall who was refusing to lower his prices for anything. As he turned to begin backing Niall up, a clear, amplified voice rolled across the busy square, bouncing off the walls.

“All right, we’re announcing the winner of the charity raffle right here and now, ladies and gentlemen!”

“Um…Lou?” Stan poked him on the elbow. “Lou, didn’t you enter that?”

“Hmm? Give me a sec, I’m busy.” Louis didn’t even take his eyes off the man on the stall as he distractedly waved Stan away.

“But Lou, you entered that raffle! Don’t you want to see if you won?”

He never really expected to win. Louis was not the kind of man who thrived on gambling, who waited for the wheel of fortune to spin his way, and grumbled when it didn’t. He gave very little to life and expected little of it in return. But it was a charity raffle, and okay, so he didn’t give to life, but he did give to charity, especially when the girl selling raffle tickets happened to be quite so hot (because she was, really, now he’d gotten away from her slightly irritating voice and equally irritating enthusiasm). So he had his ticket crumpled up in his hand, almost forgotten, if he hadn’t been able to feel it within his grasp – and he couldn’t be bothered checking it.

“You look,” he ordered, dumping the crumpled ticket into Stan’s hand. He turned back to the stall.

“Now, about this tequila…”

Overhead, a smooth voice was rattling off a well-rehearsed speech. “And we have a winner! Can the holder of ticket number nine thousand one hundred and sixty-five please come and collect their prize?”

“Louis…”

“Okay, so here’s the deal; I give you nineteen quid for these two bottles of tequila and –”

“Louis.”

“Shut up, Stan! – and then you throw in that vodka and some cranberry juice, and I’ll give you another twenty to round it off and –”

“Louis!” Grabbing hold of his arm, Stan cut off Louis’ frenzied bargaining. Turning around, Louis glowered at the interruption, but before he could get properly annoyed, Stan said “You won, Louis!”

That piece of news caused Louis to blink. “Huh?”

“You won!”

Stan thrust the ticket into his hand, and Louis found himself staring at a small blue rectangle of paper with a set of thick black numbers printed on it. His eyes struggled to focus on the numbers at first,
but after a lot more blinking and a deep, furrowed frown, and then he managed to focus on the numbers that had been swimming dizzyingly in front of his eyes. 9165.

“I’ll say that again; can ticket holder nine thousand one hundred and sixty-five please come to collect their prize – a luxury, all expenses paid holiday for five to a state of the art resort!”

It took a few moments to sink in; the idea that Louis had just won a free holiday – a free holiday for five, so that his best friends could come too, and he kept looking stupidly at the creased bit of paper in his hand. Stan was gripping his elbow very hard, face lit up. Taking a couple of very deep breaths, Louis looked up, and they both grinned at each other…and then they started laughing. Laughing giddily and unrestrainedly, laughing because he’d been so lucky and it was all absolutely insane and people from Doncaster didn’t win fantastic holidays for five.

His stomach and chest hurt before all too long, but still Louis choked on his laughter, almost bent double with the force of the laughter that still shook his lanky frame, completely and totally stunned by the idea that he’d just snatched up a ticket and left, and he’d won. He wasn’t sure he would ever be able to stop laughing just at the sheer ridiculousness of it all, and behind him he heard Niall and Hannah join in and start crashing around behind him in their own approximation of a victory dance (because of course they knew that he was going to take them with him), while beside him Stan was just standing in shock and occasionally letting out the odd breathless giggle. Louis grabbed him by the arms and they started leaping around in a manic circle, laughing at each other so hard that it hurt – and then Louis stopped dead with the kind of grin which in the past Stan would have been terrified of; the kind of grin that said Louis had some kind of plan forming in that mad head of his, and Stan had no idea whether or not he was going to like it, but he would be there every step of the way anyway, because he was Louis’ best friends and it wasn’t as if Louis was going to give him a choice in the matter.

“Right,” Louis said gleefully, turning to his friends and clapping his hands together, as if applauding his own good fortune. “Here’s the deal, tossers. You buy the booze, and I’ll give you a free holiday. No parents, no supervision, no rules – except legal ones, we’re not doing anything illegal. I have little sisters who look up to me; I’m a role model.”

Niall snorted. “You! A role model?” But he shook his head in mild amusement and turned back to the stall, pulling his wallet out of his pocket. Despite his complete lack of faith in Louis’ ability to be responsible in any way, he wasn’t going to turn down a holiday! Especially if all it was going to cost him would be keeping Louis full of alcohol and high spirits for the whole thing and there were going to be four other people chipping in.

Turning away, Louis started cutting through the crowd, wisely choosing not to wave the ticket and shout in case someone snatched it out of his hand. It didn’t take him very long to weave through the masses; no one was walking around anymore anyway; they were all craning their necks to try and accost the raffle ticket holder to give up his holiday. Nobody suspected Louis, quiet as he was.

He approached the redheaded girl, who sat at her little table with an enormous grin fixed on her face, scanning the crowd for the winner. It was her job to look enthusiastic, but really her expression was self-sufferance bordering on complete, unrestrained boredom. A long, slender shadow fell across her face and the table, and her pale forehead puckered as Louis stood right in front of her, blocking her line of sight – and then he proudly slammed the ticket down in front of her, so hard that the whole table shook.

“Did I win something?” he asked innocently.
Tipsy giggles trickled across the beach like the lazily moving ocean, the soft sounds carrying easily and echoing pleasantly down the pale golden sands. Louis’ laughter could be obnoxiously loud and unpleasant, but he was in such a happy mood, especially with a good few mouthfuls of vodka sloshing around inside him, that the sounds of his amusement were gentle and almost pleasing to the ear. A chorus of other laughs – Stan’s, Hannah’s, Zayn’s, Niall’s – joined him, and all five of them sat on the beach and laughed, filled with the youthful idea that in that moment they were completely invincible.

The sun was setting so that the sky blazed a kind of orangey colour, and it cast a pale glow onto one side of Louis’ face and sent shadows curling across the other side, giving him a slightly strange look. His fingers were curled around the neck of a half empty bottle, and a weird smile played on his lips as he stared down at the shapes he’d been tracing with one finger into the sand. A smiley face, a very lopsided dog, his own name…completely random pictures, and as he stared down at them with a dazed expression on his face, a passerby could have been forgiven for thinking that he was drugged up to the eyeballs.

Giggling breathlessly, Hannah flopped backwards onto the sand and splayed her arms and legs out wide, possibly pretending to be a starfish or something. Her blonde hair had worked itself loose of its messy knot, and cascaded freely around her face; her pristine white shorts and shirt were sandy and crumpled. She couldn’t have cared less. Her blue eyes sparkled as she looked up at the burning orange sky, streaked as it was with clouds, and her small mouth had twitched into a dreamy smile.

“Well,” she said cheerfully, “here we are.” She’d drunk far more than Louis, but her voice was perfectly steady – Hannah was a very dignified drunk.

“And it’s all thanks to Lou!” Niall reminded them, clumsily reaching out to thump Louis on the back, misjudging the distance and toppling over, ending up with a face full of sand while his hand grasped helplessly at thin air, reaching out for Lou. He ended up lying there for a while before pushing himself up and scrubbing some of the sand off his pink cheeks.

“Nah.” Louis toyed with the bottle, tracing the rim with one finger, a smile still hovering at the corner of his lips. “It was that girl on the stall. If she hadn’t been so bloody persistent, I would never have picked up a ticket in the first place.”

Stan raised his bottle, doing his best to hold it steady. His hand trembled a little bit, but they all pretended not to notice. “A toast,” he cried, “to the annoying ginger!”

They all burst out laughing, and Louis reached out and gave him a playful shove even as Zayn started vigorously ruffling his tufty hair. Still, once they’d finished teasingly admonishing Stan for his clumsy choice of words, they all raised their respective bottles – even Hannah, although hers was almost completely empty.

“To the annoying ginger!” Stan announced, and then raised his bottle to his lips and knocked back at least half the liquid inside.

Louis rolled his eyes, then caught Zayn’s eye and grinned at him. “The annoying ginger,” they chorused, and emulated Stan, taking a generous gulp of their drinks.

Shaking her head fondly, Hannah tutted at them. “That’s so rude,” she scolded. Raising her own bottle to her lips and allowing it to clink against her teeth, she said “to charity raffles!” and downed
the last dregs of her drink.

They all applauded, although no one was quite sure why. Perhaps because she had been the first to finish her bottle, and yet she was showing very few outwards signs of being more than ever so slightly tipsy.

“Amen to that,” agreed Niall, raising his bottle and making a drunken salute with it.

For a while they stayed silent, subdued and uncertain for once. Even the ocean had quietened; the rushing of the waves was low and hushed, as if the sea had been trying to eavesdrop on their conversation and was now waiting for someone else to speak. Hannah shifted into a more comfortable position on the sand and allowed her eyelids to flutter closed, hiding her pretty blue eyes from view. Niall settled down to watch her motionless face, not even attempting to disguise his open fascination with her. It was no secret that Niall had a pretty big thing for Hannah, and they all tolerated and mocked it in open measure – especially since it was never going anywhere. Niall didn’t mind so much. As he often pointed out, ‘might as well let me look, for all the good it’ll do me’. Zayn was moodily swirling patterns into the sand. Stan stared dreamily out to sea. Louis just sat in silence, listening to his own thoughts lethargically buzzing around inside his head and idly waited for the slightly cloudy sensation to fade. He felt a little woozy, like he was drifting around inside his own mind, but it was not an unpleasant sensation. It was relaxing, if anything.

“What are we going to do, then? This holiday, I mean? There’s a whole resort to explore, so much to do…” with a heavy, contented sigh, Stan sprawled back onto the sand in his usual ungainly way, not dissimilar to how Hannah had thrown herself backwards except with no attempt at elegance whatsoever. He folded his arms behind his head. “So much time, and so very few plans…I’m all for spontaneity, but I do hope we’re going to do something with ourselves.”

“Of course we are,” said Hannah, stretching lazily. “There’s heaps to do. For one, we can kick back, relax, and soak up some sunshine!”

Stan pouted; sunbathing was not his idea of how to spend a holiday. One of Louis’ favourite things about Stan was he was completely and totally mad, and incapable of sitting still for more than a few minutes at a time. In fact, it made him grumpy if he had to stay in one place for too long. He was hyperactive and a little bit crazy, and as Stan sat up again and frowned down at Hannah, Louis felt a stab of fondness for his best friend. That stab only intensified as Stan said firmly, dismissively, in a way which completely disregarded Hannah’s uninteresting suggestion, “Boring.”

“There’s a pool,” Niall offered. “While Mrs. Uninteresting kicks back on the beach, we can be swimming and checking out all the hot chicks while we’re at it.” He smirked.

Stan closed his eyes and lay back once again, waving his arms, kicking his legs and making an odd, smudgy approximation of a snow angel in the sand. “Boring.”

Clearly, their whole holiday was going to consist of keeping Stan entertained and stopping him from doing anything reckless, stupid or dangerous in his desperation to escape the usual tedium of a relaxing break. The thought made Louis grin a little; he wouldn’t have things any other way. Keeping Stan out of mischief – or unceremoniously dumping him into it at opportune moments – was how Louis had spent most of his childhood, and in his determination not to grow up, he was all too happy to keep at it.

Zayn, who was leaning against a large rock and morosely tapping out a tune onto his bottle, suggested, “Maybe you could shut up and sleep,” like he thought it was a very good idea. Most likely he did.
Turning his face up to the sky, Stan cupped his hands around his mouth to magnify his ordinarily extremely loud voice and yelled at an obnoxious volume, “BORING!”

Hannah groaned, reached for her enormous floppy sunhat and dragged it over her face, like she could block Stan’s voice out that way. Niall resignedly rolled his blue-green eyes and then went back to appraising Hannah’s legs – although he could have been formulating a plan to see how much sand he could pile on top of her to keep her locked in place; with Niall it was often hard to tell. With a snort, Zayn took another swig of his drink. As per usual, it was left to Louis to find some way of keeping Stan occupied, and he didn’t mind that at all. It took him a few seconds of lazily dragging his fingers through his fringe to bring it to the place where he liked it over his forehead, and thinking about what he could say as he did so – but then a plan had popped into his head, and he was pretty sure it could work for the both of them equally. Not like he was going to let Stan have all the fun. He wasn’t a slave. But the idea that had just occurred to him would be good for both of them.

“Dare competition,” he said in an indolent, almost bored drawl, and he tried not to let the corners of his mouth twitch into too large a smile as he imagined that fed up expression sliding off his best friend’s face. “No rules. It goes as far as it goes.” One eyebrow raised in challenge, because Stan was excellent at dares, and the only complaints he’d ever received was that his dares were always just a bit too outrageous.

Stan sat up. “Ooh,” he said, and when Louis turned to look at him, he knew he’d been right; the boredom had slipped off Stan’s face and his eyes were wide with excitement and just a little bit of interest, his mouth forming a slightly surprised shape. “That doesn’t sound boring.”

They formed a circle; a little ring, and Hannah’s drained bottle was to be the instrument that would choose the victim. Stan was smirking wickedly already, doubtlessly preparing an array of completely shameless dares that were piling up inside his head in abundance; he had absolutely no intention of being kind or toning it down for anyone. He was completely merciless. Louis pitied the poor fool who ended up being on the receiving end of the bottle when it was Stan’s turn to spin.

Louis wasn’t sure who was the most drunk; it ought to have been Hannah, who had drained her bottle first and started on the next with an admirable amount of enthusiasm, but as usual she was showing little effect, apart from being slightly more giggly than usual; even that was barely noticeable. Perhaps it was Stan, whose fiendish expression looked more wicked than usual, even for him, and whose usually pink cheeks had turned peony. It could have been Zayn, who was waiting with wide eyes for the selection process to begin, anticipating the dares to come. Maybe it was Niall, who for once was silent, the tension getting to him.

Alternatively, maybe it was himself; he could definitely already hear the familiar background buzz ringing in his ears that he had long since learnt to associate with waking up in the morning with fuzzy memories and his screeching mother hurling lots of bills and the occasional court order at him when he dragged himself, groaning, out of bed.

In any case, none of them were completely in their right minds, which meant that the upcoming barrage of dares would be accepted eagerly and carried out with the aplomb that five drunken teenagers would usually award to everything that they shouldn’t have been doing in their condition, and never would have in any other. Louis was ready to embrace any challenges set to him with everything he had.

Stan was the devil, and Louis was his minion – it seemed inevitable that as Stan gave the bottle an almighty twirl and it began steadily spinning, it would slowly, slowly slide to a spot and end up pointing directly at Louis. He felt an enormous smile dance like a flurry of sparks across his face and wondered what his friend was going to have him do; even considered for a brief moment the
possibility that Stan was going to tell him to jump off a cliff because he was starting to feel like it might be fun, like it would be amusing to leap off something so stupidly high and tumble through the air, screaming and falling for an eternity that lasted a nanosecond, listening to his heart thudding and feeling his blood sprinting around his body as he fell, and then hitting the ground with a thump that no one else would hear, almost inaudible, but to him would be the loudest noise in the universe aside from the crunching of his bones that would accompany it.

That was when Louis figured out that he was definitely the most drunk out of all of them, and wasn’t that curious, because he’d only had one bottle of vodka. At least, that was all he remembered having.

“Okay, then,” Stan said, and his voice sounded weird, the words thick, like he had a mouthful of rocks that he was trying to talk past. Louis wondered whether his own voice was similarly distorted, and whether someone had poured a little extra something into their wine that had set his brain on fire and caused his limbs to be so inordinately heavy. “I dare you to…” he paused carefully for a while and let Louis sweat, long enough for his skin to prickle at the expression on his friend’s face, just long enough to start realizing that perhaps this was a bad idea and he should refuse right now before he was leeched into a contract he couldn’t break free from. But before he could open his dry mouth to protest, Stan was continuing. “I dare you to find someone – some kid with a piggy bank full of more cash than Fort Knox and an ego the size of Jupiter. And I dare you to fuck that kid senseless, to take them and make them forget their own name. Once you’ve done that, you can dump the shit out of them for all I care. But you’ve got all that charisma locked away inside of you; I want to see how fast you can dupe some pathetic snotty brat with a rich Daddy into falling for you.” Then he smirked, allowing his harsh words to sink in, and took a gulp of his drink. The sunset glittered off his grey eyes and allowed his blown-out pupils to shine. “You’ve got til the end of the holiday. If you can do it, I’ll give you fifty quid, hands down.”

Louis was ninety-nine percent sure that someone had spiked their drinks, but he was one hundred percent sure that he didn’t care. He loved to be challenged and he loved a game, and this one he was confident he could win. Watched by Niall, Zayn and Hannah, he nodded jerkily in acceptance and held out his hand to shake Stan’s, to bind the contract.

“Hold up!” Stan fumbled clumsily for the metal bottle top he’d unscrewed off his drink when he opened it, and flipped it over, examining the jagged underside. “This’ll do. I want you to swear it properly – a blood contract. No backsies. You get me?”

Oh, Louis got him all right – and already he was caught up in the whirlwind of Stan’s insanity. Snatching the bottle top, he sliced a careful line down the middle of his palm, swearing animatedly at the spike of pain, and then watched Stan to do the same, a ribbon of blood springing to the surface of Stan’s palm too. They shook hands, then, blood merging together, and Louis felt a surge in his stomach that felt like the sealing of a promise that could never be broken, that would hang over them forever, something which would change him irrevocably.

Although it might just have been nausea.

Bringing his hand away, Louis licked Stan’s blood off his hand and then his own, trying to clean the cut so it wouldn’t turn sceptic. It would be hard to seduce someone if there was some kind of awful pus oozing out of his infected hand. Stan was busily scanning the beach, as if looking for something – and he seemed to find it, satisfaction curling his lips into a smile as he alighted on something a fair distance away. Louis followed his line of sight and found himself blinking in surprise.

A slender figure with curly hair stood a little way down the beach, staring morosely out to sea in an amusingly clichéd manner, hands thrust into the pockets of his black Chinos. He wore a loose grey jumper that fell in folds around his slender body and made him look unusually skinny, and the wind
played in his hair, ruffling it and whipping it up around his face. There was a slightly lonely feel to the way he was gazing out across the water, almost hypnotized by it, and as Louis watched, the boy turned to examine the rest of the beach, reaching to push an unruly curl out of his eyes. His mop of hair was untameable, adorably messy and seeming to frame his face; it needed cutting, but the slightly unkempt look was cute on him. Louis could pick out very few details of his face other than that it was pale and he seemed to be pretty attractive, but there was a discernible amount of quiet discontent in his expression, and he seemed to be lost in contemplation.

He ought to have looked pretentious, staring out at the scenery with a maudlin expression like someone from a film, but he just looked desolate, as if he was wishing very hard for something that he was unlikely to get. Perhaps it was company.

As Stan and Louis looked on, joined by the curious stares of the other three, whom Louis had forgotten whilst he and Stan had been sealing their blood pact, the boy flinched, finally noticing that he was being watched. Almost embarrassed, he turned away, hand jumping to his tangle of chocolate brown curls and smoothing them down over his forehead. The sleeves of his jumper were rolled up, exposing pale forearms, and his Chinos hugged his backside, which Louis felt was his duty to examine appraisingly, even though he felt almost ashamed to be checking out such a shy looking and reclusive boy. He started musing to himself about whether he could befriend the boy, whether he would have time…

Stan was in a cruel mood that day. The boy hurried off, arms wrapped around himself, hair whipping wildly around his pale, pointed face in the breeze, and Stan drew all of their attentions back to him with a low cough. His raised eyebrows alerted Louis to a new twist in the challenge they had already agreed on, and he felt his heart sink, because with the kind of foresight born from years of spending every day with Stanley Lucas, he knew exactly what course of action the boy had just decided upon.

His horrible suspicion was proved miserably correct as Stan pointed at the slim, retreating figure and said calmly “That kid. Get him in your bed, and do it quick.” And he smirked at Louis, who wished with all his heart that he hadn’t just sworn a blood oath to do just that.
Chapter 3

Louis’ usual tactic when it came to seduction was ‘know what your target likes’, but with no sources of information to fall back on, he was drawing a blank on that one.

Usually, he would befriend sisters, brothers, friends, ex-flames, parents – anyone necessary, really, and attempt to glean information about his intended hook-up. He didn’t like turning up clueless. However, he spent nearly six hours on the very first full day of his all-expenses paid holiday attempting to coax any kind of clues about the curly haired boy’s preferences from everyone he met, and so far he only knew three things: the boy usually had cornflakes for his breakfast, he was in the habit of going for melancholy strolls on the beach, and he was apparently either an introvert who hated everyone or had some kind of strong aversion to being outside, because Louis hadn’t seen him leave the hotel since the day before. In blissful heat and glorious sunshine such as this, he was completely baffled by the boy’s absence from the beach, poolside or various other spots of outside leisure.

Understandably, he didn’t have a lot to go on.

He didn’t even know the boy’s name – although that quickly changed after he sent Hannah over to have a quick whisper in the ear of Sven, the fit lifeguard. She came back pink and giggly, with a phone number on the back of her hand, and told Louis that the curly haired boy was Harry Styles (for God’s sake, he even sounded rich, like he should be a famous rock star), he’d come for a fortnight’s stay with his mother Anne, stepfather Robin and beautiful sister Gemma (well, Louis would believe that when he saw it; he was pretty sure that to be labelled as beautiful when compared to her brother, the girl would have to be stunning if she were to even get a look in) and he said little and did even less, preferring to lurk in his hotel room and occasionally peep out of the window at the people milling around below.

Well, Louis couldn’t have that. He couldn’t exactly preposition the boy if he never got to meet him. Neither could he go walking straight into his bedroom – well, he could, but he had a feeling that gesture might not be well received. More subtle measures would be required, it seemed.

For a while he contemplated romanticism, and wondered whether he should write some kind of note and have it sent up with the boy’s lunch tray (he preferred to eat in his room, apparently –this could mean that he was either horribly snobbish, refusing to eat with anyone who was ‘below’ him, or horribly shy, refusing to eat with anyone at all) but his poetic prowess left rather a lot to be desired, and he didn’t want to scare him away, so that plan was scuppered almost before he’d thought of it.

Truthfully, Louis was into grand gestures, and he wasn’t entirely sure how to proceed because he was fairly certain that the quiet curly haired boy wouldn’t really be into that kind of thing. He wanted to do something spontaneous, something funny, but at the same time something which wouldn’t entirely be in his usual style of blowing people away and then making his move before they could quite recover fully from his usually rather impressive act. Louis was very good at surprises. He was not, however, quite so good at befriending quiet, shy people who rarely ventured out of their hotel room, and therefore he ended up sat gloomily by the poolside, drinking some kind of fizzy wine in a fancy glass (which he had to admit was an extremely feminine drink, but he wasn’t unduly bothered) and considering his plan of action, or lack of.

In a further moment of madness, Stan had bet fifty quid on the outcome of their bet – if Louis didn’t manage to add Harry Styles to his list of conquests (he didn’t actually have a list; that would be just a little bit too obnoxious and he’d also kind of lost count if he was completely honest) then Stan was in the money. If he did, then there would be a lovely fifty pound note in his pocket. Louis was a twenty
year old boy who was teetering on the brink of a drink problem – fifty quid was an extremely useful commodity. He had no intention of letting it pass him by.

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Whatever was in that drink, it was stronger than he’d given it credit for. Who knew that such a girly looking drink could be quite so fierce, could make you quite so dizzy in such a short space of time? It was almost amusing, that he was having a few problems with walking in straight lines already. Then again, what was already? It seemed like he’d lost several hours, because the blue sky had turned dusky pink with the slightest tinge of orange, and almost everyone had abandoned the pool as the evening turned cool. Louis was alone as he sat absently by the poolside, gently swinging his legs over the edge.

A small noise alerted him to the fact that he was not alone, but he didn’t look up. Softly shuffling footsteps as someone crossed the room ought to have been an alarming noise, but Louis was in the kind of mood where he would have turned around and asked a raging axe murderer if he wanted a drink if one so happened to be stalkling through the outdoor pool facility. So he sat splashing in the pool, watching the ripples slowly spread out through the water, and didn’t even acknowledge that someone was behind him.

It came as a shock, then, when he stopped kicking for a while and the water stilled, becoming glassy and smooth – and he found himself staring at the reflection of a boy with a thick head of curls, who was wearing black jeans and a white t-shirt and a lot of bracelets that were clumped together in groups on his skinny wrists, and who looked just as shocked to see Louis as Louis was to see him.

Turning around, Louis found himself face to face with the boy, and took the opportunity to examine him a little more thoroughly. There were details that a reflection couldn’t convey, that couldn’t be taken in through a distant glance down the beach. Like the flawless double curve of Harry’s petal pink lips, which Louis was willing to bet a substantial amount of money had never been kissed. The way he had one curl which hung in a certain way across his forehead, twisting unexpectedly upwards and looked quite funny to the intoxicated Louis. How the light reflecting off his moss-coloured eyes made Louis think of sunlight making an algae-covered pond sparkle, how they were an intricate and incredible green that Louis had never seen before. His rounded cheeks, and the way colour danced across them as he blushed, dropping his gaze to the floor. He had an iphone sticking out of his pocket, with headphones trailing from his ears, and he quickly tugged them out without looking at Louis, stuffing them self-consciously into his pocket. Fascinated, Louis watched the speedy movement of his hands, noticing how big they were and wondering if he could find an excuse to compare hand sizes, just for a laugh. Next to Harry’s, his hands looked like a baby’s. Harry’s white shirt had wrinkled weirdly across his stomach in a strange crease, and one of his astonishingly white shoes had a careful streak of mud on it, like he’d deliberately put it there. The thought of the boy crouching down and strategically daubing mud onto his brilliant white shoes with one finger made Louis grin, and his whole face lit up with the force of it.

“I didn’t know anyone else was here,” Harry said slowly, his voice low and rich and hesitant and oh, it sounded like a waterfall of chocolate being poured all over Louis and he pretty much wanted to drown in it. He didn’t return Louis’ smile, and his gaze was cautious and self conscious, like he was ashamed to have been found here.

“Well, you do now,” Louis said cheerfully. “I don’t blame you for waiting for things to calm down a bit. It was mad down here earlier. It’s so much nicer when it’s quiet, isn’t it?” Where the hell were these words coming from? Since when had Louis Tomlinson ever associated quietness with being a good thing? But he found that strangely, he was sincere – he was actually enjoying the stillness. He didn’t often get any.
“I should go.” Harry looked anxious, like he was uncomfortable being around people, or even just one person, and it was Louis’ instinct to instantly attempt to put him at ease. He was that kind of person.

“You don’t have to. It’s lovely out here. Look at the sky, isn’t it beautiful?” He cast out a hand to indicate the pinky-orange hue that had been painted above them. “We don’t tend to get sunsets like this back home. The streetlights usually outshine them a bit.” He sighed wistfully.

Curiosity had Harry’s head tilting to one side in spite of himself. “Where’s home?”

“Doncaster. You ever been?” Harry shook his head. “You probably wouldn’t want to. It’s not the most sensitive of areas. They’re not a fan of sunsets and quiet evenings back there. That’s why it’s nice to get some peace.” Louis patted the ground beside him. “You want to come and sit here for a while? I’m kind of getting lonely over here.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Harry slowly crossed the room and sat down a few inches away from him, careful to avoid any sort of physical contact. He kept his feet away from the water, and Louis wondered what he must look like, dabbling in the pool with his bare toes. Not that he really cared.

“So is there any reason you felt it was necessary to make sure that everyone had left before you ventured out of your room?” questioned Louis, and it only occurred to him that perhaps that was somewhat of a personal and rather bluntly phrased question after it had left his lips.

There was a pause, and Harry’s forehead wrinkled in concentration as he valiantly attempted to summon an accurate explanation of the feelings that he often struggled to comprehend himself, and which were almost impossible to put into words which would make any kind of sense at all.

After a while, he admitted “People make me uncomfortable. I always feel kind of like they’re judging me. I guess I’m paranoid.” He shrugged self-consciously. “My mother thinks I have some kind of social anxiety or something.”

Louis found himself feeling sympathetic despite his difficulty to empathize with the feelings, seeing as he’d always been bold, confident and reasonably careless when it came to first impressions or people’s opinions of him in general, aside from when they sought him out to tell him what they thought. He wasn’t so keen on that. Maybe he didn’t completely understand Harry’s feelings, but he knew it must feel pretty awful to be afraid of people just because they could have a negative opinion of you.

“What about you?” Harry asked. “You don’t really strike me as the lonely type.”

Snorting, Louis agreed, “Definitely not. No, I just sat down on the poolside and had a couple of glasses of this stuff –” he gestured at the bottle that sat beside him “– and I guess I just… lost track of time. Specifically a couple of hours. Happens sometimes, if you get drunk. Hours slip by like minutes.” He toyed morosely with his wineglass, gloomily tracing the rim with one fingertip.

“Excellent. I’m sure that’ll do your liver the world of good,” said the younger boy dryly, and Louis was surprised to hear a humorous edge to his sarcasm. The corners of his mouth had lifted into a slight smile.

“Spare me the lecture,” he responded lightly, and Harry smirked at him. Louis decided to see how far he could push things with Harry, how much banter he was willing to put up with; he began tentatively, just a little tease. “Well, our relationship is progressing rather quickly, isn’t it? We’ve known each other all of five minutes, and in that time you’ve lectured me on my alcohol intake, told me all about your social anxiety issues and had a little rant about your problems, and I’m still a
complete stranger. Correct me if I’m wrong, but you seem to be treating me like some kind of counsellor.” He grinned cheekily. “You haven’t even introduced yourself. Rude.”

Harry blushed, held out his hand for Louis to shake, and then snatched it back again, all in one nervous movement. “Harry!” he blurted out. Taking a deep, shuddering breath, he exhaled in one big huff and said more calmly, “Harry. My name is Harry.”

“Pleased to meet you, Harry.” Louis reached for his hand and shook it enthusiastically; Harry’s hands were larger than his, cool and a little damp from nervousness, but not unpleasantly so. He had quite a firm grip, too, a fact which Louis filed away in the section of his mind reserved for filthy thoughts that he could bring back to mind later on. “I’m Louis. Want a drink?” He shook his bottle cheerfully at Harry.

Backing away slightly, Harry warily said “I don’t really drink.”

“Well, now’s the time to start, don’t you think? You can’t be all cute and innocent forever, can you? Come on, curly. Live a little!” A playful smile danced across his face and he once again offered the younger boy the bottle of wine.

Firmly but politely pushing it away, Harry shook his head decisively. “Thanks, but no thanks. I’d rather not end up on the floor with a banging headache in the morning, and I’ve learnt from past experience that I don’t really hold my alcohol very well.”

“Fair enough.” Louis shrugged and poured himself another glass, hesitated, then brought the bottle to his lips and took a long drink. As he removed his lips from the rim with a soft pop, he added “All the more for me, then.” He licked his lips to clear off the last droplets, and saw Harry’s cheeks flame bright pink as he watched.

They didn’t speak for a while; Louis was basking in Harry’s stunned gaze, somewhat enjoying the fact that the boy had been rendered completely speechless by the sight of his pointed tongue gliding sinfully slowly over his lips. Repeating the gesture with a good extra helping of seduction, Louis looked right at him, feeling his gaze start to smoulder, and watched Harry’s embarrassment grow as he blushed violently. Idly, Louis wondered whether the boy with the curly hair had ever experienced this kind of attraction before; the kind that sent a jolt running through your stomach, rather than simply thinking someone looked alright. The kind of desire that cultivated into a molten stream of lava licking through your veins – the kind of allure that said ‘come to bed’ with only a quick flicker of a pair of blue eyes. Because Louis knew from experience that Harry was having these feelings; as if his blown out pupils, dazed expression and hanging open mouth weren’t enough of an indication, he had flirted with enough people to know when someone was attracted to him. A finely honed sense that came with it was exactly how much they liked him, and oh, he knew that Harry was struggling with an onslaught of incredibly fascinating and uncensored thoughts at that precise moment in time. He’d corrupted quite a few previously innocent girls and boys before finding Harry Styles, and he knew the look which indicated they were re-evaluating their entire stance on life simply because he had flashed them a row of perfect white teeth and heaped on a generous helping of charisma.

He’d seen that slightly shell-shocked expression many times before.

“Your girlfriend is very pretty,” said Harry in a rush, as if it was the first thing he had thought of to fill the sudden silence. It might have been amusing, the speed of which the words came and the mortification that followed once he realized how odd it had sounded, if Louis hadn’t suddenly found himself scrambling to correct the assumption.

“Oh, Hannah isn’t my girlfriend!” he hastily amended. “Once upon a time, maybe, but not any more.
We’re just mates. Good mates. Nah, I wouldn’t go out with her again – nothing against her; she’s bloody gorgeous, but we weren’t right for each other, and I couldn’t do that to Niall.

It was far too much information, when just a simple ‘she isn’t my girlfriend’ would have done just fine, and Louis himself almost felt embarrassed with how much he had revealed, but Harry relaxed visibly. “Oh.” He paused. “You don’t have a girlfriend, then?”

Louis was amused. “Why, do you?”

“Um…well, I never…uh. Girls don’t – um. I mean, I do – I would! But I just – um, yeah. I don’t really –” he was tripping adorably over his words, obviously flustered, and Louis’ amusement increased tenfold as he watched the boy struggle to regain some form of control over his confusion. Harry blinked stupidly, and his iphone fell from his pocket and onto the tiles with a clatter; he didn’t seem to notice.

“A simple ‘no’ would suffice,” Louis offered helpfully as a way to end Harry’s scarlet-faced misery. “I’m assuming the answer is a no.”

Sheepishly, Harry admitted “I’m not currently in a relationship, no.”

“That makes two of us. Yay for the singles club!” Louis held out his hand for a high-five, and Harry hesitantly gave him one, like he thought the outstretched hand might be snatched away and leave him to look like a fool.

Louis yawned, clapping a hand over his mouth, and some of Harry’s shyness seemed to dissipate as he teased “Tired, are we? Perhaps you should go to bed.”

“Yeah, maybe. I’m tired and tipsy.” Louis ruffled his hair at the back, raking it into a mess with one hand and then smoothing it back down, and then he stretched and carefully set the bottle down. “Might go back to my room, actually…I – oh.” He froze, closed his eyes, and then groaned and starting rubbing his eyes wearily, swearing softly.

He had expected Harry to cringe at the language, but he seemed unaffected by the cursing. “Problem?”

“Yeah, actually. I can’t remember where my room is. Or what number…”

Biting his lip to hold back a laugh, Harry suggested kindly, “Get out your keys; your room number will be printed on them.”

Brightening, Louis started rummaging around in his pocket. His face fell when all his search yielded was half a packet of Polo mints and a button. “Damn. I gave it to Hannah.”

Rather than point out stupid that had been, Harry helpfully said “Maybe it might be an idea to go and find her, then?”

“It might,” agreed Louis faintly, massaging his temples. “Thing is, I can’t remember where Hannah’s room is either.”

That particular turn of events was just too much, and Harry burst out laughing. He threw his head back and laughed delightedly, and Louis felt his eyes flit to the rather magnificent line of the curly haired boy’s jaw, roving appreciatively over it and enjoying the view. Abruptly, Harry was serious, his head snapped back into its usual place, and Louis momentarily mourned the loss of the rather excellent view he’d had.
“What on earth are you going to do, then?”

“I don’t know,” admitted Louis pathetically. “I didn’t mean to drink so much! Stupid sissy drink. I think it must be paint stripper masquerading as wine.” He gave the bottle a dirty look.

“Well you can’t sit out here all night.” Brow creasing in thought, Harry nibbled his lip anxiously for a while. “How averse are you to sleeping on the floor?”

Unexpected. Louis blinked. “Are you…offering to let me sleep with you?”

It was a clumsily worded query, and they both blushed violently. “In my room,” Harry was quick to clarify. “Yeah. I’m sorry I can’t offer you anything better, but I’m sure I can lend you a pillow or something –”

Only fifteen minutes or so after meeting him, and already he was being invited back to the boy’s hotel room! Stan would have a field day over this. Elated, Louis beamed at him, his whole face lighting up in a dizzying smile that caused Harry to blink and apparently his thoughts scattered once again into an incoherent mess, because his whole expression blanked for a few seconds, like he was a doodle-covered blackboard and Louis’ grin had wiped him clean.

“That would be great! You really mean it?” It only occurred to him to be suspicious after he’d accepted, and he felt a little silly, but his drunken brains were utterly scrambled. Harry wasn’t the only one who was drowning in confusion.

“If you want to, then yeah.” Harry shrugged.

“They won’t charge you for having someone else in the room with you?”

Snorting, Harry told him “Only if they catch me. Which they won’t. Let me tell you a story; I’ve been coming here annually since I was eight, with my family, while my mother tried to force me to socialize and banned me from the pool unless I could come down at a ‘sensible hour’. ” He rolled his beautiful green eyes. “When I was fourteen, I decided I’d had enough. I struck up a kind of deal with the receptionist, Iris. You must have seen her. Big lady; massive hoop earrings, dodgy hair, smudged lipstick?”

Louis nodded. “I know her.” He remembered seeing her on the way in, mainly because Stan had muttered a catty comment about her appearance, something about learning to apply her make-up at clown school, and caused all five of them to cackle wickedly.

“Yeah, well, not to put too fine a point on it, I paid her off. Except not with money. She sneaks down to the hotel bar every night and makes good use of her staff discount, and I get to wander around and do whatever I like without being called out on it. The arrangement is basically that she turns her watchful eye in the opposite direction every time I do something I shouldn’t, and I’ll provide her with an alibi if she ever gets caught drinking on the job. Make up an urgent errand that I needed her to do, or something like that. The manager likes to suck up to my stepdad because of his rather limitless bank balance, so he wouldn’t ask too many questions if he thought I was forcing slave labour out of a lowly receptionist.” He smiled. “It’s been four years and thus far, I’ve never needed to give her any kind of excuse. I get the better end of the deal. My point is, if we sneak up now, Iris will either be drinking herself into oblivion, or already there; she wouldn’t notice if I sneaked the entire golf club into my room.”

Surprised that Harry had actually managed to come out with quite so many words and at such a speed compared to the rest of his stumbling, awkward mumbles, Louis listened open-mouthed, in complete awe. Realizing that he was being stared at, Harry once again compensated for his sudden
massive increase in conversation by turning the colour of the receptionist’s garish red lipstick, right to the roots of his hair.

“Why am I telling you all of this?” he asked weakly.

Louis shrugged good-naturedly. “I’ve just got one of those faces.”

Getting to his feet, Harry spent a couple of moments carefully breathing in and out in a brave attempt to regain his composure. It took a while for his face to fade from crimson to ivory and his nervousness to recede once again, but once he was reasonably collected again, he managed a nod and a smile, and reached out, offering his hand to haul Louis to his feet. God, he was about to take a drunken stranger to his bedroom. How weird. He almost wanted to laugh at the thought – it was just so mad!

Louis’ smaller hand gripped his, their fingers loosely intertwining together, and Harry had hauled the older boy halfway to his feet before he suddenly became unnaturally entranced with the contrast between their skin – pale and tanned, big and small, and they looked oddly good together – so good, in fact, that he hesitated, pausing so that he could curiously run his thumb over the silky skin of the back of Louis’ hand, feeling extremely weird as he did so. The sensation was enjoyable; warm skin on cool, and it felt weirdly intimate. He came extremely close to blushing again, actually, which was rather mortifying.

Fortunately, he was comforted by the way that Louis seemed equally transfixed, his wide blue eyes fixed onto the joining of their fingers, like he was stunned at the sight of light brown on snowy white. Harry understood the sentiment. He wondered whether Louis’ heart was hammering in his heart the way his was. He’d never held hands with anyone before – strangely, he’d kissed a couple of people fleetingly, but never yet held hands. That made him feel almost lonely; his chest tightened.

Seeming to realize just how long they’d been stood there holding hands, Louis instinctively let go, quickly tugging his fingers free. Harry barely had an instant to register the loss of that warm hand on his own before a shriek shattered his concentration; unbalanced, Louis had swayed unsteadily and pitched backwards, and Harry made a clumsy grab for him as he stumbled backwards and teetered right on the edge of the pool, arms flailing, eyes wide with shock. An exceedingly unmanly squeal escaped his lips as Harry made one last fruitless snatch into thin air to try and catch him before he fell –

There was a massive splash as Louis hit the water with full force, crashing into it and dropping straight to the bottom like a stone, sending a mini tsunami of water cascading over the edge that Harry had to dodge with a curse, leaping neatly out of the way. For a moment there was only the dark silhouette of Louis lingering under the water, and the waves that he had caused rippling outwards and lapping at the poolside – then his head broke the surface, and, swearing violently, he shook his head like a dog. Water droplets splattered everywhere as he shook them out of his hair, and Harry spluttered with laughter as he held his hands up to try and protect himself from being splashed. It didn’t really work.

“Fuck,” Louis gasped. “That’s cold!” He shuddered violently and gasped for breath, wrapping his arms around himself.

Rolling his eyes, Harry once again held out a hand to help him. “Come here, idiot – out you get.”

He really ought to have known what was going to happen next. Louis seized him by the wrist and grinned wickedly, his eyes sparkling with mischief – then he gave a tug, and Harry found himself tripping forwards in a way extremely similar to how Louis had, minus the squeal. His lanky body crashed into the water and he felt his muscles start to scream (Louis was right, it was so cold! He
suppressed a shudder) and then he was being hauled to the surface and all of a sudden he was beside Louis, treading water and shivering as he attempted to muster a glare to direct at the older boy who had just dragged him into a freezing swimming pool at a silly time in the evening. Somehow, the expression wouldn’t come.

“Hey,” Louis giggled. “Hey, Harry. We’re all wet.” He giggled again, and then tipped his head back, his giddy laughter bouncing off the walls and being thrown straight back at them, echoing through the room. He was going to be absolutely impossible to deal with until the morning; Harry just knew it.

“Oh,” he said grumpily, “terrific.”
Chapter 4

Waking up with bloodshot eyes, a murderous headache and the kind of nausea that only the most ferocious of alcoholic beverages could inspire in him, Louis had to admit that he wasn’t exactly at his most charming when he was hung over. His hair was plastered against one side of his head, flattened oddly and sticking up in all the wrong places, and he had a big imprint on his cheek from where he’d slept weirdly and the pillow had left red marks on his face. His mouth tasted sour and gritty, as if he’d taken a mouthful of sand. There was a lovely pounding inside his head, like his whole personal orchestra was discordantly banging away in there, smashing the inside of his skull with noise. On the whole, he was feeling very much worse for wear. However, there were several pleasant surprises awaiting him; rather than waking up on the floor with his whole body aching, as he had expected, he was lying on a rather comfortable bed. He hadn’t thrown up, because his mouth did taste foul, but not remotely like vomit, so thankfully it seemed that he had managed to hang on to some small scrap of dignity. Neither had he drooled on the pillow, which sometimes happened. So he had not disgraced himself completely, which was something, at least.

Fighting back a groan, he carefully raised his head, only to discover that a pair of green eyes were fixed on him, and that Harry was sprawled on his stomach on the floor, face turned towards Louis, watching him solemnly. He was perfectly still and quiet; the only signs of life were his chest rising and falling gently as he breathed, and the odd blink as he looked at Louis with an unfathomable expression that Louis was too exhausted to even attempt to decipher.

“Morning,” he croaked. The sound of his own voice made him wince; he sounded awful, and the volume of it grated on his ears, even though he’d spoken fairly quietly.

“Morning,” replied Harry softly, for which Louis was very grateful.

“I thought I was sleeping on the floor,” Louis reminded him, remembering to lower his voice for the sake of his own dreadful headache.

Harry shrugged; the motion looking extremely odd bearing in mind the position he was lying in. “Yeah, but I figured you were going to be feeling pretty dodgy when you woke up, and I guessed that you could do without added back pain from sleeping down here. How’s your head, by the way?” The question was asked perfectly innocently, but there was a mischievous twinkle in his green eyes—Louis could have sworn the beautiful creature was laughing at him.

He responded with a sour grunt. “Did you run over me with a tractor last night before tucking me in? Because that’s what it feels like.”

Biting his lower lip in an attempt to subdue his laughter, Harry shook his head. “Well, if you will drink ridiculous amounts of something when you don’t know what it is…”

“It was a stupid sparkling girly drink in a fancy glass,” Louis grumbled, “how was I supposed to know that it would have the same effect as a bottle full of horse tranquilizers?”

Harry snorted with laughter, then hastily disguised it as a cough, hiding his smile behind his hand and turning away to try and cover his amusement.

Managing to claw himself into a sitting position, Louis wearily rubbed his eyes and cast an appraising glance around the room. It was a large room, probably one of the more luxurious in the hotel. The walls, bedclothes and enormous fluffy rug on the floor were all pristine white, and Harry’s clothes hung from every furnishing, as if he’d thrown his things about with the intention of making
the room look lived in rather than eerily unoccupied. Most of his things were black, like velvety shadows sprinkled across the room. There was a doorway on the far right which presumably led to a sparkingly clean en suite bathroom. An enormous suitcase lurked in one corner, overflowing with stuff. More clothes, of course; an ipod, although Louis wasn’t sure why he needed it, seeing as he already had an iphone. A laptop, a set of keys, a couple of unread books, and several pairs of brand new shoes. None of the possessions seemed particularly personal to Harry himself, apart from some of the more well-worn t-shirts and his iphone, which rested on the bedside table and was clearly like an extension of his hand.

Harry flushed and looked awkwardly away, like he was embarrassed by Louis’ scrutiny. Maybe he had figured out that Louis was completely stunned by the sheer size and quality of the room. Perhaps he had only just realized that there was a complete stranger in his bed. Either way, he looked extremely uncomfortable, and Louis was instantly on a mission to put him at ease again.

“I’m a state,” he announced. “I think I’ll go back to my room now and have a shower, if that’s all right with you?” Why was he asking permission? It felt right, somehow; he had just spent a whole night in the boy’s room, after all. He decided not to question it further.

As if he couldn’t help himself, Harry flashed him a cheeky smirk, lips twitching into a wicked little smile. “Are you sure you can remember where it is?”

“Surprisingly, yes; my memory seems to have recovered nicely, thank you very much.” He was halfway out of bed before he realized that the clothes he was wearing weren’t his – in fact, he was drowning in loose, high-quality fabric.

His legs were dripping in well-worn cotton; grey sweatpants that he would never have been seen dead in, the kind of unflattering garment he liked to wear at home in secret whilst watching chick flicks, an activity he preferred to keep to himself. The fabric fell in huge folds around his legs, pooling at his ankles; they belonged to someone far taller than he was. A loose black sweater had been pulled over his head, and the sleeves fell past his wrists, making him look rather ridiculous. Out of habit, he went to roll up the sleeves to his elbows, and discovered that the name ‘Harry Styles’ had been sewn neatly into the inside hem of the right sleeve. Judging by Harry’s embarrassment, he hadn’t really thought about the significance of letting Louis wear his clothes.

“Oh,” Louis said softly. He was oddly touched by the gesture, and momentarily wondered how his other clothes had been taken off – a quick inventory of his limbs to check whether he had involuntarily completed Stan’s dare told him that in the absence of any kind of tenderness whatsoever, he hadn’t done anything too drastic in his drunken state the night before.

“You fell in the pool,” explained Harry, apparently unable to make eye contact; his devastating green irises were trained on the floor. “We both did, actually. I figured it was kind of dangerous to leave you dripping wet, so I lent you some of my clothes and locked you in the bathroom…I think you worked out for yourself what you were supposed to do.”

“You fell in the pool,” explained Harry, apparently unable to make eye contact; his devastating green irises were trained on the floor. “We both did, actually. I figured it was kind of dangerous to leave you dripping wet, so I lent you some of my clothes and locked you in the bathroom…I think you worked out for yourself what you were supposed to do.”

“Right.” Louis swallowed. He didn’t like this odd helpless feeling he was getting; the weird gratitude, the way he had softened towards the nervous boy who had done his best to help a drunken idiot who had pulled him into the swimming pool and laughed like a madman while he did it. “Well. Thanks.”

Nodding quickly, Harry knelt down and found the shirt and Chinos which Louis remembered putting on the day before, and he hesitantly held them out. They were crumpled and looked scruffy, and he seemed regretful of the state they were in. “Sorry, they got kind of…messed up. I couldn’t do much more than dry them, I’m afraid.”
“No, that’s fine. Thank you.” Louis hastily accepted his clothing and turned his back on Harry, tugging the baggy black sweater over his head and pulling on the rumpled shirt instead, grimacing at the stiff feel of the material. After he’d finished putting his clothes on and quickly giving Harry’s back, he stuffed his hands into his pockets and scuffed the floor with the toe of one slightly damp espadrille. “So, uh… I guess I kind of owe you, then. For pulling me out of the pool and bringing me in like a stray cat and preventing me from contracting hypothermia.” His corresponding smile was innocent, rueful and with just a dash of flirtation – his hair was a mess, he probably looked even worse than he felt, which was quite an accomplishment, and he felt like he could sleep for a week, just close his eyes and fall asleep right where he stood. But he was determined to get things back on track, and if anyone could charm someone whilst un-showered, exhausted and hung over, Louis Tomlinson could.

Hastily backing away a little with his hands held up, Harry insisted, “It’s absolutely fine! You don’t owe me anything! I’m sure you’d have done the same for me!”

On the contrary; if Harry had been the one who was drunk beyond all reason, Louis would have been taking advantage and winning the bet in absolute record time, and that mop of curls would suddenly have become very rumpled in an extremely short space of time. But he chose not to mention that particular fact; instead he leaned on the bed and gave another charming, sheepish little smile. Manipulative? No, of course not.

“Well, I’d still feel better if you’d let me repay you in some way…”

Awkwardly, Harry reminded him “I’m not exactly struggling on the poverty front. No offence, but I really don’t need your money, Lou. Louis!” He quickly corrected himself, turning salmon pink and flustered. How cute. “I don’t want repayment.”

Money? Louis almost laughed. If he had two coins to rub together, he’d already be spending them; he wouldn’t be giving them to a boy so rich he could probably afford to fill a swimming pool with money and roll around in it. “I was thinking more about paying you back with some of my astounding company. How do breakfast cocktails catch your fancy?”

Instantly, Harry’s expression turned panicky; Louis could tell he was scrambling for an excuse. “Like I said, I’m not a big drinker.”

“Non-alcoholic breakfast cocktails?”

“I’m not really into cocktails.”

“Well, just breakfast, then?”

“I don’t tend to eat breakfast.”

Liar. You have cornflakes every morning; I have my sources. “Well, how about you come down and hang out with me and the guys on the beach later? They’re a bit mad, but I’m sure they could tone it down a little if I ask them to.”

Instantly shaking his head, Harry hesitated, and then words started pouring out of him in a jumbled mess. “I can’t. I’m sorry, it’s great of you to offer, but I don’t really get on well with people. I’m not a social person. I’m really more comfortable up here on my own – nothing personal to you, trust me, but I prefer to be alone. Your friends wouldn’t like me anyway.”

“Harry, my friends like everyone. It’s ridiculous. They fall in love with everyone they meet.”

“Louis!” Harry looked him right in the eyes. “I’m really sorry, but I don’t want to go down to
breakfast with you. Or meet your friends. Please don’t take it personally, because it’s not about you, but I just can’t. So please don’t ask me again.”

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“He’s absolutely impossible!” groaned Louis, while Stan sat beside him, listening to him whining about the impossibility of seducing a boy who was afraid to leave his room when there was a possibility of anyone being outside to see him. “Every time I started getting somewhere with him, he got scared and backed right off!”

“Lou, you spent the night in his room. I hardly think that constitutes as not getting anywhere.”

“Exactly! That’s exactly my point! Because when we woke up, he could hardly even look at me! It was like he was completely ashamed, and we never even did anything. All I did was ask him if he wanted to come down for breakfast and not only did he turn me down, but he also asked me never to ask him again and then couldn’t wait to be rid of me. It’s all such a mess. He’s like a block of ice; I can’t get any kind of decent response out of him since last night. I mean, I wake up in the guy’s bed, wearing his clothes, finding that he took care of me all night, and now he refuses to even talk to me! What am I supposed to make of that? Ugh!” He flopped resignedly back onto his sun-lounger with a sigh.

Stan was distracted, scanning the poolside with a smirk on his face. He lowered his sunglasses appreciatively to stare across the water to the other side, where two dark haired women were stood chatting. “Well, if you can’t get him to go with you, you could always go for the sister. She’s pretty hot. Or his mum, damn.” He whistled. “I would.”

Disgustedly, Louis slapped his arm. “You’re disgusting.” He paused, sparing her another glance. “Oh. Actually…you might have a point. She does not look old enough to have two kids.”

Wriggling into a comfier position, Stan nodded smugly to himself. “See? I know what I’m talking about.” He spared another glance for Louis, noted the dissatisfied, stubborn expression on his face, and sighed heavily. “Oh, I know that look. You’re not going to settle for anyone else this whole holiday, are you?”

“Of course I’m not. He’s hot, he’s hard to get; he’s the perfect challenge. I want that boy, Stan. I want him.” He almost sounded creepy, with the insistency in his tone, but Stan was nothing if not used to Louis’ weird mannerisms.

“What are you going to do, then? Because clearly this isn’t going to be easy, and it sounds like the kid is almost as stubborn as you are. This might just be a showdown worth seeing, after all. Should I be collecting bets off the others?”

“No, you shouldn’t; you should be helping me think of some way to attract his attention without freaking him out.”

“Uh, Lou? In case you didn’t remember, I don’t want you to get his attention. I don’t particularly want to lose fifty quid.” But Stan had never been able to resist getting involved in one of Louis’ insane schemes, and in the end, he shook his head and suggested wryly “get your bum out. They can never resist that.”

Thoughtfully nibbling his lip, Louis asked “You really think so?”

Stan laughed, tilting his face upwards so that the sun could play on it and possibly even give him something vaguely resembling a tan. “Man, your arse cheeks were sculpted by the gods. If you
won’t use them to get the attention of some sinfully cute hottie, then what the hell are you planning to use them for?” Laughing again, he reached for his drink and took a long sip, as if imparting that particular piece of wisdom had exhausted him.

It had been a joke, but Louis was starting to wonder whether there might actually be some kind of sense in it – which was where his next plan came from. As Stan sat giggling to himself, clearly amused by his own ridiculousness, Louis was taking that teasing comment and turning it into one of the most wicked plans he’d ever had. Well, any excuse to flaunt his admittedly rather fabulous backside.

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Nobody would have known that Louis had never picked up a golf club in his life from the way he was playing so expertly. Admittedly, if they’d been there for a couple of hours, they might have figured it out, from the way Louis had rather dangerously waved it around, almost taken Hannah’s eye out and ended up having the rules patiently explained to him by a caddy who was soon to realize that he wasn’t being paid anywhere enough for this – but before all too long, he’d worked out the general idea of what he was supposed to do, and to everyone’s amazement, he was actually winning, something which surprised no one more than it shocked Louis himself.

Hannah had taken the opportunity to wear her new white shorts and shirt, and was bouncing around in her element, being watched admiringly by Niall, who was struggling to pay attention on anything else for long enough to even know when it was his turn. Stan was alternating between playing frighteningly well and being overcome in bursts of helpless laughter every time Louis turned around, which meant that every other turn he had went painfully wrong and endangered several people’s lives when he sent the ball shooting towards their heads because he couldn’t see past his tears of laughter. Zayn had taken refuge in his room, apparently uninterested in either golf or Louis’ plan, which had been enough to persuade the others to join him and Stan.

He was wearing the tightest trousers known to man, and they showed the outline of absolutely everything. His shirt was also sinfully tight, but not so much that it drew attention away from his backside, which was causing almost everyone in the vicinity to stare in utter shock at the perfect curvature of it. It didn’t help that he was walking quite so weirdly, twitching it with every step; eyes were drawn to it like magnets, and apparently people couldn’t decide whether to be shocked or appalled – apart from the little gang of giggling girls who had taken it upon themselves to follow him around, shrieking with laughter and whispering excitedly every time he turned his back on them. He didn’t know whether to be irritated or amused.

It had been a long day, and only about two hours had passed, while Louis waited impatiently for Harry to emerge onto his balcony, or a glimpse of brown curls to appear in his window. So far, he had been disappointed; he had seen one of the maids lingering on Harry’s balcony, gawping at his backside, but Harry himself had been dishearteningly absent. It was actually unbelievably frustrating to have gone to all of this effort and yet have apparently no reaction at all from the one person whose attention he’d been attempting to attract.

Only it would seem that the same gods who had sculpted his arse were smiling down on him, because just as he was about to give up and wiley go back inside and frequent the hotel bar, he heard a voice behind him, a voice which was apparently giving a lecture.

“You can’t just lurk in your room all day, Harry. It isn’t healthy. It won’t do you any harm to stand and watch us now, will it?”

“But mum –”
It was the second voice that really made Louis whirl around so fast he thought he might break his neck. Harry’s mum was guiding him along with one hand on his back, almost pushing him, and he was looking incredibly reluctant, squirming with embarrassment, ducking his head and trying to get away from her. Mouth hanging open, Louis started blatantly and unashamedly at him, and didn’t have time to turn away when Harry’s head snapped up and their eyes locked. He saw Harry’s eyebrows fly up in surprise, watched his cheeks turn pink, saw him stutter halfway through a complaint, and then his eyes had flickered straight to the floor as he forced himself to look away from Louis. Feeling his lips tighten into a taut line – oh, so it was going to be like that, was it? – he deliberately turned his back on the boy, and, just to add insult to injury, went back to the game and got into an incredibly over-exaggerated stance, sticking his bum out as far as it would go. Which was pretty damn far.

He heard Harry swear, saw him stumble out of the corner of his eye, and listened in satisfaction as his mother admonished him for both his clumsiness and his language. Satisfaction had a smile growing on his face, and he made sure to wiggle unnecessarily as he made his next shot, sending the ball flying wildly across the golf course and vanishing from sight. Stan took the opportunity to laugh at him, but Louis didn’t much care; he had the pleasure of knowing that Harry was ten times more distracted than he was.

Louis could almost feel those green eyes on him, burning into his skin, and he liked the way it felt to know that Harry was completely fascinated with his tight clothes. In fact, it made him boisterous, eager to show off, so that before long his funny comments were being practically bellowed at Hannah for the younger boy’s benefit despite the fact that she was standing right beside Louis. Every so often she would shake her head at him in exasperation, but he wasn’t really listening.

In the end, it was boredom that ended his fun; Niall finally got fed up with watching Hannah and wandered off, Hannah got a phone call from one of her other friends who was having a boyfriend crisis and declared she had to drop everything and become the next top agony aunt, and Stan decided that with very few visible results other than Harry’s blushes that the plan had worked, he couldn’t be bothered hanging around waiting much longer. Reluctantly, Louis agreed to go inside with them, but only because he knew that one of the best ways to attract someone is to always leave them wanting more – so he chose to remove himself from Harry’s company. Throwing an arm around Stan’s shoulders, he chose the longer route around the course, so that when they passed Harry’s family, Louis and his tight trousers sashayed past right beneath the curly haired boy’s nose.

Needless to say he forgot whatever point he’d been making about why he should be allowed inside, and abandoned everything in order to watch Louis swagger past, showing off for all he was worth. Louis felt himself swell with pride and satisfaction over the fact that he had rendered Harry completely speechless, and he even turned around and dared to cast a cheeky wink over his shoulder, just for the purpose of watching Harry’s pale face flare an even brighter scarlet than it had on previous occasions. His satisfaction was palpable, and he even got to enjoy the sight of Harry being aggravated that he’d been so clearly thunderstruck by a pair of tight trousers.
For such a vibrant and social person, it was really quite surprising how much Louis enjoyed a bit of peace and quiet. Likewise, he loved his friends to bits, but their company could be a little suffocating at times if one didn’t have a break every now and then. He’d found it very comforting, however, knowing that even at best Hannah wouldn’t resurface before eleven, and both Zayn and Niall struggled to be up by lunch. Stan could be awake from any time between four o’clock in the morning and three o’clock in the afternoon, but usually spent at least half an hour in the bathroom showering, and his absence from outside Louis’ bedroom door when Louis sneaked out would suggest that he was having a lazy day rather than an over-productive one.

There were few people on the beach at six o’clock on a Sunday morning, and Louis was almost completely alone as he stood shuffling his feet and kicking sand around, staring at the ground, lost in thought. He was struggling with a little conundrum which he liked to call ‘the Harry Styles problem’. So far, he hadn’t had much success in trying to solve it.

He was confused. There seemed to be no obvious reason as to Harry’s reluctance; he’d immediately jumped to the conclusion that a previous relationship had ended poorly, but seeing as Harry had shown no aversion to discussing past lovers, he’d had to rule that out. Nor did he seem to have anything against relationships in general. Therefore Louis could only assume that he was cripplingly shy – not that his cheeky comments and overall flirtation tied in particularly well with that theory, but it seemed like the most likely of them all. Either that, or he had some kind of split personality disorder, and Louis highly doubted that.

Or an evil twin who could switch places with him in the blink of an eye, Louis mused idly, staring boredly out at the ocean. Well. Perhaps not evil. Introverted. An introverted twin and an extroverted twin. Hmm.

That was another idea which he discarded as unlikely, and with a heavy sigh, he went back to pacing restlessly up and down, as if following the same bland little trail of his own footprints round and round in a wobbly circle would miraculously answer all of his questions.

The fact was that by now he ought to have had Harry over the hotel bar and made him scream so loud he forgot his own name, and more than once, too. Interestingly, the fact that he couldn’t persuade Harry into even leaving his room was more of an incentive than a deterrent. He wanted to understand the curly haired boy, that was the thing. Already, he’d gotten over the initial lust and was feeling curiosity instead, which, for him, was unusual in itself. Rather than simply forcing Harry into giving in, he wanted to have the satisfaction of knowing that Harry had gone with him because he simply couldn’t bear not to; couldn’t summon the restraint any more. The trouble was that he wasn’t sure he could do it.

He had to find some kind of subtle, sweet way of winning the boy over. Sweet, Louis did excellently – subtle, however, wasn’t really his forte. Anything but, as a matter of fact. Which meant that, the more he thought about it, the more he grimly realized that his previous antics would only have dissuaded Harry: dragging him fully clothed into the hotel pool; lying in his hotel room and practically ordering to come down for breakfast and meet four total strangers; wearing tight clothes and swaggering around the golf course like he owned it…he cursed himself and his complete lack of tact. He could have at least attempted to be delicate about the matter. But no; as usual, he’d blundered in and expected Harry to fall at his feet, and for once, it hadn’t worked in his favour. Charming the pants off someone didn’t really work when, to them, charisma was about as welcome as bacon would be to a vegetarian.
It was safe to say that he was lost in his own little world when he heard the splash.

He wouldn’t have paid much attention to it if it hadn’t been for the exasperated “Duchess!” that accompanied the noise, and then the slightly worried “Duch, come out of there! It’s deep, you shouldn’t – are you okay, Duch? Duch?” The tone had risen from irritated to anxious to almost panicked, and Louis’ head snapped up and he frowned, sensing trouble.

“Duch!” The voice was twisted in fear now, drifting from over the rocks that towered way over Louis’ head. Curiously, he kicked off his shoes onto the sound, found himself a foothold, then started scrambling up the rock face like a money, gripping so tightly to the little outcrops of stone that his knuckles turned white. Luckily for him, he’d always been good at climbing – he and Stan had clambered up onto the roof of their local primary school once to retrieve a football, and since then he’d been unafraid of any kind of heights. Clawing his way up the rock face, he swung one leg up onto the top and straddled the pillar of stone, looking across the beach for the source of the sound. His eyes found a rock pool; small in circumference but deep, and probably the depth that was visible didn’t do it justice. In fact, he guessed that even he would have struggled to stand up in it, let alone the little thing that was desperately struggling to stay afloat in the middle of it.

He couldn’t see who had been shouting, but the source of the splash was now clear; a little dog, some kind of West Highland Terrier; a little fluffy white thing that looked rather like a bright-eyed ball of cotton wool with little legs poking out oddly and an incredibly yappy bark. Under normal circumstances, Louis would have backed off; he didn’t trust any creature which so closely resembled an electrocuted sheep, but there was something about its piteous whines, frantic splashing and the terror of its owner that had him carefully bringing his other leg onto the top of the rock and neatly sliding down, grazing the back of his legs as he did so.

Landing neatly on both feet, Louis carefully bounced across the sand before getting down on his knees a short distance away from the little dog, where it desperately struggled to stay afloat, little legs kicking almost comically if it hadn’t been for the fact that it was trying to keep its head above the water and apparently struggling to do so. He wasn’t all too certain what to do next; on the whole he was more used to bigger, less feeble looking dogs and was more of a cat person anyway, but in the end he stretched out a hand to it, making a hopefully coaxing sound in the back of his throat and praying that it wouldn’t be one of those snooty dogs that over time had become like its owner and assumed the mannerisms of a rich, fussy old lady. If it turned up its little black nose at him, he might have to dive in after it, and the water looked bloody cold, so understandably he didn’t quite fancy it.

“Duch,” he called encouragingly. “Come here, girl, come on!” Was it a girl? Duchess sounded like a suitably feminine name; that was the female equivalent of a Duke, wasn’t it? It would be quite awkward if it wasn’t, but honestly, he couldn’t tell what gender the animal was. To him, the dog looked like an enormous, squeaking – sorry, barking – pom-pom.

For a moment he thought that it was going to shun him, but struggling wildly, it somehow managed to manoeuvre its fluffy little body vaguely in his direction, and almost pleadingly bumped his outstretched hand with its nose. Melting under the duress of Duch’s ridiculously helpless gaze, Louis shuffled further forwards on his knees, reaching out to her with his other hand. He clumsily made a grab for her, missed, and pulled a face as, wriggling, the dog spun away from him, revolving gently as she kicked stupidly around and yelped her indignation at the sheer lack of dignity of being unable to control herself.

Louis reached out helpfully to the animal and found to his surprise that he wanted to help her – he didn’t like seeing the slightly dazed, worried look in her eyes as if she was just beginning to realize how dangerous the icy water was. Splashing around, she blinked pleadingly at him, begging for help with her big brown eyes, the colour of chocolate, the colour of…Harry’s hair.
That was what caught him by surprise more than anything else; what made him stop for a moment and stare at her. That was also what made him start again, reaching out with renewed determination to save her, almost as if the little reminder of the mysterious curly haired boy had strengthened his resolve. Reaching out with new purpose, Louis felt his fingers dip ever so slightly into the water and swore, shaking his hand so that frigid droplets splashed everywhere. Cold! Like ice, almost! Snow, like the animal’s fur. Dazedly flicking the last of the water from his fingertips, he shuddered and pulled back – only another yelp reminded him what he was supposed to be doing, and gritting his teeth, he leaned forwards, taking a very deep breath so that the frozen temperature of the water wouldn’t shock him quite so much again. It had felt like plunging his fingertips into a pile of broken glass, the jagged edges tearing at his skin and ripping him open – except it was just water, and the little dog’s whole body was submerged in that.

Louis shuddered pityingly. Perhaps there was more to her than he’d imagined; perhaps she was stronger, braver, prouder than he’d given her credit for. Perhaps she wasn’t just a spoilt, pampered little pet. After all, apart from the struggles and the whines, she was making very little sound. He was fairly certain that if he’d been in that water, being ripped to shreds by icy coldness, he wouldn’t just whimpered. He would have screamed.

“Come on, help me out, here!” Louis stretched out a little further. He was seriously in danger of toppling headfirst into the water if he wasn’t careful.

Panting heavily, she wobbled towards him, struggling across the surface of the water towards his outstretched hand. Louis resisted the temptation to roll his eyes at the sight of such a clearly pampered lap-dog that had probably never chased a cat in her life, and focused his energy on touching her instead. His fingers grazed the top of her head and he gave her an encouraging pat before making another gentle sound of persuasion to coax her towards him.

Her sopping wet fur felt odd under his fingertips; slippery, rather than silky, which was how it looked. Carefully leaning out a little further and hanging onto the ledge with one hand to make sure that he wouldn’t fall in, Louis stretched out, muscles shrieking in protest, trying to get a better grip on her. Just as he was about to give up, or possibly dive straight in after her, his fingers hooked around a little tartan collar, scraping past a brass nametag in the shape of a bone that was engraved with ‘Duchess’ in neat italic lettering – and he tugged carefully on the band, worried that he might hurt her. She curiously nosed his hand for a moment or so, gave him a token lick, and then allowed him to get a better grip and start gently pulling her towards him.

She wasn’t as heavy as he’d expected; there was more fur than anything else, billowing around her and making her look bloated and chubby. Pulling her in to the side, Louis reached into the water – cold! Cold! Bloody freezing, icy spikes tearing his arms to pieces; shudders running through his whole body, arms screaming where he’d plunged them in up to the elbows! – and then scooped her out, bringing her soaking, shuddering little body against his chest.

After shivering in his arms for a moment, she looked up at him, sneezed, and then shook herself all over him, water flying everywhere and covering him in bitterly cold water droplets like he’d been caught in the middle of a rainstorm. His skin glittered with diamond teardrops of water.

“Thanks,” Louis said. “Nice way of repaying me, that.”

“Duch! Duchess!”

A lithe, lean figure was scrambling over the rocks on the other side of the pool from which Louis had come, breathlessness suggesting that they’d been attempting to accomplish that feat for several minutes. Hair tangled, cheeks pink with effort, eyes wide as he rushed over, hands reaching out automatically for the dog. But when a pair of bright, leafy green eyes met his, Louis found himself
blinking and almost dropped the dog in shock.

“Oh. You saved Duch,” Harry said oddly. “Thank you.”

Clumsily transferring the squirming animal into Harry’s waiting arms, Louis said sheepishly “I don’t make a habit of this, you know.”

Frowning curiously, Harry asked, “What?”

Louis waved at his bedraggled, water-flecked clothes. “For some reason I always seem to be wet whenever you’re around.” It was a poor choice of words, and they both blushed violently, Harry especially. Embarrassed, Louis allowed his gaze to flicker downwards.

A small, cheeky grin flickered across Harry’s face, mouth quirking upwards in one corner, and, still staring at the floor, he said teasingly, “It seems like an enormous coincidence to me.” Daring to sneak a glance at Louis, he managed another little smirk, and Louis was amazed to find that the boy was playing with him – it was almost banter that he was giving out. Apparently, some of the confidence that vanished and reappeared in an instant was showing its face.

With a good-natured sound, Louis shrugged and let it pass. “I suppose you owe me, now, for saving your dog.” He reached out and scratched Duch’s ears fondly.

“One could argue that the debt was repaid when you saved Duch – I gave you a bed for the night, and you rescued my dog. I think we’re even now, are we not?” Harry’s crooked grin was almost playful, but his eyes had tightened slightly with anxiety.

“I think saving a dog is worth rather a lot more than a bed for the night, don’t you? I won’t ask for much, don’t worry. Just…” Pause. After a moment of indecision, Louis bravely took the plunge. “I wish you’d come down to the bar with me later. No strings attached,” he hastily verified, “in fact, if you like we’ll go ten minutes before it closes so no one else is there, and you can drink tap water and scowl disapprovingly at whatever I drink because I’m screwing up my liver. I won’t ask you to meet my friends and I won’t make silly jokes; in fact we could just sit there in awkward silence until we’ve finished our drinks and then part ways and I won’t bother you again. I just want you to try it. Just to be different.”

Despite his attempt to look stern, Harry pointed out with faint amusement, “You know, I’m almost ninety-nine percent certain I asked you not to ask me that again.”

“Nope, I’m pretty sure that was as regard to breakfast cocktails and hanging out with my best idiots – and please take notes; I didn’t ask you to do any of those things. In fact, I requested that you come and sit in the bar with me this evening, in complete solitude, with neither hide nor hair of any of my friends in sight.”

Mouth twisting wryly, Harry said, “Mmm… tempting. I might consider it if you take a legally binding vow of complete silence first…” He was struggling not to laugh.

“I don’t know about that… pinkie promise, possibly? Not sure I could run to any form of formal contract, but a pinkie promise, I can do.” He teasingly held out his little finger.

Harry looked at it for a while, mouth forming a twitch of amusement as he raised his eyebrows at Louis’ extended little finger. For a while, he stayed silent, expression playful, toying with Louis as he contemplated his decision. Head tilted onto one side, he gave Louis a flirtatious smile and let him sweat (figuratively) for a while, clearly nervous, palms sweating. It wasn’t a role reversal Louis much liked; he preferred to be the confident one rather than the one who was afraid. Now he was stood
twitching with nervousness, awaiting a response from the younger boy who, for once, was actually in control of the situation, and looked like he was enjoying it rather a lot. Louis wasn’t sure whether it was a turn-on or just plain irritating.

Just like that, with a light flash of his eyes, Harry made his decision.

“No.”

He said it playfully, the way he’d said everything else – like it was another little bit of the banter they’d been sharing for the past couple of minutes, and there was an amused smile on his face as the word slipped out; he was looking forward to Louis’ reaction. That reaction was a combination of stunned, hurt and amused, because of course it was all part of the game, this refusal, but he almost wished that Harry would stop playing, just for a moment. Because “no” wasn’t really what he wanted to hear.

“No?” he echoed faintly.

“No,” Harry agreed. His eyes sparkled with delight in the reaction he had invoked.

“Can I ask why?”

“I don’t feel like it.”

Louis contemplated that for a while. “Just right now, or ever?”

“Right now, I’m not interested. As for in the future…well, we’ll have to see about that.”

Harry was most definitely playing with him now. He was the devil; a demon with curly hair and a bewitching smile, and Louis was both aggravated and excited by the challenge he presented. He had a feeling that the boy knew it, too. They were pulling each other in, watching each other dance, and every time they started to move too closely together, Harry would leap away. It was unbelievably frustrating and absolutely fascinating.

“So if I asked you again, say, tomorrow…?”

“I’d still say no.” Turning around, Duchess still clamped firmly in his arms, Harry threw a playful glance over his shoulder and teased, “don’t be predictable. I like surprises.”

“I’d have thought you were completely against them. Too many people and not enough privacy.”

“Depends who’s surprising me.” After a moment’s thought, Harry said, “I might take you up on your offer, but I want you to know that if there’s one thing I hate, it’s crowded places. So if you’re planning to leap out at me from a darkened room with a battalion of enthusiastic friends, then I’d urge you to reconsider.”

“I wasn’t planning anything of the sort,” promised Louis.

“Good.” Harry kept on walking, arms still folded, holding his dog securely against him so that she couldn’t wriggle free, and this time he didn’t so much as glance back over his shoulder as he called, “I’ll see you around, then.”

Confused by his sudden attitude change – since when had he gone from being that shy, reclusive boy by the pool to being one of the biggest teases Louis had ever met? – Louis stared after him, mouth unattractively hanging open as he stared stupidly at the rapidly retreating figure who was slowly heading down the beach. After climbing up the rock face with her (Louis followed, scrambling after
him so he could watch him leave), he placed Duchess on the sand, gave her an encouraging pat and
a whistle, and after glancing back at Louis, she began trotting after her master, tail wagging.

Either Harry had summoned up enough trust in him already to start opening up and his true
personality was showing through the facade of shyness he kept up for everyone else, or he
really was cripplingly shy and felt he was close enough to Louis to get over it. Whatever it was, he
was confusing Louis endlessly, and it was bloody exhausting. *He* was supposed to messing
with *Harry*’s head, not the other way round!

Louis rubbed his eyes tiredly, sat down and shook his head incredulously. This was supposed to be a
holiday! He was going straight back to his hotel room and he was going back to sleep – and
hopefully he’d be able to think of an appropriate surprise in the meantime.
He was scared that he was losing himself, but at the same time, it seemed like the best thing that had ever happened to him. Weirdly, for those few minutes he’d spent teasing Louis – teasing! – he’d felt like someone else. As if he’d stepped out of his own nervous, introverted self for a moment and become someone new; someone who could take banter and give it back as easily as blinking; someone who wasn’t shy or scared and didn’t get knots in the pit of his stomach when he spoke to people he didn’t know; someone who wasn’t afraid to admit that maybe he liked boys in the way he was supposed to like girls, who had admitted it to himself and boldly decided it didn’t matter. Someone who met a guy on holiday and was so, so tempted to hook up with him even though he didn’t do that sort of thing; he didn’t speak to strangers; he didn’t fancy guys he barely knew…that wasn’t Harry Styles. At least, certainly not the Harry Styles that he knew himself to be.

Maybe this was a better Harry Styles. It frightened him, though; he’d come on the family holiday to do all the usual things – listen to music, think, shun the company of everyone who wasn’t a member of his own family, and walk quietly on the beach. Self-reinvention hadn’t exactly been on his list of planned holiday activities.

All these somewhat worrying thoughts chased mercilessly through his brain as he watched Louis cross the lobby from his secluded spot behind a rather ugly potted plant, peeping through the leaves and watching the older boy cheerfully wander through the room like he owned it. He waved coyly at the receptionist, Iris, awarded a winning smile to a gaggle of giggling girls squashed up on the sofa, and then flicked his hair out of his eyes and sashayed into the lift with one hand hanging neatly by his side and the other running sexily through his fringe, looking for all the world like a celebrity on the red carpet.

A soft snort from beside him made Harry jump, and he turned in surprise to find that someone had come and sat on the chair next to him, leaving a couple of inches between them because he knew Harry liked his personal space, and was lounging on the seat with ease. He nodded, more than most people could expect from him, but made no other attempt to greet the newcomer.

Liam had been working as a hotel bell boy since he was sixteen, and he and Harry had become sort of friends ever since running into each other on the beach one evening a couple of summers back – quite literally. An avid runner, Liam had been sprinting down the sands in one direction, while Harry shuffled forwards with his eyes glued to the floor in the opposite direction, headphones turned up full blast so that there was no way he could have heard Liam coming. As was unavoidable, Liam had collided with him, knocking him right over, and the two of them ended up flat on their backs on the floor, groaning, each with a rather nasty headache as their heads had banged together. Liam been full of apologies, but somehow, Harry had found the situation funny. He was so surprised at being knocked flying by a total stranger that he couldn’t help but laugh – from that moment onwards, Liam had been Harry’s friend, in a way.

They had struck up some form of acquaintance that took the form of a mutual silence more than anything else. Harry wasn’t usually the chatty type and Liam often had a lot of work to do, but they would not and sometimes exchange smiles in the corridors, and every now and then Harry would come and help Liam carry suitcases around, just for something to do. It was the closest thing to a real friendship he’d ever had. Apart from Louis, that was. And he felt so much more comfortable with Liam, mainly because he didn’t fancy him, but also because Liam knew Harry’s boundaries and was careful to keep them in place, whereas Louis seemed to almost derive pleasure in overriding them.

“He really is something, isn’t he?” Liam remarked in a low voice, nodding at where Louis had been
mere moments ago, where Harry’s eyes still lingered. His employees’ badge had gone askew, and Harry felt an odd urge to straighten it. “You’d have thought he was the next Madonna, the way he walks. Like he’s wearing high heels!” Clearly, Liam itched to imitate Louis’ walk, which even Harry had to admit was quite funny. Liam wasn’t being unkind; he was simply making an observation, and a witty one at that. Allowing a wry smile to show that he was amused, Harry nodded in agreement before Liam spoke again.

“You like him, don’t you?”

“No!” His reply was instantaneous, automatic – he didn’t even have to think about it. He, Harry Styles, likes someone? The very idea was preposterous. He was notorious on the resort for not liking anybody, even as a friend. Harry avoided company of any kind; he didn’t like people. It was something people took for granted now. Nobody tried coming on to him, or even speaking to him, and all the newcomers were warned off him. He was the weirdo, the outcast…he didn’t really mind. He preferred being shunned to being chased by people attempting to befriend him.

“You are allowed to like people, you know,” said Liam slyly, nudging him very lightly with his elbow. “Even I can see he’s pretty hot, even if he does walk like Kate Moss.”

Harry swallowed. “All right, then. Maybe I do like him…a little bit. But he makes me feel really weird – I just don’t get it. It’s like I’m more confident when I hang out with him. I feel different…like I’m not so scared anymore. Like I can be me, and you know I’m no good at that. But I don’t understand how that works; he terrifies me! I don’t have a clue how I’m supposed to act around him, but I just…do. And it’s not me.”

“Sounds like he’s good for you, then. I know you like your privacy, but I worry about you sometimes. You’re not really a very social guy. It’s how you are, and that’s okay, but I think a bit of interaction would do you good. A confidence boost would be good for you.”

“He keeps asking me out,” Harry blurted out. Embarrassed, he ducked his head and examined the floor. “Like…down to the bar, for drinks and stuff. And I don’t know how to take it.”

“Say yes!” cried Liam, as if it was obvious. It probably would have been, to anyone other than Harry, who was almightily confused by the whole concept of agreeing to have a drink for a stranger he’d only met three or four days ago.

“But…I don’t know him.” He hated the way his voice was so close to a childish whine, but he couldn’t help it. That tone always creeped into his voice when he knew he was losing an argument – and oh, he was losing spectacularly.

“So get to know him!” Waving his arms enthusiastically in the air, Liam continued, “go for that drink, kid! Talk to him! Get to know what he’s like, make friends with him, ask stupid questions and completely embarrass yourself! Otherwise, how will you ever know him? A hot guy with a fantastic arse is coming onto you, mate; what are you doing with your life? You fancy him, he fancies you; go out with him, and if you don’t like him, turn him down again next time! Come on, Harry, he could be your soul mate!” He gestured dramatically, and Harry stared incredulously at him, trying to work out whether or not Liam was sending him up. Apparently, he wasn’t. “Next time he asks you, look coy and then say yes, and then tell me how it turns out.”

“And if I don’t?” God, he was teasing Liam now – his whole world had turned upside down! There was definitely something wrong with him.

After a pause as he acknowledged the banter in surprise, Liam said almost playfully, “If you don’t, then I’ll ask him myself.”
Harry blinked. “I didn’t know you were gay!”

There was a long pause while Liam struggled to decide whether to laugh or be confused by that statement; he chose laughter, and his incredulity came out in the form of a chuckle and a grin that spread across his whole face as he shook his head fondly at Harry, the picture of innocence, who was still staring at him open-mouthed at the revelation he was convinced Liam had just made. It took several long seconds for Liam to get a handle on his amusement and stop giggling at the shock on Harry’s face.

“No! That’s not what I meant!” Shaking his head, Liam explained, “I meant that I’ll ask him for you, idiot!”

“Oh.” Harry’s shock subsided a little. “No, don’t do that. He’ll hate me if he thinks I’m getting the bellboy to do my dirty work.”

Liam poked him lightly. “Hey. I’m not just the bellboy; I’m your friend, remember! And the guy fancies the pants off you; you could get your mum to ask him out for you and he’d say yes.”

“I need to do this myself, I think. I can’t get everyone else to do everything for me. I have to…”

“Grow some balls?” suggested Liam dryly.

Harry laughed. “If you like. I don’t want to make other people do things for me anymore. If Louis really is changing me, then maybe the least I could do would be to help him out – I could at least try and be a bit more…outgoing. You know.”

“Yeah,” Liam said softly. “I know. You just need to get some confidence, that’s all. It’ll come with time, Harry. I think maybe this guy might be good for you, you know. I’m not just saying that because you’d make a good couple, either. If he brings you out of your shell a bit…well, I’d like to see that happen. You’ve been a good mate of mine for two years, Harry; I’ve often wished you weren’t quite such a loner. No offence intended; I know it’s the way you are. But sometimes I think you can have too many boundaries, you know? It’s about time somebody broke through a couple of those walls.”

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“Lou, I need to talk to you.”

It wasn’t very often that Stan was serious; he was renowned for making a joke out anything and everything. For that reason, and that reason alone, Louis halted in his otherwise relentless pacing up and down the hotel room, unclasped his hands from behind his back and turned around to stare at Stan, who was sat on the edge of Louis’ bed, staring him down with a solemn expression which looked out of place on his usually mischievous face.

He wasn’t entirely sure when Stan had even come in; he’d been lost in thought, stalking up and down and frowning as he tried to figure everything out; unravel the mystery, as it were. Louis was confused, and he didn’t much like it. In fact, he had every intention of working it all out and never, ever being confused again. Actually, he was going to start work on thoroughly befuddling Harry Styles, just to settle the score. His plan had been to toy with Harry, and it appeared that Harry was toying with him. The tables had been turned, and weirdly, he was kind of enjoying it. However, refreshing as it might be, he certainly wouldn’t mourn when it was done; he didn’t much like being the weak one.

“Looks like you are talking to me.” His tone was sharp, and it stabbed the air between them like a
needle; he regretted it almost instantly, and, closing his eyes, forced himself to take a calming breath. He asked a lot more evenly, “What’s up?”

“I think you know what’s up, Lou.” Concernedly, Stan’s eyes roved over him, as if he were trying to look straight inside his mind. It made Louis feel kind of uncomfortable, if he was perfectly honest. Discomfort and awkwardness were two sensations he was rapidly getting used to, and he was distinctly unimpressed by the fact. Surely his confidence couldn’t desert him just because a beautiful boy with green eyes had dared to tease him back!

“Well clearly I don’t, otherwise I wouldn’t have asked.” He so wasn’t in the mood for Stan to interrogate him, or whatever other game he was playing.

Sighing heavily, Stan admitted, “I want to revoke the bet.”

Whatever Louis had been expecting him to say, it certainly wasn’t that. A frown etched across his forehead and he said slowly, incredulously, “I don’t follow.”

“It’s not exactly difficult to understand, Lou! It was meant to be a joke, that’s all; a stupid dare! I just wanted to see how quick you could get some rich chick in your bed, and when that Harry kid came wandering along, I wanted to see if you could get him. Just for a laugh! I didn’t realize you were going to get so…so obsessed with him!”

Stung, Louis said “I’m not obsessed!”

“Lou. Let’s be serious. We’ve been here for almost a week now, and so far, all you’ve talked about is the kid – how fit he is and how much you want to bang him and how weird and cute and shy he is and how much he winds you up – it’s not normal, Lou! Maybe you’re bored and this is just a diversion, I don’t know, but I swear, you’ve got way too invested in this bet. So I take it back. All of it. You don’t have to have sex with him or talk to him or even look at him anymore. This was supposed to be a mates’ holiday, not a fortnight watching you stalk some posh twat with curly hair!”

“It was a blood oath,” Louis insisted, and his voice sounded odd; strangely hollow, like he was repulsed by the idea of giving up on Harry now. “No backsies.”

“Don’t be so pathetic, Lou. We’re not twelve. A blood oath is about as meaningful as a pinkie promise to us; just forget about the guy, and we’ll say no more about it. Yeah?”

“No,” answered Louis stiffly. “I happen to take pinkie promises seriously, actually. A promise is a promise. Anyway, I don’t want to quit. It’s not just a stupid bet anymore; the kid’s lonely, and he needs friends, and I want to help him, okay?”

“Help him? He doesn’t need help! He’s rich, he’s hot, he’s got family, he comes to places like this every holiday – how does that kid need help?”

“He’s lonely,” Louis responded, and his voice cracked embarrassingly as he said it. “I don’t think he realizes it yet, but he is. He needs someone to hang out with and maybe…maybe that someone could be me. I could help him!”

“God, you’re full of it. He’s a total stranger; he’s nothing to do with you, and here you are preaching about his mental issues and acting like I’m the one who’s been messing with him this whole time, like I’m the one in the wrong.”

“So I realized there’s more to him than sex; what’s so wrong with that? People aren’t just toys, you know; they have personalities. It’s about time I remembered that. He’s amazing, and maybe we’ll be able to help each other. I kind of feel like we’ve got this thing, you know? Kind of like…we’re
friends.”

“You don’t even know him!”

“Yeah, well maybe I want to know him!” Louis snapped. “He’s cute and funny and he’s different from all the other spoilt little rich brats around this place. Maybe it’s about time he met someone like me, someone who can actually teach him not to run away from everything. I think he might be learning already. He’s already started teasing me; the guy has a wicked sense of humour.”

“And how is you fucking him going to teach him not to run away from everything?” Stan demanded. He snorted in disgust. “Stop kidding yourself, Louis. You’re a heartbreaker; you always have been. It’s how you are. You take people and you screw them up, and you’ll do the exact same thing to this kid too, without even realizing it!”

Furiously, Louis yelled, “I never do that intentionally! People get attached! Anyway, you told me to go for him in the first place, remember? Don’t go preaching to me, Stan Lucas; you’re as bad as I am for picking people up and seeing how badly they’ll break, how hard you have to drop them to make them shatter. So you shut up, and you shut up right now, because you may be too thick to figure it out, but maybe this kid is the kid who’ll change things. Maybe he’ll stop me from being such a –”

“Slut?”

The word was said in the heat of the moment, and it slashed viciously between them like a sword, making them both flinch. They’d called each other many things in the past, but never that. So they enjoyed messing about, what teenage boy didn’t? But neither of them had ever said anything so harsh, probably because Louis was so afraid that it might be true. Enough people had said it to him in the past. Chanted it after him in the street, with wolf-whistles to accompany it. Look, there goes Louis, Louis the slut. He hooks up with chicks in clubs and guys too, if they’re hot. He isn’t fussy. He’s that much of a slut.

He’d always pretended not to hear, but now…

Mouth falling open in shock, an appalled Stan backed away a little bit, trembling, like he was horrified at himself. He shook his head in confusion like he had misheard, like there was something wrong with his ears and he was trying to clear them. Toffee-brown hair fell messily across his forehead as he did so, and Louis glowered at him with something painfully close to hatred. Slut. The one word he’d always been afraid of, because he was so scared that maybe he was one. It stung, like he’d grabbed a handful of thistles and swallowed them; his throat prickled and so did his eyes. Ridiculous. One word had affected him so strongly that he was close to tears. He swallowed very hard, shaking his head too, dazed by Stan’s spiteful accusation. For a while, they stood in silence, Stan biting his lip so hard that it turned white, and Louis shaking all over with a mixture of anger and upset; he was both offended and shocked that Stan would say it. Now he was wondering, did Stan think that too? Did he watch Louis walk down the street and think ‘there he goes, the filthy slut!’ when outwardly, he would smile and wave? Louis shook like a leaf at the very thought that his best friend might have been hating him all the while. That he had given him a dare which involved sex, because hey, sex was nothing to a slut like him! That Stan thought the same thing as all the rest. His ears burned.

“I didn’t mean –” Stan began weakly. “I didn’t mean it…like that.”

“Oh, yeah? Funny, because last time I checked, ‘slut’ still meant the same thing it always has.”

“Yeah, but I – I didn’t mean to say it!” cried Stan wretchedly. He looked horrified at himself.

“I’m pretty sure that’s the insult of choice for most fourteen year old girls these days…but that’s you
all over, isn’t it? You always were a bitch.” Louis would regret the words later, but now? Now, they felt good. He was on fire, the nastiness filling him from the inside out, overflowing, and he was completely uncontrollable. His temper had always been a force to be reckoned with.

“Louis, please. I don’t want to fall out with you over something as stupid as this.”

What gave Stan the right to be so bloody reasonable? He’d started the argument in the first place – words hurt, and that word especially, the word that girls had whispered behind his back as he passed and that people had hissed from behind their hands, knowing full well that they could hear him perfectly. He had gotten used to it, really; after all, it wasn’t like he hadn’t earned that particular piece of slander. But from his own best friend? It hurt.

“I think it’s a bit late for that – and I don’t think it’s stupid at all, actually. If you think I’m such a big slut, why don’t you go and make friends with a nun? I’m sure there’s plenty of them around here. If not, you could always go and find a convent.”

“Oh, come on, Lou, don’t –”

Snatching up his jacket off the bed, Louis stalked over to the door with a scowl plastered across his face. He yanked the door open so hard that he was surprised he didn’t pull it straight off its hinges, and held it open very pointedly. When Stan stayed rooted to the spot with a pleading expression on his face, Louis punctuated the gesture with an irritable little cough.

“I’m going for a walk. If you’re still here by the time you get back, then I’ll be a murderer as well as a slut.” Then he coldly walked out, slamming the door behind him, and leaving a dismayed Stan standing in the middle of his room with a downcast expression on his face.
Chapter 7

Louis was well and truly sick of being turned down. Tonight he was going to do something absolutely spectacular; he would win Harry over and show that he wasn’t just a stupid slut. In fact, he wasn’t planning on any kind of sexual advances whatsoever – just romantic ones.

He’d spent a long time picking out a shirt of Zayn’s which, strictly speaking, he hadn’t been given permission to borrow. On a point of accuracy, he’d snuck into Zayn’s hotel room while the other boy was in the shower and snatched the shirt in question from over the back of a chair, feeling pretty pleased with the speed with which he did it. After all, he’d been planning to acquire that particular item of clothing for a while; it was a grey shirt with a picture of a skull on it, and black roses – a morbid garment, but it looked pretty cool and brought out some of the more subdued greyish tones in his eyes. After fixing his hair like it was a military operation, finding some trousers which were perhaps a little less revealing – see, Stan, I am so not a slut! Louis thought – and far looser on him, and choosing his least ratty shoes, he was ready. Kind of.

If anyone had known what he was planning, he knew full well what they’d have said. Told him he was an idiot. Who did he think he was, bloody Spiderman? It was the stupidest plan ever and he’d hurt himself and even if he didn’t, it was just plain creepy, climbing the walls to get someone’s attention; Harry would probably be utterly horrified and think he was seriously weird, and be put off him for good! Well, Louis knew all of that, and he didn’t care a bit.

It was somewhat of a consolation that Harry was a weirdo, too, and a friendless weirdo at that – so he couldn’t object too strongly to Louis being completely bonkers. Anyway, he was at a loose end, and he’d run out of other ideas. This was seeming like a better and better idea by the minute, now there was nobody hanging around to change his mind.

Feeling pretty pleased with both himself and his plan, he stared up at the wall beneath Harry’s balcony and grimly spat on his hands. He was going to end up with an awful lot of grazes on his palms by the time he had reached his destination, but he’d heard people say enough times that love cures all ills, and people will do anything for love, etcetera, etcetera. Previously, he’d snorted with laughter at sappy nonsense like that, but if it gave him an excuse…well, who was he to scoff? He didn’t know what love was like, after all. And it made him feel slightly less crazy if he had some way of justifying his actions.

He took a good run up before rushing forwards, springing at the wall and grabbing hold of the first handhold he came to, namely some kind of ivy or other creeping plant that was growing up the wall. It turned out to not be the steadiest of items, something that he abruptly realized when he found himself lying sprawled on the floor with a large handful of the stuff wound around his fingers. Shaking his head, he hurled it to the ground, stormed over to the wall and made a great show of thoroughly examining it for crevices which he could use to drag himself up.

The first place he found to shove his foot was rather a tight fit, and he almost panicked when he thought that he’d trapped his toe in the crack – but before too long, he managed to shake his foot free and then he was scrambling up the next little section of wall, scrabbling ineffectively to try and rip some of the ivy away and find a slightly more steady place to put his hands. It was by no means the easiest wall he’d ever climbed – and yes, he’d climbed walls before! He was a teenage boy who liked to get drunk; of course he’d climbed plenty of walls in his time. This one was proving to be a particular challenge; his hands were burning and he could feel Zayn’s shirt sticking to him as he struggled to try and gain a little height. It felt like he’d hardly moved.

Don’t look down, he warned himself, and then repeated it out loud, with more emphasis, like he
didn’t expect himself to obey; “Don’t. Look. Down!” Shaking his hair out of his eyes, he breathed out heavily through his mouth, pulled a face, and then stretched his hand out, arm aching as he forced himself to reach out further than his arm was intended to reach in order to grab a brick which was suitably placed for him to pull himself up a little higher. Inch by inch, he was slowly making his way upwards. If Harry didn’t appreciate this, Louis would be sorely tempted to punch him. Seriously. Either that, or he’d throw himself off the balcony.

Providing he actually managed to get up there first, of course.

He was slowly, carefully getting there, albeit with a lot of huffing and puffing and copious amounts of swearwords. Hopefully Harry wasn’t listening; he had the feeling that the sound of him rattling off every expletive in the dictionary wasn’t the most romantic beginning of a serenading session. Also, with the way Harry looked so painfully innocent, he felt awful at the thought of contaminating his little curl-concealed ears with swearwords. Not quite awful enough to close his mouth and stifle them, but pretty awful, anyway.

The balcony was coming closer and closer, and he was starting to feel heartened with every inch of ascent. He had a sneaking suspicion that he’d ripped the hem of Zayn’s t-shirt and that Zayn was probably going to kill him when he found out, but he’d deal with that later. One of his shoes was in serious danger of falling off his foot and dropping all the way back down to the ground again; if it did, he was going to kick off the other, too, partly so that the first shoe wouldn’t feel lonely, and also because at least that way it would look deliberate and seem a little less ridiculous. His hair was sticking to his forehead and Zayn’s shirt was sticking to his back, the stalks of the ivy were relentlessly scratching his tanned arms, and as he shifted awkwardly, one of the twigs slashed at his face, leaving a stinging graze on one cheek. He hoped it made him look rugged and determined rather than clumsy, which was how he felt right then. He also hoped to God that if by some miracle he did turn out looking rugged, then Harry would be into that kind of thing.

If he fell now, he would probably break one or possibly more bones – he’d done so in the past, and had no particular desire to relive the experience. Therefore he was concentrating on not falling, even though his brain appeared determined to try its utmost to distract him, filling his mind with new ideas; according to his brain, he ought to have slicked his hair back, had his teeth whitened and climbed heroically up the wall with a red rose between his teeth, and he probably ought to have had some kind of dramatic music playing in the background.

Louis was seriously beginning to worry about what kind of state his mind was in to be conjuring up mental images like that. Especially because he was thinking that actually, it would be quite cool, especially if he accessorized the whole ensemble with a sword belt.

Gritting his teeth to dispel any more forthcoming Disney-themed fantasies, Louis growled and found himself a new foothold, pulling himself up another short stretch of wall. Perhaps he should have brought a ladder instead – less romantic, but a lot more practical.

Light was spilling from Harry’s doorway out onto the balcony; he could see it if he craned his neck – it was dim for a summer evening, but then again, it was coming close to midnight. Idly, he wondered whether Harry was one of those night owls; he looked young enough to have been in bed by now. Still, appearances could be deceiving.

He was getting distracted again. Focus, he told himself grimly, and returned his attention to the wall.

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He was listening to music and leaning over the edge of his balcony, hand trailing over the edge, boredly tracing the cool metal bars, wondering if, from below, his silhouette made him look like he
was enacting a cheap, rip-off version of *Romeo and Juliet*. It wasn’t quite the most authentic of balconies, and he by no means resembled any sort of Juliet, being eighteen, male, not particularly romantic, and not being a fictional character. Still, it amused him to think of it.

Headphones jammed in his ears, blocking out the world, he’d removed his ever-present black clothes for once, wearing a plain white shirt and jeans instead. Ed Sheeran’s melodic voice was trickling soothingly into his ears, and he couldn’t help but smile at the ridiculous cliché of listening to sad music and staring melancholically out into the night. Harry derived amusement from the strangest of things.

Perhaps even more clichéd; his thoughts were occupied by a man. A certain man in particular, with caramel-coloured hair and wicked eyes like sapphires dipped in ice, which glinted with mischief whenever he opened his mouth. With tanned skin and a long, lithe body a little smaller and more controllable than Harry’s, and a mouth which unashamedly voiced anything which came into his head without even stopping to think about what he was saying; Harry envied him for it almost as much as he pitied him. He could imagine that it had gotten Louis into several sticky situations in the past. However, he’d probably talked his way out of them easily enough, with that velvety voice that wrapped around each syllable and made Harry quiver at the mere thought of how that voice framed his name, like each letter was a kiss being pressed lightly against his skin by a cool mouth. These were the kind of sinful thoughts he was ashamed to be having, and he pinched himself lightly on the wrist as a stern reminder to ignore them.

Still, he had by no means forgotten how touchy Louis had been with him, on the very first night they’d met. While he hauled the dripping wet man up the stairs, puffing and panting all the while, Louis’ slender fingers had fiddled with his waistband, snuck underneath his skirt and trailed enticingly up the warm skin of his back, tapped little nonsensical tunes onto his spine. His mouth had been warm and inviting as it wandered across Harry’s neck, and no matter how valiantly Harry protested and pushed him away, it always came back. He had enjoyed it far more than he should. Whether Louis remembered any of it or not he didn’t know, but he hoped not. If only because of the way he had blushed quite so hard when Louis’ mouth, whispering temptations and drunken promises into his ear, had tried to corrupt him and coax him into bed…

Harry would not forget how close they had come to doing just that. He hadn’t been strictly truthful in his telling of the turn of events after he brought the older boy to his room; in reality, it had been anything but the innocent evening he had portrayed it to be. Whispering persuasively, Louis had managed to convince him to remove both of their clothes in a matter of minutes, and they’d both been lying on the bed in only their underwear, skin touching, when Louis had rolled over to kiss him and Harry realized that he was lying on his bed with a total stranger who was making a pass at him…when he realized how it must look.

Stuttering and stammering, he had made his excuses and locked himself in the bathroom rather than Louis – when he nervously resurfaced, Louis was asleep and snoring, and it had been left to Harry to find him new clothes and stuff him into them without waking them. He had tried, honestly tried, not to look, only to touch when necessary…but how could he help but notice the snowy white and slightly brown shades of their contrasting skin? How could he prevent his shaking fingers from lingering on Louis’ taut stomach and smoothing his soft hair? It was a miracle in itself that he hadn’t woken Louis up and carried on with all of the things that the other boy had been proposing for half of the evening. That terrified Harry; he hated to even speak to a stranger, so how had he almost ended up in bed with one? And it continued to be so; he was more comfortable with Louis, a totally mad stranger who threw himself at shy introverts and then fell into the hotel pool and dragged Harry in with him, than he had ever been with anyone in his life. Which was why he sometimes forgot that he was Harry Styles, who shunned company and didn’t like people and was never happier than he was when things were silent, and why he sometimes found himself becoming someone he didn’t
recognize, but who might actually be him.

Quickly banishing the thought, he looked down into the courtyard below – and that was when he wondered whether his mind had snapped and he’d gone entirely mad, because his Romeo and Juliet delusion had apparently gained a new aspect; become a little more accurate. He could see the shadow of someone clinging to dear life to the bottom of his balcony, kicking their legs and struggling to get a better grip on the metalwork.

Ripping his headphones out of his ears, Harry leapt back in alarm. Was it a burglar? Why his balcony, out of all of them, when his fear of strangers would tie his vocal chords in knots that would prevent him from crying out for help if anyone were to leap over? But just as he was about to make a panicked dash for the French windows and lock them, protecting himself from whoever the hell was hanging off his balcony, a familiar set of tanned fingers appeared on the edge, poking through the bars – and then a face popped up, pressing against the white metal, and he could see that he recognized the person who was clawing madly and trying to haul themselves up onto the parapet.

“Shit!” Louis cursed, swinging wildly off the balcony, and accompanied it with several similar profanities as he struggled not to fall off and plummet straight back down to the ground again.

After a couple of moments, Harry cautiously approached him, peeking over the edge, his body throwing a shadow over Louis’ face. Looking up at him, Louis’ mouth quirked into a sheepish smile that only widened as Harry asked incredulously, “What the hell are you doing?”

“Falling,” admitted Louis. “Which wasn’t the original plan, but it would appear to be how things have turned out…would you mind giving me a hand?” He stretched one hand through the bars.

Shaking his head in pure amazement, Harry knelt down and grabbed hold of his arm – and then the other…and slowly, little by little, he and Louis worked together until Louis was finally putting one leg over the bars and struggling to scramble over. Eventually, he managed it, and they stood staring at each other, Harry quickly dropping Louis’ hand like it had burnt him while Louis tried not to look embarrassed and attempting to recall how his plan was supposed to have turned out.

In the absence of his previous plan coming to mind, Louis decided to just go with his instinct – which just happened to be making a joke of it all. Dropping to his knees, he dramatically clasped his hands in front of him and exclaimed, “But hark! What light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Harold is the sun!”

Stunned, Harry burst out laughing, and Louis listened in amazement to the beautiful, unrestrained sound of it, echoing through the hotel grounds, stealing away the silence and replacing it with something far more pleasing to the ear. He couldn’t help but grin in response to Harry’s amusement; straightening up from where he had been bent double, Harry raised an eyebrow at him and shook his head in bemusement.

“My ears have not yet drunk a hundred words of that tongue’s utterance, yet I know the sound: art thou not Louis Tomlinson, and a complete and total idiot?” He couldn’t keep either the smile off his face or the laughter out of his voice.

“You missed out a massive chunk,” Louis chided gently, and he stepped forwards and pressed a finger to Harry’s lips to silence him. “My name is hateful to myself, because it is an enemy to thee; had I it written, I would tear the word.”

He gazed unflinchingly at Harry, fixing him with a cool blue stare. Harry swallowed, clearly understanding what he was talking about; he was referencing the way that Harry cringed whenever
Louis’ name was mentioned across the hallway by the receptionist, flinching like it was his own. The way he had turned him down time and time again, almost as if he was ashamed to be associated with him. Blushing, Harry’s gaze dropped; he hadn’t realized that Louis had paid enough attention to even notice those little things, let alone that he had taken it to heart.

“He speaks yet he says nothing: what of that? His eye discourses; I will answer it.” Louis dipped forward and pressed his cheek against Harry’s, getting access to his ear, but he said nothing else, merely waiting for Harry to respond.

“I am too quickly won,” Harry offered, fetching up the only appropriate quote he could think of.

Louis snorted. “If only that were true.” Turning around, he rested his chin on his hand and leaned on the balcony, lounging over the edge and stared over the edge. “You’re paraphrasing, you know. Skipping bits. My English teacher would have had a fit over you.”

“Yeah, well it’s been a good few years since I last studied Shakespeare, so I hope you’ll forgive me for forgetting the odd line,” Harry said dryly. “I would have brushed up on it a little if I knew someone was going to flirt with me and insist that I replied using lines from a play I barely even looked at when I was studying it.”

“It’s about time you had a bit of trouble, I think. You’ve given me enough.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“I think you know.” Louis faced him again; leaning forwards, he continued softly but animatedly, “that same pale hard-hearted wench, that Harry Styles, torments me so that I will sure run mad.” Pausing, he shook his head with a sigh. “Look, see – now I’m paraphrasing.”

“Never mind that; who’re you calling a wench? Anyway, I’m not tormenting you.”

Again, Louis laughed. “Remind me; how many times have you turned me down now? Five? Six?”

“Twice,” Harry corrected primly, “three times, if you’re going to count the time you tried to get me to drink with you by the poolside.”

“Three times too many, then. Does the thought of my company really horrify you so much that you couldn’t even bear to sit with me for ten minutes in silence before the bar closes? Am I that bad, really? Because forgive me if I’m wrong, but I got the impression that we get on quite well.”

“I hardly think that counts as torment,” muttered Harry wryly, then more loudly, “not your company specifically. Just company in general. I’m not keen on mixing with people overall; you shouldn’t take it so personally. Actually, I do enjoy your company – more than most people’s.” Embarrassed by the revelation, he quickly looked away. “I just…don’t like people.”

“Your only love sprung from your only hate?” Louis asked wryly, quoting Shakespeare again, and once again he turned his back on Harry and went back to watching the sky.

“If you like. I’m terrible at socializing; I never know what to say. You’d be quick to get rid of me if I did come. You only want me because I’m unattainable; it’s my only selling point. I’m not funny or clever or attractive, so my only appeal is that you can’t have me. I don’t like people, but I know them all too well; everyone wants what they can’t have.”

“Well, it depends on how you look at it. What if I did find you funny, clever and attractive?”

Gorgeous, ivy coloured eyes rolled in acknowledgement of the question, but Harry shook his head
pityingly, lips pressed amusedly together. “Well, then it’d be a serious error of judgement on your part, but I suppose I can’t complain. You really aren’t going to let this go, are you?”

“Nope,” agreed Louis cheerfully. “I’m going to keep on asking until you say yes.”

“And what if I never say yes?” His smile had reached his eyes by now, and there was a new light of excitement dancing there; unconsciously or not, he was enjoying the verbal battle. “What if we both go home and never see each other again and I still haven’t said yes?”

Louis shrugged. “Then I’ll follow you home and trail your every move, and when you die I’ll scratch ‘yes’ onto your gravestone with my fingernails. And then I’ll have the answer I want even if you’re in no state to fulfill it.”

Harry snorted with laughter and tried to hastily disguise it as a cough. “I suppose I’d better say yes, then, or else you may end up with a restraining order, and that really would be a shame.”

Delighted, Louis’ eyes lit up. “So…hold on a minute, you’re actually saying yes?”

More amusement. “No.”

Slumping in defeat, Louis groaned and closed his eyes in defeat. “I swear, you’re trying to drive me mad, aren’t you? And I’ll have you know it’s working –”

“I can’t say yes until you ask me.”

He was the devil. Louis didn’t think he’d ever seen one person enjoy themselves quite so much over refusing to say one tiny little word – but he hadn’t realized that the withholding of one small word could be quite so maddening. His eyes narrowed, and Harry struggled not to laugh.

“You probably won’t say yes even if I do ask you,” grumbled Louis, but after a moment or two, he relented. “Fine. But if you say no one more time, I’m through with asking; I’ll just drug you and you’ll wake up tied to a bar stool with a glass of lemonade in your hand and a cocktail umbrella shoved up your nose. So, for the fourth time, will you, Harry Styles, hang out with me tomorrow? Just for a little while?”

There was a long pause, and Louis waited with bated breath for Harry to come out with some quip, some sarcastic comment, some convoluted excuse or stupid, infuriating reason why not, or worst of all, just one final short, sharp ‘no’ that Louis thought would hurt more than anything, now that they’d had such a long conversation and now that Harry had admitted that he liked being with him. He almost wearily closed his eyes in preparation for the rejection and the sharp, mocking sting of inadequacy that always came with it.

“Yeah,” said Harry. “All right.”

Louis almost fell right off the balcony again in shock.

“You what?”

“I said yes. I’ll come and ‘hang out’ with you tomorrow.”

“What, really, though?”

“I said yes, didn’t I?”

“You’re not going to go back on it?”
“I wasn’t thinking of it…”

“Oh my God, this is great!” Louis clapped his hands excitedly. “Oh, just you wait; this is going to be absolutely brilliant!”

“Just us,” Harry warned. “None of your mates, or any of the staff, or whatever. Just you and I.”

“Of course, of course! Whatever you say. Wherever you say. God, this is great!”

“Well, I’ll believe that when I see it.” Harry folded his arms across his chest, tried to look disapproving, and failed miserably. “Now, are you going to heroically climb back down to the ground and go with the whole theme you’ve got going on of being dramatic, or would you rather do what normal people would do and use the stairs?”

“Stairs, if you don’t mind,” Louis said weakly. “I don’t think I could do that again. It’s taken years off my life!”

Harry stepped neatly backwards and allowed Louis to edge past him, padding through the hotel room and heading for the door. He watched him leave with palpable amusement, raising his eyebrows at the new bounce in Louis’ walk.

“Victory is mine,” called Louis cheerfully.

“For now,” teased Harry, and he closed the door behind the older boy before Louis could turn around and demand an explanation for that, too.
“You have got to be kidding me.”

“What?” asked Harry anxiously, instantly looking down at himself. “What did I do?”

Raising an eyebrow, Louis looked him up and down, scrutinizing him. Harry was wearing black jeans, an enormous black hoodie that swallowed his entire, skinny body within its cavernous depths, a black beanie, and grubby black Converse sneakers. He looked like he was dressed as a nun, except for the flowing white headdress like a thick, linen version of a wedding veil (although he seemed to have chosen a beanie in replacement of it). In fact, the hugely loose hoodie that fell almost to his knees and almost certainly didn’t belong to him gave Louis the rather amusing impression that he was wearing a giant black chastity gown, perhaps with electric fences concealed beneath the swaths of billowing material, ready to zap Louis’ wandering fingers if they strayed too closely to the hem of the hoodie.

“Is that a hoodie or a tent?” Louis asked a little unkindly.

Harry flushed. “Shut up! I’m here, aren’t I? That’s what you wanted; that’s what you’ve been badgering me about for the past week. If you’re going to insult me, then maybe I should just leave.” He said it a little huffily, but made no move to turn on Louis and storm off like he was threatening to.

“Harry, we’re supposed to be sunbathing. By the pool. In the first sign of glorious sunshine that this country has produced in months, the first glimpse of summer we’ve had so far this year, we were supposed to be relaxing by the pool, and here you are, clothed from head to toe in black looking like a sloppily dressed ninja! You’re going to fry inside all of that! Black fabric absorbs heat; you’re going to absolutely roast.”

“My problem, not yours. Anyway, who said anything about the pool? What happened to our quiet little drink in the bar?” demanded Harry.

Louis snorted fondly. “It’s eleven o’clock in the morning, Harry – the bar isn’t open yet. So for the moment, the pool is here, and so are we. It makes sense.” Eyeing him up and down, Louis continued pleadingly, “at least lose the beanie?”

“No!” Defensively, Harry backed away a little, one hand flying up to protect the beanie that was nestling on top of his head, his curls jammed haphazardly underneath it. “The beanie stays. I’m having a bad hair day. Anyway, why is it so important? Why should I take it off?”

Stepping closer to him, Louis gave him a pitying look. “Please. You look like an Eskimo. In fact, that hat so closely resembles an egg cosy that I won’t be surprised when you become a boiled egg underneath all of those clothes – it’ll be totally in character. I’m begging you, take off the beanie? For me?” His eyes suddenly became very large and almost illegally persuasive.

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“Not for anybody,” insisted Harry.

There was a long and challenging pause, during which Harry folded his arms in a display of defiance and Louis looked him up and down, appraising him, apparently re-evaluating his opinion of the boy. They stared each other down for a few seconds – then Louis lunged forwards, playfully snatched the beanie off his head so that brown curls exploded in a halo of chocolate brown around Harry’s head, and then screwed up the little black woollen hat into a tight ball and threw it as far as he could, aiming at a group of children splashing around in the pool. It landed with a plop in the water beside
them and began sinking immediately, like some kind of dead animal. Squealing, one of little girls snatched the hat and started crowing over her new plaything, and before long they were all squabbling over it, tugging furiously at Harry’s poor beanie and squawking at each other in protest.

Horrified, Harry gawped at the seven children who were suddenly having a screaming fight over his beanie. “Louis! I can’t believe you just did that! That’s my hat!” he cried indignantly.

Slyly, Louis regarded him with faint amusement, one eyebrow raised. “Well, I’m sure they’d give it back to you, if you want to go over and tell them that.” The enormous grin on his face clearly stated that he thought the exact opposite, and sadly, he was completely right.

“I can’t go over there!” Even the thought made him feel almost faint with horror; if there was one thing that terrified him more than people in general, it was little kids. Especially loud, noisy ones who appeared ready to start bashing each other in order to win the prize of Harry’s rather soggy, mutilated hat.

“Well, if you really want your hat back that badly, I suppose you’ll have to take the risk, won’t you? Otherwise, might I suggest that you hurry up? There’s not going to be any sun loungers yet if we hang about mourning your beanie all day. Come on!” Grabbing Harry’s baggy sleeve, Louis gave him a tug and started pulling him towards the sun lounger with a huge grin on his face.

“Louuuu,” whined Harry as he was dragged unceremoniously along the poolside, stumbling and struggling to keep up, “this is a really bad idea. I don’t think I should have come; you won’t want me hanging around anyway. In fact, I really don’t think I should be here, I should go –”

“Nonsense,” Louis cried briskly as they came to a stop beside a single free sun-lounger that had been crammed into a shaded corner away from all the others (one which, unbeknown to Harry, he had relocated earlier in the afternoon so that the other boy would have somewhere to sit) “we had a deal and I refuse to let you go back on it. Anyway, it most definitely is not a bad idea. My ideas are never bad. Ever.” He plonked Harry down on the sun lounger and was able to enjoy a few moments of Harry’s unrestrained shock before the younger boy managed to wrest some form of control over his expression.

Staring up at him, Harry stammered, “I’m not sure about this, Lou, I really don’t –” he paused.

“Hang on, why are we sat over here? Nobody else is over here.”

Louis smiled patiently. “That was sort of the idea.” More to the point; when did you start calling me ‘Lou’? He would never admit to anyone how much he enjoyed the sound of the endearment falling so naturally from Harry’s perfect pink lips. “You don’t like people, remember? I figured I’d shift us out of the way.”

Harry flushed with pleasure that Louis had remembered and been so considerate as to accommodate for his social anxiety. “Oh. Thank you.” There was a pause, and then he frowned slightly and said, “there’s only one sun-lounger.”

Already beginning to shrug out of his tight blue shirt, Louis raised an eyebrow at him as he hurled the garment to the floor, ignoring the blush that exploded across Harry’s pale cheeks. “Lazing around in the sun all day isn’t my idea of fun, thank you very much. You can lurk under your sun umbrella and try not to get a tan to your heart’s content; I’m going to be enjoying the pool.” Kicking off his shorts and leaving them in a heap on the floor, along with his shirt, Louis revealed himself to be wearing nothing more than a pair of swimming trunks, and he was visibly amused by Harry’s evident shock.

“We were supposed to be hanging out,” Harry reminded him almost accusingly, looking a little
sulky. His sinfully attractive lips were pushed out into a pout. “That was the deal.”

“We are hanging out. I get to mess about in the pool. You get to sulk in the shade and play out the whole angsty vampire role you’ve got going on. Everybody’s happy.” Grinning, Louis waved coyly at him, a flutter of his fingers, and then turned, gave a little run up, and dive-bombed into the pool, splashing water everywhere so that a little gaggle of teenage girls (the same little gaggle of girls, as a matter of fact, who had been stalking him for days) screeched and got rather soaked, and began wailing over their suddenly rather damp hair and dramatically streaked make-up that Louis had utterly destroyed by showering them in water, when previously they had been standing around waist-deep in the shallow end, showing off their bikini-clad bodies and doing no swimming whatsoever. He felt a little stab of vindictive pleasure at the jibe, and got to enjoy the sound of Harry’s gorgeous laugh rippling across the pool in response to their screams.

Shaking his wet hair like a dog, Louis submerged himself in water once again and emerged after a few seconds, grinning massively at the visible delight on Harry’s face and quickly swimming over to the edge. Leaning over the side of the pool with his arms folded, he called, “Care to join me?”

The look of abject horror on Harry’s face said it all. Throwing his head back and laughing, Louis pushed off from the side and spent the next couple of minutes messing around. Mainly for the purpose of Harry’s entertainment, he did a couple of handstands, demonstrated several different forms of swimming strokes (including the doggy paddle, much to Harry’s amusement) and then had Harry measure his lung capacity by seeing how long he could hold his breath for. After that, he headed for the deepest end of the pool and started doing dives off the side, while Harry applauded and rated each one a ten, even the one where Louis slipped and fell in sideways, displacing what looked like half the water in the pool with the enormous splash he created. (Suffice to say that Harry rated that one a ten simply because it sent him into convulsions of uncontrollable laughter, which Louis counted as a personal victory.)

He was having a great time, in fact, when he came up for air after having done a rather dramatic impression of a whale solely for Harry’s amusement, only to almost end up vanishing back underneath the surface and choking on chlorine-filled water when he spotted Stan and Zayn swanning in wearing swimming trunks and nothing else, and Stan’s eyes homed in on him almost instantly.

They both took several rather harsh intakes of breath as they set eyes on each other, but the moment Louis had sucked that breath inwards he found it being snatched away from him again in shock. Staring across the waters at each other, he found himself struggling not to feel unnerved by the intensity of his best friend’s gaze. Louis forgot to keep treading water and suddenly found himself under it, with water over his head and all around him, pouring inside his mouth and burning his lungs with the harsh, icy, bitter chemical taste of it. Frantically splashing and kicking, he struggled to right himself, and felt his body tipping sideways. Around that moment, he lost track of which way was up, and started flailing desperately in an attempt to find the surface. His chest was beginning to ache, and water stung his eyes, his vision blurred.

One of his hands broke the surface of the water, and he thankfully kicked up for the surface, his head bursting through the waves as he coughed and spluttered, spitting out what felt like half of the pool and trying not to choke on it.

“Are you all right, Lou?”

Harry was leaning so far over the edge that it was surprising he didn’t topple in, his knuckles white as he clung to the poolside, eyes wide as he stared at Louis, who hastily shoved his hair out of his eyes and forced a very wobbly, watery-eyed smile. Sneaking a glance at Stan, who was staring
wide-eyed at them, Louis was suddenly very aware of the rather minimal distance between his and
Harry’s faces; their noses were about an inch away from touching, if that.

The word ‘slut!’ washed across Louis like a slap in the face. Cheeks burning, he ducked his head,
wondering whether Stan was stood watching him and thinking exactly that. Determined not to give
Stan the wrong idea, maybe even to prove his innocence, he moved back a little, further away from
Harry, and nodded.

“I’m okay. I just drunk half the pool, that’s all. It wasn’t very nice, but I’ll live.” He grinned.

Leaning over even further so that he wobbled even more precariously on the edge, Harry anxiously
asked, “Are you sure? You don’t look so good.”

“Nah, I’m fine. You can go and sit back down if you want –”

“Louis!”

Stan was waving frantically at him from where he and Zayn stood, and as Louis watched, he leapt
manically up and down and his waving intensified. As Louis blinked at him, Stan started hurrying
over towards him with Zayn hot on his heels, and Harry instantly shrank back, visibly daunted by the
appearance of Louis’ friends.

“Louis…” he said warily.

Frowning, Louis started gesturing violently for Stan to leave, but either he ignored the gesture or
didn’t notice it, because he just kept coming forwards with a great deal of enthusiasm. Wide-eyed,
Harry started shuffling backwards, visibly anxious, his lanky frame starting to shake a little bit as if
he was beginning to have some kind of panic attack.

“No, no, I didn’t know he was coming! Seriously, Harry, I had no idea –” Stan, you twat, you’re
about to ruin the one chance I have to impress the cutest guy I’ve ever met in my life who has only
just consented to hang out with me! Quickly glancing around, Louis swore under his breath, then
met Harry’s panicked gaze and demanded, “do you have your phone on you?”

“N-no, but –”

“Good,” Louis said, and for the second time since he’d met Harry Styles, he grabbed him by the
front of his hoodie and hauled him into the pool with a colossal splash.

It wasn’t the warmest pool Harry had ever been unceremoniously dragged into, and his clothes
weighed him down so that he would have sunk if Louis hadn’t grabbed hold of him, making him
squeak in shock as the curls were shocked out of his hair, which ended up falling past his shoulders
and hiding his eyes. Dripping wet, he shook it out of his eyes similarly to the way Louis had, gasped
for breath and then fixed Louis with an abject glare. Water filled his enormous, billowing hoodie,
and Harry struggled to keep afloat with all of the jet black material swishing around him in the water.

“You’re beginning to make a habit of this; consider me distinctly unimpressed,” Harry growled.

Edging closer to him, Louis shoved back several sopping wet layers of thick hair so he could get to
the other boy’s ear, and whispered softly, “You needed an escape route; I gave you one. Now when
I give the word, we’re going to duck underneath the water, swim to the other side, and make a run
for it before they can catch us. Okay?”
Harry frowned at him in confusion. “I don’t get it. They’re your friends! I mean, I have issues with strangers sure, but you don’t have to run away from them.” Not that he would ever admit it, but he was flattered by the thought that Louis was so eager to spend time with him that he would run away from his friends and risk upsetting them just so that Harry wouldn’t leave.

Wrinkling his nose, Louis pulled a face. “Friends are overrated. And I don’t feel much like talking to them at the moment. We’ve not been getting on lately. Anyway, I’d rather make a ninja-like escape from my irritating friends with you than hang around and listen to Stan talk about how many times he got laid, if you know what I mean.” He grinned, and it was dazzling.

Harry’s answering grin was so happy and achingly beautiful that it made Louis lose his focus for a moment or so; he felt his jaw go slack with awe and stared blatantly at Harry for a few seconds like a total idiot. Once he’d somewhat regained his composure, he forgot to let Harry know that he was about to dive, and quickly ducked underneath the water anyway, leaving the younger boy treading water on the surface.

It didn’t take Harry long to catch him up; seconds later, he too was safely immersed in cool water and was following Louis as he cut swiftly through the water like some kind of swimming professional. Imitating Louis, he manoeuvred neatly around the various other swimming tourists, navigating around slender legs and fat stomachs and podgy little babies on floats, dodging them all with prowess that surprised himself, and not in the least bit left behind as he had expected to be. It helped that every so often Louis would stop and turn around to make sure that he wasn’t being left behind, which Harry appreciated, but he was fairly confident that he could have kept up anyway.

His only trouble came in the form of a pair of dark blue swimming trunks which came flying at him out of the blue when he was about halfway across the pool, appearing seemingly from nowhere. To his shock, Harry found himself being hit in the face by them, which slowed him up a bit, not to mention almost giving him a heart attack. Bewildered, he stopped dead and examined the trunks, feeling several surprised bubbles burst out of his mouth as he pinched them between his thumb and forefinger, squinting at them through the water. He diverted his gaze to Louis, who was apparently torn between hilarity and mortification, one hand covering his mouth as he shook with barely restrained laughter, looking absolutely horrified as he stared at the swimming trunks in Harry’s hand.

From all of those things, Harry deduced that they were Louis’ swimming trunks.

He almost burst out laughing himself; in fact, it was only the risk of death by chlorine ingestion that stopped him from falling to the bottom of the pool in convulsions of laughter at Louis’ embarrassed expression. The next course of action, of course, was for Louis to accept his trunks and attempt to put them back on – but when they were filled with water, and floating around in his hands, he could barely get near them, let alone slide his legs into them. The one time he was vaguely successful, he stuffed two of his legs down one leg hole and had to kick them off before he sunk to the bottom of the pool.

In the end, Louis shrugged in disgust and started swimming towards the other side again, dragging his trunks behind him like a giant parachute while Harry followed and attempted not to catch side of Louis’ bare backside as he swam after him. He was still struggling not to cry with laughter.

They both exploded out of the water at the other end of the pool, laughing at the shock on the faces of the parents and toddlers around them as they emerged, Harry fully clothed and Louis wearing — well, not very much. Exploding with laughter, Harry hurriedly stripped off his enormous, sopping wet hoodie and shoved it over Louis’ head – it was long enough to almost be a robe, hanging way past his thighs, covering him so that all of sudden Louis was insanely glad that Harry had decided to wear an enormously baggy item of clothing that day. Giggling, Harry tugged on one dripping wet
sleeve, and the two of them made a dash for the exit, leaving Stan and Zayn to confusedly scan the whole pool in search of them with no results.

~*~

Harry lay flat on his bed with his eyes closed, struggling to keep a smile off his face; the corners of his lips were being played with, twitching upwards every few seconds, courtesy of the memories darting through his head which had him struggling to keep a straight face, and would probably continue to do so for days to come, if not weeks.

People in general exhausted him, and Louis was no exception to that rule. He always had to take a couple of hours to recharge, at least; he needed some time to himself to relax and get his energy back, otherwise he felt exhausted, grumpy and overcrowded, none of which were a particularly good combination. So after the two of them had been chased out of the hotel lobby and given a stern lecture by the hotel manager about indecent exposure (although it perhaps ought to be noted that he rather hastily backed off once Harry managed to knock some of his dripping wet hair out of his eyes and became vaguely recognizable as the rich stepson of one of the hotel’s rather richer and more generous patrons) and had found their way back to Louis’ hotel room, where he had put some actual clothes on and they had watched rubbish daytime TV for about an hour in companionable silence, Harry was pretty much ready to drop even though they’d barely done anything, and hardly exerted themselves. Company other than his own drained him more quickly than any form of exercise.

Apart from a slightly wistful puppy-eyed expression, Louis had made surprisingly few objections when Harry had chosen to leave; in fact, he’d seemed positively cheerful, probably delighted with being able to hang out with the younger boy for even the limited time he’d had. It was a sentiment that Harry shared – which was why he was now lying in his hotel room grinning at the ceiling like a total idiot, and not really caring about how stupid it was.

He had a friend! They’d had fun together! For most people, this would seem inconsequential, trivial almost, but to Harry it was almost unknown. People didn’t like him, and yet an attractive, hilarious, ridiculously attractive madman actually wanted to be with him. He was still struggling to get his head around it, but it was an amazing feeling. One of the more surprising things was that he wanted to be with Louis, too. It was completely bad. After only an hour or so of alone time, he was feeling completely invigorated – something which was incredibly unusual; it usually took him at least three hours and half a packet of biscuits before he was feeling fit for anything other than collapsing onto the bed and listening to The Script on repeat and trying to remember how not to fall asleep immediately from pure exhaustion. Actually, he felt a strange urge to go bounding out of the room in search of Louis, but he didn’t want to seem annoying, so he lay perfectly still thinking over the day’s events instead.

There wasn’t much to think over, in all fairness, but Harry managed to find quite a few little details to go over and over in his mind – the way Louis’ blue eyes sparkled when he laughed, and the way several strands of wet hair fell sexily over his forehead when he resurfaced from beneath the water. The muscles of his back that Harry had taken great pleasure in examining whenever Louis turned around. The crinkles around his eyes whenever he laughed. He didn’t remember ever noticing things like this about anyone else before in his life; usually all he tended to notice about people was how loud their voices were and how pointless their conversations were. It was surprising to find that he was discovering these things about someone, and how happy it made him feel to think of them.

The hotel phone beside his bed started ringing, and he was so lost in thought that he absentmindedly reached out, picked it up and answered it without realizing what he was doing. Only once he could feel the cool plastic on his cheek did he realize what he’d just done, and he froze in horror; answering phones was one of the many things that he absolutely hated. In fact, he scarcely ever did
“He-hello?” he choked huskily, amazed that he’d even managed to force out the few tiny sounds that he’d just made. He hadn’t expected them to be coherent.

“Harrrrrrrrrrrry…” slurred a familiar soft voice on the other end, and Harry struggled not to drop the phone in shock – seconds later, he was trying valiantly not to laugh at the ridiculous drunken tones of Louis’ voice.

“I’m sure you’re an alcoholic, you know,” he said, trying to keep the amusement out of his voice. “You’re drunk off your face right now; I’m not stupid. What have you been drinking, bleach? It’s ridiculous; every time I speak to you, you’re completely and totally wasted.”

“Not every time,” Louis protested, and Harry could almost imagine the little smile on his face as he deliberately slurred his words a little bit more. “Just…nine times out of ten.”

Fondly, Harry snorted and lay back on his bed again, the cord from the phone trailing from the bedside cabinet to where he lounged on top of the duvet, rolling his eyes and fighting a grin. “Idiot. Come on then, what do you want? Why have you called me at this drunken hour? What do you want from me? And before you even start, there are a few things which I would like to say ‘no’ to straight away: no orgies, no belly dancers, no alcohol – wait, hang on, more to the point, where the hell did you get my number?”

“I managed to scoot behind the desk and write it on my arm while Iris was in the bar last night. And I called you because I dropped my phone and cracked the screen, and I can’t scroll up or down, and the only numbers on my contacts that I can see past the cracks are yours and the pizza place down the road. And this isn’t a pizza situation, Harry. This isn’t a pizza situation.”

Struggling not to laugh at the sheer seriousness of Louis’ tone, Harry asked amusedly, “What kind of situation is it, then? Hot dogs? Tacos? Burger and extra fries with a large strawberry milkshake?”

“Ladder.”

“Ladder?” Harry frowned. Drunken Louis was even weirder than the normal Louis, something which he hadn’t actually believed to be possible. Completely confused, Harry wondered whether Louis might be suffering from undiagnosed mental problems. Ladder? He was baffled.

“That’s what I said.”

“Why do you need a ladder?”

There was an embarrassed pause. “I need it to get down.”

“Why, where are you? You’re not on my balcony again, are you?”

“I’m up a tree.”

“You’re up a tree?”

“Do you have hearing problems? Or do you just have some kind of irrepressible urge to repeat everything I say? Yes, I’m up a tree. A large one.”

“How on earth did you get up there?”

“By climbing.”
Amusement colouring his down, Harry teasingly suggested, “Then climb down.”

Louis growled. “I’m not in the mood for your games, Styles. I’m stuck up a tree. You don’t have to find it so bloody funny! Call the fire brigade, the FBI and my mother, in that precise order, and then come and bring me a ladder. And keep your voice down, will you? I don’t want Stan knowing that I got stuck up a tree.”

Unable to contain himself any longer, Harry spluttered, “I’m sure he woodn’t mind.” Then he started rolling around on the bed in convulsions of laughter, bright pink in the face.

Again, Louis made a disgruntled sound. “Oh, hilarious. You should be a comedian. Come and get me down, you twat!”

“I’m a twat? You’re the one who managed to get stuck up a tree! God, this is brilliant. This is comedy gold. Someone call the paparazzi – Louis Tomlinson got stuck up a tree! If you were famous, the press would have a field day.”

“Yeah, well, if I was famous I’d have made my body guard throw you out of the window by now. Please, Harry. I don’t have any intention of staying up here all night, and it’s absolutely freezing. Don’t just leave me up here!” Not for the first time, Louis was pleading with him, and it felt so, so good.

Shaking his head, Harry sat up with an enormous grin spreading uncontrollably across his face, fighting a fit of helpless schoolgirl-type giggles. “I’ll come,” he promised. “Hang in there.” Then he snorted with laughter again.

“I hate you with a burning passion that could singlehandedly ignite the fires of hell,” Louis said mildly.

“I know you do.” Swinging his legs off the bed and stuffing his feet into a pair of unlaced Supras, Harry told him, “stay right there, okay? I’ll be there in two. Well, two plus the amount of time it takes me to find a ladder. Promise me you won’t fall out of the tree before I get there?”

“Haha, funny. You’re a real joker today, you know that? I don’t like it.”

“I’m being serious! Don’t fall, all right? Because if you do, I’ll make you wish you were never born, do I make myself clear?”

“Crystal,” grumbled Louis. “I’ll do my best; I’m making no promises. But if I do fall, make sure they play decent music at my funeral.”

“Will do. See you there.”

Hanging up, Harry snatched up his room key and despite only being dressed in sweatpants and a baggy grey shirt, he jogged out of the room with the laces of his white Supras trailing on the floor so that he was at extreme risk of falling over. For Louis’ sake, he hoped that Iris hadn’t drunk so much that she was incapable of telling him where he might find a ladder.
“Well. I guess you really weren’t kidding about the tree.”

Harry had no idea how the hotel proprietors had managed to persuade a palm tree to grow in a country where if you were lucky, it only rained for ten minutes in a day, but somehow they had managed it. He also had no idea how Louis had managed to climb said tree, given that it was very tall and appeared to have no handholds to grab onto whatsoever, but somehow he had managed it. Louis seemed to be very good at managing things. Getting around Harry’s social anxiety. Getting him to become friends with him…getting him to begin feeling things he’d never felt for anyone before in his life. It would have been a big fat lie if Harry had said he wasn’t developing some kind of feelings for Louis, and an even bigger lie if he’d said he wasn’t worried about them.

Ignoring him, Louis stared up at the sky, drumming his fingers repetitively on the branch he was perched on. Apparently rather embarrassed by his current position, he pretended that Harry hadn’t spoken and continued gazing upwards, as if the cloudless, starless sky was the most fascinating thing he’d ever seen in his life.

The ladder which Harry had procured was by no means the easiest thing to drag through the hotel gardens, especially as the tree Louis had gotten stuck in was in a little area of greenery at the back of the golf course, meaning that he’d had to haul an enormous wooden structure across the previously flawless greens. He hadn’t quite dared to look around and see what kind of damage he’d been doing with it, but he dreaded to think of the kind of scuffmarks he would have left in the grass. It lay at his feet now, and he kept glaring at it; he’d already decided that he wasn’t going to bother taking it back. After all, it was heavy, and Louis was in no state to help him carry anything without falling over.

“Aren’t you going to ignore me and stay up there all night, or would you like me to help you get down?” he asked, struggling not to grin.

Louis glanced downwards, saw his amusement, then with a noise like an angry cat he swivelled clumsily around on the branch, folded his arms and turned his back on Harry, clearly deciding he’d rather keep his dignity than get back onto the ground.

Unwilling to let him cling to what little humility he had left, Harry leapt forwards with a laugh, grabbed hold of the tree trunk and started violently shaking it so that the branches rustled wildly, Louis struggled to stay seated and almost fell off, and ended up clinging to the trunk with a horrified expression, making a whining noise.

“Harry, don’t! God, I’ll fall, don’t, Harry, please!”

Quickly releasing the tree, Harry retreated backwards a couple of steps and looked up at him, raising one eyebrow. “Oh, so I exist now, do I?”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever! Just help me get down!”

“Well, I don’t know about that. I’m kind of enjoying seeing you stuck up there.”

Louis growled at him. “For some strange reason, I’m not. Now would you please get me down?”

“What on earth are you doing up there in the first place?”

“I remembered someone telling me that this sort of tree is impossible to climb,” Louis admitted, “because the branches only start close to the top, and it’s hard to get a decent grip on it. Turns out,
it’s not impossible, so long as you take your shoes off and spit plenty on your hands first. It is, however, kind of impossible to get down, so if you don’t mind...?”

Innocently, Harry asked, “What makes you think I can get you down?”

“Oh, uh, I don’t know, maybe it’s something to do with the ladder which is lying on the ground right behind you? Don’t go getting cocky with me. I’ll make you regret it.”

“How are you going to do that if you’re stuck up a tree?”

“Shut up. Stop enjoying my humiliation. Pick up that ladder and get me down!”

“Say ‘please’.”

Louis said something, but it most definitely wasn’t ‘please’. In fact, it sounded like a mouthful of swearwords, but because he was drunk, they all blurred together into an incoherent mess of syllables. Tutting, Harry shook his head at him.

“Language. I’m not sure I should help such a foul-mouthed young alcoholic, you know.”

“I’m not an alcoholic, and you deserved it. Please, Harry, get me down! I’m literally begging, now, that is how desperate this situation has got! I’ll be your slave! I’ll – I don’t know, I’ll bow down at your feet and worship you, I’ll –”

Amusedly, Harry enquired, “Is it really that bad up there? I mean, that bark has to be a bit scratchy on the buttocks, but other than that it doesn’t look too uncomfortable, really. I could be wrong, though. Is it that bad?”

“No, but I really need a piss,” Louis admitted, “and if there’s one easier way to lose your dignity than pissing yourself, it’s pissing yourself up a tree. So will you please get me down?” His blue eyes turned pleading, and Harry could have sworn that he fluttered his eyelashes a little.

There was an extreme temptation to let him stay up there all night, maybe make him beg a little more, forge a couple of unbreakable bargains...but Harry couldn’t be that cruel. Sighing, he bent down to get the ladder, leaned it against the tree and carefully held it in place as Louis thankfully grabbed hold of it, stepped onto the first rung and started scrambling down.

When he reached the bottom, he seemed to forget that Harry was standing directly behind him; he stepped straight back into the younger boy’s arms. Immediately, Harry stiffened, because the warm weight of Louis Tomlinson was suddenly pressed up against him, and he didn’t smell boozy at all; he smelled like toothpaste and the free shampoo you got in little bottles next to the shower, and maybe a little bit like the tree he’d just been sitting in, and Harry was at just the right height for Louis’ feathery hair to tickle his chin. His slender body was the perfect shape to fit into Harry’s arms; Harry could have put his arms around Louis’ waist from behind and he sensed that it would have felt perfectly natural. Letting out a short, sharp breath, Louis hesitated, staying still for a moment, and Harry closed his eyes, scarcely daring to breathe, because the most gorgeous man he’d ever met was extremely close to him, and he didn’t know if he could stand it.

Slowly, Louis turned around, and all of a sudden, there they were, chest to chest. Louis rose up onto his toes so that they could be eye to eye, as well, and his little pink tongue flickered sinfully over his lips, wetting them so that they glistened. Harry’s eyes were drawn there, and he was suddenly rather wobbly at the thought of how those lips might feel on his.

Bewildered, he struggled to acclimatize to the sensation of being so ridiculously attracted to someone, so much that his chest was tight and he was struggling against the urge to crush Louis
against his chest and bury his face in his hair, and just hold him for a while. Strong affection wasn’t something Harry was used to, and it frightened him a little.

It didn’t help that Louis was staring hungrily at him, his blue eyes dark with something that could have been Harry’s shadow falling across his face, but could have been desire, as well. Something primal tightened in the pit of Harry’s stomach, and he hesitantly placed his hands onto Louis’ biceps, carefully stroking down his arms. Louis closed his eyes and gave a small sigh, which Harry took to be encouragement, and he stroked a little further up Louis’ arm, feeling heat scorch his fingertips and whisper up through his hands all the way to his spine, making him shiver in delight. He’d never touched anyone like this before – not ever. He’d never really felt the inclination. Right now, however, he wasn’t sure he could stop.

Leaving his sides, Louis’ arms shifted, and he rested them on Harry’s waist, almost like he was holding him. The feel of that almost had Harry panicking, but after swallowing his anxiety down, he was all right again, and tracing feathery shapes onto the tanned swell of Louis’ biceps, his expression serious. Those sinfully dark eyes fluttered open, the colour of the ocean in the dead of night, and Harry bit his lip very hard to restrain a strange, strangled sound that he could feel struggling to work its way out of him – something painfully like a moan. He would have blushed, because it wasn’t as if Louis would have known in the darkness, but it was a cool night and all the blood had vanished from his cheeks as he stood there, breathing heavily, trying to get his head around the fact that he was being held by another man in what could only be described as an embrace.

He breathed out in a shudder, and as if that were some kind of sign, Louis leaned forwards, agonizingly slowly. It seemed to take an eternity to dip his face towards Harry’s, to slide his nose to the right of Harry’s and gently touch his cheek with the tip of his nose. Their faces were quite literally touching; if one of them tilted their heads, they would be kissing. The thought sent delicious trembles down the back of Harry’s neck, trickling like cold water all the way down to his spine. It was ridiculous how badly he wanted it – he could have it, too if only he had the courage to make that first simple move.

Harry took a very deep breath, and hated how it shook.

The sound of rustling and swearing from the undergrowth behind them made them both flinch; Harry cringed backwards like Louis had hit him, shaking his head in horror and stepping away, and Louis turned furiously towards the disturbance as if it was some kind of personal enemy of his. Instantly beginning to retreat, Harry started backing away, and he was just about to turn tail and run at top speed back towards the hotel when a spotty fifteen or sixteen year old boy in a bright red uniform with a snapback on his head with ‘Pete’s Pizza Parlour’ embroidered on it in bright yellow stumbled out of the bushes, carrying a pizza box like it was the most precious thing in the world and he’d die if it happened to slip out of his hands.

Blinking, the acne-ridden youth swiped his untidy hair out of his eyes and said weakly, in a voice that was in the process of breaking and squeaked embarrassingly, “Uh…I have a pizza delivery here for a Mr. Louis Tomlinson?”

“Shit,” Louis said, rubbing his eyes wearily, “I forgot I ordered pizza.”

Harry couldn’t help but laugh shakily at the sheer ridiculousness of it all; his voice shook a little, but he wasn’t the only one with a voice that was betraying him at that moment in time, so he didn’t mind too much. Anyway, he had an excuse; he’d almost been kissed. “When did you order pizza? While you were up the tree?”

“Yeah…I told you there were only two numbers I could see; I called the pizza delivery first.”
“Oh, so I don’t take priority over pizza? That’s – that’s charming, that is.” Pulling out his wallet, Harry started rummaging around for a couple of notes. “How much do I owe you?” he absently asked the youth, already beginning to smooth out the creases in a twenty pound note

“Whoa, whoa, hold up,” Louis interrupted before the boy could respond, “that’s my pizza. I’m paying for it, mush. Get your fingers out of your wallet.” He patted his own pocket, hesitated, fumbled around for a couple of seconds, then his head drooped in defeat. “Oh, for the love of… I left my wallet in my room!”

“It’s a good job one of us is organized,” Harry said fondly, handing over the money to the boy and accepting the pizza box in return. “Keep the change.”

“Ooh, get you, you spoilt little rich boy,” Louis teased, as the youth quickly turned around and vanished back into the trees without an objection. “You must have more money than sense. You lost an extra fiver, there.”

Harry shrugged. “It’s not my money; it’s Robin’s. Anyway, I liked that guy. He brought us pizza.” Sitting down on the lawn, he opened the box and frowned at the completely undivided pizza, confused. “Okay, how are we going to cut this thing?”

“Watch and learn, rich boy,” said Louis, sitting beside him and reaching into his pocket for his keys, “and I’ll show you how the other half cuts pizza.” Pulling out his keys, he examined his hotel room key for a moment or so, then placed it in the middle of the pizza and proceeded to cut a wobbly line down the centre of it with the metal edge of the key.

Bursting out laughing, Harry cried, “That’s disgusting! You have no idea where that key’s been!”

“Of course I do. It’s been in my pocket, with all the fluff and tic-tacs and other crap. Now, do you want pizza, or not?” He handed Harry a clumsily cut slice, and after examining it suspiciously for traces of fluff or dirt, Harry shrugged resignedly as if to say ‘we all die sometime’ and shoved the wedge into his mouth.

For a couple of minutes, they stuffed their faces with pizza in companionable silence, and Harry enjoyed being able to focus on the food rather than the little smear of tomato on Louis’ left cheek, and how much he wanted to wipe it off with his fingers, or the way he had a little uneven tuft of hair poking up at the back that he would have loved to smooth down, and then he could have moved his hand to the back of Louis’ head and carefully pulled him forwards and pressed his lips to the older boy’s and held him in place while he kissed him –

Harry almost choked on his pizza, and Louis looked up in alarm as Harry coughed and spluttered and attempted to regain some of his composure, wishing that he wasn’t turning such an unattractive shade of mauve from oxygen deprivation.

“Are you all right?” asked Louis with a frown.

“Yeah,” Harry forced out, “um – bit of, uh, pepperoni went down the wrong way is all.”

“That’s funny,” said Louis mildly, “seeing as this pizza is ham and pineapple.” But he didn’t pursue the subject, tactfully leaving Harry to sit and blush without pushing it. That was something he liked about Louis; if he knew that Harry was uncomfortable, really uncomfortable, he wouldn’t try to take it further just for the sake of banter. Some people did, and Harry absolutely hated it.

The silence fell once again, and they both enjoyed it for a little while. It was surprising, really, how much Louis enjoyed sitting quietly with Harry; he thought it was something he could get used to.
Especially as it was quite so entrancing to watch Harry’s mouth move as he ate, the way he stuck his
tongue out before he shoved the next wedge of pizza into his mouth, the flash of his teeth as he bit
down…it occurred to him rather quickly that he was enjoying this far too much.

It took Harry rather a long time to realize that Louis was staring at him, but by the time he had
figured it out, Louis was past caring anyway. Rather than looking worried, Harry smiled a little bit
and tilted his head back to look up at the sky so that Louis couldn’t see him blush.

“Do you order many people pizzas to eat on a golf course at midnight?”

“Not really; it’s more of a recent kind of thing. Anyway, it was only quarter past eleven when I
called you; it took you ages to find a ladder.” Stretching, Louis shoved the pizza box away with a
contented sigh and lay down with his hands folded over his stomach. “That was brilliant, but I’m
absolutely stuffed. I couldn’t eat another thing!”

Harry lay down as well. “Ladders aren’t a very normal thing to have in a hotel, I wouldn’t have
thought. I thought I did well to find one in the first place.” Pause. “In that case, do you make a habit
of climbing things? Balconies, trees…”

“That was a one-off,” Louis told him sternly.

Sitting up, Harry shuffled over to lie beside him, and they both stared upwards for a while. He was
watching Louis out of the corner of his eye, though, and couldn’t fail to see Louis’ lips push
forwards into a pout.

“What’s up? Why are you making that face?”

“I like to count the stars, but there aren’t any. Can you see any stars, Harry?”

“Only the ones in your eyes,” Harry said, and turned shocking pink with embarrassment.

Louis’ lips curved upwards into a smile. “Do you make a habit of delivering corny pickup lines
whilst lying flat on your back on a golf course stuffed full of pizza at midnight?” But he said it
affectionately, and Harry smiled too.

“That was a one-off.”

Above them, the moon was watching, a dim orb barely casting enough light to see by, but Harry
liked that; it meant that his bright pink cheeks were a little less obvious. As Louis had complained,
the skies were blank; all Harry could see were a few faint silvery clouds drifting in the distance and
the tops of the trees, looking like black silhouettes in the darkness, waving gently in the breeze. He
turned his head to admire Louis’ profile, and his eyes roved over the shape of Louis’ nose, the curve
of his lips, the fluffy mess that was his hair…drinking him in, Harry stopped and stared at him for a
while, and in the stillness, it felt like the rest of the world had done exactly the same.

That wasn’t the most original of observations; he’d stolen it from a song, but it didn’t make it any the
less true.

Settling down into a more comfortable position on the carefully mowed grass, which felt like velvet
against his skin, Harry folded his arms behind his head and closed his eyes contentedly, enjoying the
stillness. The only sound that he could hear was the sound of Louis’ steady breathing, perfectly timed
with the rise and fall of his chest.

It was the only sound he wanted to listen to ever again for the rest of his life.
Chapter 10

“I hope you realize I could lose my job over this!”

The dancer, Danielle, who currently should have been stretching off in preparation to curl up inside a model of a cake so that in half an hour’s time she could be wheeled into the luxury lounge and then jump out of it and dance to entertain the rich watchers who had gathered there, frowned at Louis. She was gorgeous; he had to admit – amazingly tight corkscrew curls exploded around her head, falling perfectly into place, and held back from her face with a little silver tiara. She was dressed from head to toe in silver; a silver leotard with fake diamonds sewn to the bodice, which glittered whenever she moved as they caught the light, a stiff, sticky-out silver tutu, thick silver tights, even silver pointe shoes, and she wore silver false eyelashes, decorative silver swirls framing her eyes that looked a lot like butterfly wings, and silver eye-shadow reached all the way up to her eyebrows. As he examined her, she lifted her hand and brushed her hair back, and he saw that her fingernails had been painted silver, too.

The effect ought to have been overwhelming, making her look like an overdressed Christmas tree fairy, but she looked strangely beautiful, almost ethereal dressed completely in silver with a little silver glitter sprinkled on her cheeks, contrasting beautifully with her gorgeous caramel-coloured skin.

“Nah, you won’t,” Louis reassured her, stuffing a couple of notes into her hands. “I know a guy. The guy I’m doing this for, actually. He has connections; I can be sure that you won’t get into trouble over this, don’t you worry.” He was bluffing, but he’d always been a confident liar.

“Oh, really? And tell me, is there a specific reason why you feel the need to leap out of a cake and do ballet to impress this guy? Hmm?” Her hands placed on her slender hips, Danielle gave him a very stern look.

“Uh…he has a kink?” Louis tried, but he knew straight away that she wasn’t buying it. Sighing in defeat, he gave up. “He doesn’t actually know I’m doing this. I’m doing my best to win him over and he isn’t really buying it; and I figured that the best way of doing it was to make him laugh.”

Danielle rolled her brown eyes. “Making a fool of yourself for the sake of love? Where have I heard that before?” But her expression softened. “Oh, go on, then! But if I get fired, then you’d better make good on that promise not to let me get sacked, or I’m officially going to throw a hissy fit!” She looked too good-natured to have a hissy fit, her wildly curly hair bouncing around her shoulders, eyes warm with affection. He tended to have that effect on people; he was so enthusiastic that people instinctively felt friendly towards him, and he sensed that she was a naturally kind person anyway.

“Thanks, Dani! Can I call you Dani? You call me Lou, I’ll call you Dani; like old friends, right? Okay, so do you have one of those leotards for me, or what?” He was excitedly bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet.

She snorted. “I doubt this would fit you, somehow. But I might be able to find you something.” Delving into the props cupboard, she started rummaging around, looking for a suitable outfit for him. “I honestly don’t know what you’re going to do out there, though; I can’t even teach you a basic routine in the time we’ve got. You’re going to have to do some serious improvising.”

“Oh, that’ll be fine,” answered Louis airily, “I scarcely do anything else, anyway. Planning isn’t really my forte. I’m a spontaneous kind of guy.”
“I’ll bet.” Clearly amused, she produced a stretch of electric blue lycra from the back of the wardrobe, which Louis could clearly see was in the shape of a rather tight leotard. He attempted not to look daunted by the thought of wearing it. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to find a tutu in your colour, but I can probably stretch to a pair of pointe shoes; you’re probably around the same size as me, actually. You have really small feet!”

Louis shrugged. “Yeah, I guess I do.” He managed a really small smile which felt extremely forced as he managed to curve his mouth into what felt like a stiff, unnatural crescent; for the sake of courtesy, he felt he’d better attempt some kind of smile, at least.

“Are you okay?” she asked. “You look kind of scared.”

“I’m fine.” Just wondering what the hell I’ve just gotten myself into.

His next smile was a little more genuine, supposed to be reassuring, but he knew that it still didn’t reach his eyes, still didn’t look quiet right, and Danielle didn’t fall for that evasion either. Her mouth pursed into a pout as she examined him thoughtfully, clearly trying to figure him out.

The silence stretched between them for a while; Danielle seemed to be struggling to decide whether to speak or not. Eventually, nibbling her lip, she looked anxiously up at him and tilted her head to the left ever so slightly.

“You know, if he doesn’t know you’re doing this, he won’t know if you…you know…” She squeezed his shoulder sympathetically, and then hesitated.

“Chicken out?” Louis asked sharply. “No, you’re right. He won’t know. Because I’m not going to.”

He plucked the leotard from her hands. “I’m up for this. I just didn’t realize the outfit was going to be so tight, that’s all. It won’t cut off the circulation to my brain, will it?” He grinned.

“Brain?” asked Danielle innocently. “I didn’t know you had one.” She gave a sunny laugh. “No, it shouldn’t do. I’ve still got all my wits about me, and I’ve been dancing since I was six years old. You’ll be fine.” After a moment’s hesitation, she blurted out uncertainly, “he must be one special guy, if you’re willing to completely humiliate yourself just to get him to notice you.”

Louis felt the corner of his mouth twitch upwards. “I actually don’t think this is the most dramatic thing I’ve done for him, to be honest. But he’s cute, and he’s funny, and I never expected to like him as much as I do – but here I am, and there he is, and I’d quite like him to be over here with me by the end of the night…so, yeah. He’s pretty special.”

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“Well, I have to say, you look like you’re in an absolutely brilliant mood,” Liam remarked, dropping into the chair beside Harry’s and helping himself to Harry’s untouched glass of coke without even thinking about asking permission. His limbs sprawling everywhere like a clumsy puppy, Liam shot Harry a playful grin, which wasn’t returned: forget swallowing a lemon; Harry looked like he’d bitten his tongue and then shoved a lemon into his mouth and squeezed the juice into the cut. “I take it this isn’t your cup of tea, then?”

Harry pulled a face. “Watching some poor girl leap out of a cake and then flounce around the room in a sticky-out skirt making a fool of herself? Is that anyone’s cup of tea?” Reaching across the table, he tugged his glass from Liam’s loose grip and took a small, delicate sip. “My mum seemed to think I’d enjoy it. I told her I wouldn’t, but…” He shrugged.

“Oh, it’s not that bad, really. I kind of know the girl who does it – I’ve spoken to her in the corridor a couple of times. It’s all very tasteful. I’ve seen it heaps of times before. And she’s beautiful, too –
very, very beautiful.” He seemed to go off into a daze, thinking about it, and Harry grimaced in mock disgust.

“Yuck. Keep your fantasies to yourself, Payne. Don’t want to know.”

“Oh, come on. Don’t even try and tell me you’ve never fancied anyone before; I don’t believe it. There must be someone. A little tiny crush, back in high school… a celebrity you fell for…come on, you can tell me. I won’t laugh.” Liam’s enormous grin said otherwise, but Harry didn’t bother to point it out. He had no intention of discussing his ‘crushes’ with Liam – so far, Louis had been his funny, crazy, bouncy little secret, and Harry had every intention of keeping him that way.

The lights dimmed, and Liam leaned over to whisper, “Oh, go on. Spill.”

“There’s nothing to tell,” Harry whispered back. “I’m not interested in anyone, and I never have been.”

Liam was about to argue, but all of a sudden two of the hotel staff came sprinting into the middle of the room, pushing an enormous model of a cake. They strategically positioned it in the centre of the stage, glanced around to check the positioning and the lighting, and then nodded to each other and ran off again, like a pair of uniformed ghosts. The music, which had been softly playing in the background, raised in volume, a spotlight danced onto the cake, and the whole room fell into a hush as everyone stared expectantly at the cake, waiting for the end of the overture.

It ended on a long, drawn out violin note, and as that quavering note ending, the top of the cake exploded upwards as a pair of lithe arms burst through the paper mache top of it – and Harry gaped in utter astonishment as he watched Louis struggle to scramble free of the cake. A blush crept up his cheeks as he struggled not to look as horrified as he felt; if Liam happened to look at him right now, he’d be pretty stupid not to realize that Harry had been lying about never being attracted to anyone, and the one person he’d ever shown interest in was standing right in front of them wearing an electric blue leotard.

Louis stretched out his arms, stifled a giggle, and then twirled around a couple of times. Nervous laughs rippled through the audience, while Harry stifled the urge to bury his head in his hands with second-hand embarrassment. It was a good thing, he supposed, that Louis was completely shameless. Flitting around the edges of the stage with an enormous grin on his face, stumbling a little in the silver pointe shoes he’d slipped onto his feet, he unashamedly scanned the crowd, quite clearly looking for someone. Harry resisted the urge to duck his head and hide underneath the table so that Louis wouldn’t spot him.

Too late. Louis’ blue eyes homed in on him, and an enormous grin burst across his face. One of his hands came up, elbow tucked into his side, and he gave Harry a flirtatious little wave. Harry felt himself flushing with embarrassment as Liam turned to him with raised eyebrows and point blank stared, along with at least twenty other people. The temptation to curl up and hide underneath the table with his eyes closed and pretend he wasn’t there was almost overwhelming.

“Do you know that guy, Harry?” Liam whispered. “Why is he waving at you like that?”

Harry didn’t even have to ask what he meant; the huge, hyperactive smile stretching across Louis’ face was almost worrying in its brilliance, and he had all but stopped moving so that he could stand and wave at the younger boy, who thought he might spontaneously combust in shame. Forget his face being red; it felt like he was scarlet all over; every inch of his skin burned with embarrassment.

He’d known that Louis was dramatic, determined and resourceful, and had no qualms whatsoever about making an idiot of himself, but this was off the scale, even for him. He was wearing lycra! He
had silver ballet shoes on! He was dancing around to Mozart with a stupid goofy grin on his face, trying his best not to laugh, in front of about fifty posh snobs! Harry wasn’t sure whether to punch him or kiss him.

Doing a very clumsy pirouette, Louis sprung around on light feet as if the floor was made of lava, dancing tentatively from spot to spot, leaping manically around the cake as the spotlight struggled to keep up; clearly not following any kind of choreography, Louis had completely thrown off both the lighting staff and the audience, who were clearly confused. They didn’t seem to have grasped that he was trying to be funny and doing it for a laugh, and were deliberating over whether or not to take him seriously. A couple of people were giggling, smothering laughter behind their manicured hands, but for the most part, they were confused, apparently unable to cope with the idea that he was completely and totally taking the mickey.

His efforts at being graceful were laughable in themselves; he attempted to float across the room and ended up jerkily staggering across the stage, arms dangling by his sides as he forgot about them, head hanging. Louis was not a born dancer. In fact, as he tried to leap artistically around a few scraps of paper mache, and ended up somehow tripping over them and almost falling flat on his face, Harry burst out laughing, an extremely loud choke of mirth that had him stuffing his fingers into his mouth to muffle it.

Open-mouthed, Liam glanced between Harry, who was blushing furiously and struggling not to collapse into convulsions of laughter, and Louis, who appeared to be having the time of his life as he cavorted around on stage with his arms wildly waving, his caramel-coloured hair flopping over his forehead. He flicked it out of his eyes, glanced around, and then blew Harry a kiss for effect before spinning around and flouncing to the other side of the room, coyly waggling his fingers at everyone who made eye contact with him.

Unable to help himself, Harry made a grab at the air, as if the kiss was something tangible and he could snatch it and keep it forever. Then he pressed a hand to his burning cheek and watched Louis frolicking around, completely entranced. Liam kicked him several times to try and get his attention, but Harry was too fascinated with the curve of Louis’ spine, the hard muscles of his biceps, the way the light brought out golden highlights in his hair, and the dopey grin on his face to pay any attention to that. A soppy sigh fell from his lips before he could stop it, and he had no desire to take it back. He’d never been so mortified in all his life, but surprisingly, he was enjoying it. Especially because this would be an excellent opportunity to mock Louis the next time they started teasing each other.

“Harry!” Liam hissed, “Harry, why are you blushing? Who is that? Harry?” He elbowed Harry very hard in the ribs, but he could have hacked Harry into little pieces and it wouldn’t have attracted Harry’s attention enough to make him look away from the idiot twirling around in the middle of the room.

Louis was still dancing, if you could call it that. He tripped across the stage, falling over his own feet, falling over the cake, falling over his own shadow, or at least, that was the impression he gave. Clearly having no choreography in mind whatsoever, he was just going with it, and he didn’t care about how idiotic he looked – although Harry had every intention of telling him later. Every so often he would pause mid-twirl to look at Harry, to blow him more kisses, or simply to laugh right at him, and every time, Harry’s heart leapt out of place and punched into the inside of his chest, relentlessly tattooing Louis against his ribs. Each disorderly thump had him struggling to catch his breath, and he wondered if Louis knew that with every tiny smile, he reached straight inside Harry and pulled him apart piece by piece, shredding him from the inside out. He wondered if Louis knew that he loved every second of it.

Even as Harry watched, Louis did another stupid little spin on one foot, and he rotated at least four
times on the shiny floor before he seemed to get a little dizzy and went to put his foot down. Only, he was Louis Tomlinson, and incapable of doing anything without making an utter idiot of himself – so his foot landed on a piece of the cake he had burst out of, and it slipped from underneath the satin of his borrowed shoe.

He didn’t wobble precariously; he didn’t sway and struggle to keep his balance. No; that would be far too dignified. The bit of paper mache went from underneath him, he lost his footing, and then down he went with a thump, and a cry of “FUCK!”

Harry groaned and covered his eyes once more so that he didn’t have to see Louis fall down on his backside with a yelled profanity which wasn’t quite drowned out by the music. The audience groaned with him, sympathy leeching through their confusion, and when Harry dared to peek through his long fingers, he saw Louis sat stupidly on the floor with his left leg awkwardly crumpled underneath him, actually looking faintly embarrassed, and a little pained as well; the corners of his eyes were screwed up in pain.

The music cut off, and silence fell faster than Louis had, so that all of a sudden he was sitting in the centre of the room with the spotlight cruelly focused on him, staring awkwardly at Harry, who once again was experiencing the strange situation of being caught between wanting to laugh and wishing the ground would swallow him up – because he was going to be held responsible for this idiot.

“Um,” Louis said weakly. “Ta da?” He held his arms out and fluttered his fingers in a weak approximation of jazz hands.

Harry made his decision right there and then: a shocked little laugh burst out of him, and this time he didn’t even try to disguise it as he locked his green eyes onto Louis’ sheepish expression and shook his head fondly at Louis’ stupidity. The grin he wore was so broad that he was astonished it fit onto his usually expressionless face.

“You absolute idiot.

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“I get all the best jobs.”

“At least you can still walk.”

“Yeah, well maybe not for much longer. You’re heavy!”

Well, they weren’t sure exactly how much damage Louis had done, but he couldn’t walk; that was something they had quickly established the moment Harry had helped him to his feet and he’d tried to put weight onto the ankle he’d fallen on. Most likely it was just a bad sprain, but Louis had seen an excellent opportunity to milk it, which was why Harry was currently huffing and puffing his way up the stairs, carrying Louis to his room, bridal style. One of his long arms was looped underneath Louis’ legs, the other supporting his back, and Louis had thrown one of his arms around Harry’s neck, holding himself upright as Harry struggled up a couple more steps.

Exertion wasn’t something Harry was overly used to; he was bright pink with fading embarrassment and exhaustion, there were curls sticking to his forehead, and he was breathing hard and fast with the effort of carrying Louis. His green eyes still sparkled with amusement, the corners of his mouth constantly twitching as he fought to keep the smile off his face. Louis took that to mean that he was forgiven for his display of public humiliation.

Dishevelled, tired and filled with laughter, Harry had never looked so young, or so gorgeous,
whole life. The detached, quiet demeanour had vanished completely, leaving a bubbly, silly teenage boy in his place. This was the part of Harry that Louis alone could release, the part which felt like he belonged solely to him, and the thought of that made him want to sing. In fact, what he really wanted to do was to kiss Harry’s plump pink lips so hard that he left them bruised, run off to boast to Stan that he wasn’t a slut and he’d brought Harry out of his shell, so there – and then he wanted to run straight back into Harry’s arms and kiss those abused lips all over again. However, there was one large problem in this plan: he wasn’t in much shape for running.

“So what exactly possessed you tonight?” Harry demanded breathlessly, blowing upwards and ruffling his curls off his forehead to cool himself down a little. “Or do you just have a passion for ballet that you forgot to tell me about?”

Louis snorted. “Well, it would suck for me if I did; I wasn’t very good at it, was I? Average at best.” Quickly averting his eyes so he didn’t have to make eye contact while he said his next piece, he continued, “I kind of wanted to get your attention. I figured that dressing in a leotard and dancing to one of Mozart’s symphonies might do it.”

Harry’s mouth went dry, breath hitching in his throat. “You…seem to make a habit of that,” he said hoarsely. “Trying to get my attention with grand gestures, I mean. Have you ever considered just coming and knocking on my door and asking to see me, like everybody else does?”

“I’m not everybody else. Besides, nobody else seems to have been very successful, do they? I may have gained myself a reputation as a total prat in the process, but I’ve most definitely caught your eye, so I’m going to count that as a victory, personally.”

“You count everything as a victory. Don’t count your chickens until they’ve hatched; I might still press charges against you for this. I’m in serious danger of doing my back in, carrying you up these stairs. I wasn’t made to haul people up stairs!”

“I think I’ll take my chances, you know. I’m kind of enjoying this.”

The noise that came out of Harry’s mouth in response to that was somewhere between a sigh and a grunt. “Yeah, well, don’t get used to it. I won’t be making a habit out of it.”

“Maybe,” teased Louis, “if you stopped talking and put your back into it, we’d get to the top a bit quicker, and then you could stop moaning about how heavy I am.”

They reached the top of the stairs and Harry stopped to take a breather, still tightly pinning Louis against his chest, which rose and fell with each heavy breath he took; in the position he was in, Louis could feel the other boy’s heart beating disjointedly against Louis’ side. As Louis turned to look at him, his mouth falling open to ask a question, he noticed the mossy orbs of Harry’s eyes were glued to his lips. Louis’ tongue flickered out of his mouth to wet them, dancing along first his upper and then his lower lip, leaving them pink and shiny. Openly fascinated, Harry stared longingly at Louis’ mouth – and, gratifyingly, Louis felt that already racing heart speed up, almost seeming to take flight as it fluttered madly in response.

Louis decided that Harry’s obvious attraction to him was enough of an incentive to try and take things further; he decided to make his move. “It’s a beautiful night,” he commented. “Have you looked out of the window? Not a cloud in the sky. Gorgeous.”

Interested (Harry had a secret liking for astronomy that started prickling with curiosity like an unscratched itch) he asked, “are there many stars out?”

“Only the ones in your eyes.”
Horribly embarrassed, Harry went pink and scowled at him. “Not funny! If you’re going to use this as an opportunity to make fun of me –”

“Shhhhh.” One of Louis’ slender hands covered Harry’s mouth, silencing him. “Don’t speak. Let’s be quiet for a while.”

Harry’s eyes were wide, his lips soft and delicate beneath Louis’ fingers. He couldn’t resist brushing against them with his fingertips, enjoying the warm, silky sensation of it. Harry shakily breathed out against Louis’ hand, and his breath was minty and cool.

It was silent apart from the sound of babbling that drifted upstairs towards them; twenty conversations, or thirty, none of which they paid any attention to. Louis’ hand slipped from Harry’s mouth to cup his jaw instead, gently caressing Harry’s face with a small smile softening his expression. Chocolate brown curls tickled the back of his hand as he stroked the boy’s cheek, biting down so hard on his lip that the skin turned white.

The lip-bite in itself wasn’t intended to be seductive, but it was that which appeared to fluster Harry most of all: when Louis released the pressure on his lower lip and colour flooded back into it, the blood returning to his bitten mouth, Harry’s own mouth fell open in awe and he stared even more obviously than before. It didn’t put Louis off in the slightest; without breaking eye contact, he dipped forwards and nuzzled Harry’s cheekbone with the tip of his nose. Harry shivered and closed his eyes, letting the sensation take priority, allowing the feeling in itself to wash over him rather than the fact that someone so beautiful was cuddling him, touching his face like he was something important – like he was wanted.

“Uh...Louis...” Harry licked his lips and said hoarsely, “not that I’m complaining...but we’re standing at the top of the stairs, you’re wearing lycra, and you can’t stand up without help, let alone walk – do you really think this is a good time to be coming on to me?”

Louis whispered against his cheek, “Probably not, but then again, it’s definitely a new thing, isn’t it? You can’t tell me you were anticipating this. Say what you like about me, but you can’t deny that I’m full of surprises.”

“True. You always defy my expectations...I’ve learnt not to bother predicting your actions, because nothing I could think of in my wildest dreams could ever hold a candle to the kind of crazy schemes you cook up. You’re an impossible person, Louis.”

“Not impossible. Just a bit unlikely.”

An adorable grin danced across Harry’s face in response, so that he looked a lot like a naughty little boy. It was his turn to bite his lip, a pair of dimples accompanying the smile, and the very sight of him was enough to overwhelm Louis completely.

Unable to help himself any longer with such a ridiculously enamouring sight parading so closely before his eyes, Louis leaned forwards, his eyes widening meaningfully. Harry’s breath quickened, but before he could react any further than dilating pupils and a short choke for breath, Louis surprised them both by quickly leaning forwards, so fast that Harry couldn’t have intervened to stop him even if he’d wanted to, and kissing him lightly on the mouth.

He knew that Harry was the nervous type, but even Harry himself couldn’t have anticipated how strongly he would react. Rather than kissing him back, or standing still, Harry jerked backwards in shock, stepping backwards (not that it made a difference; he was holding Louis in his arms, and couldn’t have gotten away unless he’d physically dropped him). Except they were standing at the top of the stairs, and when Harry stepped backwards, he stepped into thin air, putting his foot down on a
piece of floor that wasn’t there. Inevitably, he stumbled, staggered, and then fell backwards – and the sounds of yells and swearing bounced off the walls as both he and Louis clumsily dropped down the stairwell, Harry slammed into the stairs so that his spine gave an agonizing crack, and the two of them began rolling towards the bottom, arms and legs colliding with each others’ limbs and the edges of the staircase and the stairs themselves… Harry was clumsy, and his long limbs weren’t the easiest to control, especially whilst they were wound around Louis, which meant that they were unhindered as they fell, tumbling down the stairs so dizzyingly, shockingly quickly that the only thing Louis could think of to put a positive spin on the situation was that at least no one was watching.

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“Owww.”

“Oh, shut up.”

“I’m in pain!”

“You’re fine.”

“No I’m not! I’m in pain,” Louis repeated dramatically.

“My ears are in pain,” grumbled Harry, ‘you’ve done nothing but moan all night. Man up.”

“We fell down the stairs, Harry. I think I have the right to complain about my many injuries.”

“It wouldn’t have happened if –”

“If you hadn’t stepped backwards onto a step that wasn’t there and thrown us both backwards down three flights of stairs.”

“I was in shock!” He pouted defensively, folding his arms. “Who kisses someone at the top of three adjoining flights of stairs, hmm? Who does that?”

“I’m not the one who freaked out.”

“I’ve never been kissed before! You’re wearing lycra! I think I had the right to be a little taken aback!”

They’d been sitting on hard plastic chairs in the Accident and Emergency department of the hospital for several hours now, Louis fidgeting and fussing and moaning like a little kid, an ice pack pressed dramatically against his face, while Harry sat cross-legged on his seat, moodily examining the floor and thinking about how very boring this was, and how he really wished he hadn’t allowed the maids to coerce them into going to hospital, and how Louis really was gorgeous but he had a very big mouth.

The fall couldn’t have done Louis’ sprained ankle any good, and he had acquired a shadowy bruise on his left cheek, which he was applying a cold compress to that had been shoved into his hands by a friendly-faced bellboy who had been sitting on Harry’s table while Louis had been flouncing around on the stage. He was scowling, his hair ruffled, and had a couple of bruises on his arm. Beside him, Harry was nursing an aching, slightly swollen wrist, and a bruised forehead, although luckily for him the mark was largely covered by his curls.

Truthfully, although Louis had been whining almost nonstop since they’d arrived, he was still struggling not to laugh, and even Harry kept finding his mouth aching with the effort of holding back a smile. They’d kissed, and then fallen down the stairs, all in the space of ten seconds. It was
spontaneous, stupid, ridiculously clumsy, and totally laughable – how very like them. Even the
thought of how their first kiss had been as stupid and childish as most of the rest of their relationship
(if one could call it that) was…well, it brought a smile to Louis’ face, and would have to Harry’s too,
if he’d let it.

“Things didn’t really go according to plan,” Louis admitted, sheepishly ruffling his hair up at the
back. “Falling downstairs and being hospitalized wasn’t exactly on the agenda.”

Harry smiled. “I suppose it’ll just mean that my first kiss will be even less forgettable.”

“Your first ever? Really?” He wasn’t easily shocked, but he had to admit that Harry had floored him
with that one. He couldn’t get his head around the fact that those perfect lips had never been kissed,
that the only person who had ever been allowed to touch them with their own was him. It made him
feel kind of funny inside.

“Uh…yeah.” Harry shrugged one shoulder, and then winced, adding that to the list of things that he
had injured. “Nobody was ever interested, and I wasn’t interested in them…I don’t know. I just
never got around to it, I guess. Until tonight.”

“And…” Louis cleared his throat. “Was it – was it a good kiss?”

“Well…I don’t know…I might have to have another one, just to compare…I don’t have much
experience, after all.” He was trying to be seductive, but his enormous, cheeky grin somewhat
dampened the effect.

It worked for Louis anyway – but everything Harry did worked for him, to be fair, so it wasn’t
exactly an unusual occurrence. He slid closer to Harry, across the plastic chair so that he was
practically sitting on the other boy’s lap, and then he cautiously dipped forwards and hesitated, so
that they sat staring at each other and he could taste Harry’s breath on his tongue.

“Are you going to throw me down another flight of stairs?” he whispered, running his hands down
Harry’s arms.

“Hmm. Possibly. Depends on how good a kiss this is,” Harry teased quietly.

“Oh…in that case, I’d better make it a good one, hadn’t I?”

He caught Harry’s face in steady hands, capturing him and keeping him still, and their noses bumped
gently together a few seconds before their lips did. The hospital sounds and smells seemed to fade
out while Louis’ thumbs stroked down Harry’s cheekbones, making his heart flutter weirdly in his
chest, while his stomach did excited back-flips, like he’d swallowed a dozen butterflies and the
largest had taken its place inside his chest, fluttering its wings where his heart should have been, so
that the racing he felt was the insect taking flight in response to the kiss.

It was nothing refined; just a simple brush of two mouths, but perhaps all the more perfect because of
that. Closing his eyes, Harry forgot his throbbing wrist and aching face and severely dented pride,
and he focused on the soft warmth of Louis’ lips instead. It was a far nicer thing to dwell on, in any
case.


Oh, a hospital waiting room, his mind mocked sarcastically, how romantic.

Shut up, Harry sternly told it, since when did either of us have a clue about romanticism? Enjoy it!

Sound advice, really.
Louis pulled away all too quickly; his mouth shone with Harry’s saliva, and his eyes were bright. Tenderly, Harry wiped a bead of wetness off Louis’ lower lip with his sleeve, and then dropped his gaze, rather embarrassed to have been the one who put it there. Not that Louis seemed to mind, really – he still felt idiotic, though.

“Are you doing anything later?” Louis asked gently. He checked his watch. “I’d say tomorrow, but…it is tomorrow.” He shrugged sheepishly, and another smile flickered across his face.

Harry swallowed. “I think I need some down time. I’m not really used to company…I think I need some time to think things through…just be on my own for a bit, you know.” Why did he sound so apologetic? Truthfully, he felt guilty; he’d spent enough time with Louis lately, more time than he’d spent with anyone else in his life, and yet it still didn’t feel like enough.

“Hey, that’s cool. I’d better catch up with Stan and Niall and all of that lot anyway – they’re probably going to report me missing presumed dead, soon. I haven’t spoken to them in days.” He brushed Harry’s hair out of his eyes. “You don’t have to look so guilty, you know. We’ve kissed twice; that doesn’t mean we have to be chained together. We’re not joined at the hip.”

“Yeah, but it feels kind of like I’m abandoning you.”

“I’m sure I’ll live…we have the rest of the night – or morning, really – in this lovely hospital together, in any case. What a great place for a date.”

Harry’s mouth was dry. “Is – is this a date, then?”

Louis looked at him carefully. “If you want it to be…it wouldn’t be the first, not out of the ones that I’ve counted, anyway…but if you’d rather us just be…um…very close friends –”

“As opposed to what, exactly?”

Clearly anxious, Louis said hesitantly, “Um…boyfriends? I suppose.”

“Boyfriends…” Harry said the word slowly, testing it out; it tasted strange and foreign and exciting on his lips, tingling on the way out. “Boyfriends…boyfriends sounds…good.” He coughed shyly.

“Boyfriends it is, then.” The brilliance of Louis’ smile could have lit up the whole room; he would have wondered how a smile like that didn’t break one’s face if his own hadn’t been just as enormous.

“Well, then, boyfriend…mark the date. We’ll need to make a note of this one in case an anniversary comes up.” His expression was teasing.

“No worries; we don’t need to mark the date,” Harry said dryly. “It’ll be on our medical records after tonight. Along with a list of our stair-inflicted injuries.”

The sound of Louis’ laughter echoed through the corridors, stealing through every doorway and into every room, and it was so happy and cheerful, just what was needed in a gloomy hospital at god-knows-what time in the morning that nobody had the heart to tell him to shut up.
“Well, I thought I was bad at chatting people up,” Niall commented as he tapped the ball with his golf club, focusing intently on the game, “but really, Louis, that takes the cake. Knocking someone down the stairs!” He tutted.

Louis was almost ashamed of the flaming grin on his face. “Well, it worked, didn’t it?”

“God knows how. Maybe you knocked something loose inside the kid’s head. I know if some nutter sprained his ankle by making a himself look like a dick prancing around in front of me in a tutu and then chucked me down three flights of stairs, I wouldn’t be asking him out on a date – I’d be getting a restraining order on him!” Niall turned around and started dragging the bag of golf clubs behind him in the direction he’d hit the ball; their all expenses paid holiday turned out not to quite stretch to the expenses of a caddy. “The guy must be mad.”

“He’ll suit me quite well, then.”

“How’d you do it, man? Come on, tell me your secret. It’s official; you can get anyone. I need to know how you can do it so I can work some magic on Hannah.”

Amused, Louis shook his head and clapped Niall on the back as they settled at their next spot and he selected a club in readiness to make the next shot. “Ah, I don’t think even I can help you there, man. She’s an enigma. Don’t take this the wrong way, but you’re wasting your time.”

He shook his head emphatically. “If there’s one thing you’ve taught me, it’s that no one is unattainable. The right words, the right chat-up line…you got that totally uptight posh kid eating right out of your hand. Work a little of your magic on me! Make me desirable. What’s your secret, Lou? C’mon!”

“No secret. Just persistence, and a lot of luck.”

“Nah, you’re bullshitting me. I’m not having any of that. You didn’t get that guy just by stalking him. That only works in Twilight. There must be something you did. Did you drug him? Make him sniff glue or ram a needle into his arm or something? I won’t call the cops as long as you give me some of whatever you gave him so I can use it on Hannah. Was it drugs?”

Louis laughed in spite of himself. “No.”

“Did you threaten him?”

Again, he laughed. “No.”

“Bribery?”

Quite embarrassingly, Louis literally snorted with laughter, such a revoltingly pig-like sound that he clapped his hand instantly over his mouth to stifle it. “That kid’s so rich he could afford to sew fifty pound notes into a duvet and sleep under it; you really think I could offer any kind of substantial bribe to him? He’d laugh in my face! Fifty quid to us is probably like spare change to him. Besides, Harry’s not like that.”

Niall didn’t look sure. “So…no bribes?”

“No bribes,” Louis promised, grinning broadly.
“How’d you do it, Lou?” Niall whined, and Louis completely flunked his shot, barely knocking the ball at all and yet it veered wildly off course, turning weirdly to one side away from where he had intended it to go.

Rolling his eyes, Louis followed the stray ball, and Niall stayed hot on his heels like a puppy, eagerly awaiting the apparent answer to attracting anyone you wanted which he seemed to think was in Louis’ possession and would soon fall from his lips if only Niall begged hard enough. “Is it so hard to believe that he was just won over by my great hair and natural charm?”

“Natural charm,” Niall scoffed, “you get drunk every weekend and you’re crap at golf; you have no natural charm. The great hair is a possible contender,” he allowed.

“Look, I don’t have any secret, and Hannah’s a law unto herself anyway; chances are if even if I knew the secret of unlocking any man or woman’s heart, I still wouldn’t be able to worm my way into Hannah’s bed with a million pounds in my pocket and the most attractive head in the world on my shoulders.”

“You did it once before.”

“That was a long time ago. Anyway, I can’t see myself duplicating the feat any time soon, can you? Hannah’s not looking for anyone right now. She’s single, she’s happy. Let her be. Keep mooning after her and maybe one day she’ll get sick of the single life and go for you. She’ll appreciate you far more for waiting and being patient, believe me. Women love that, and that’s one piece of knowledge I am willing to impart. Patience is a quality everybody loves.”

They fell contemplatively quiet for a while, and the next few holes were taken in silence. Louis had no aptitude for golf whatsoever, but he was slowly clawing his way back up to the top, nowhere near Niall’s score but doing less badly than he had been so far, which was something at least. They’d been golfing undisturbed for about fifteen minutes before Niall spoke again.

“None of us have ever met the guy, you realize that? Not properly. Stan tried to speak to him in the hallway yesterday and he stared at him with such horror you’d think he was about to mug him, and scuttled off, pretending he hadn’t heard a word of what Stan had said. And he quickly goes in the opposite direction whenever he sees any one of us coming, like he recognizes us and he’s scared we’re going to speak to him. He’s totally unsociable and he’ll hardly speak a word to anyone, which is why we’re maybe not as insulted as we should be…from what anyone else can see, Lou, he’s just some silent little rich kid who reckons he’s above mundane things like conversations with us lowly mortals – and yet when you talk about him…I wish you could see yourself. Your face lights up and you go all soft, and you talk like…like he’s something special, like he means so much to you. And that’s insane, because you hardly know the guy! How can you care so much about someone who won’t speak a word to anyone?” Amazingly, Niall wasn’t frustrated; he was honestly curious, and that touched Louis to the core. He wanted so desperately to make Niall understand, to show him how Harry sparkled and how his quiet light lit up the whole room and how when he was with Louis, he wasn’t quiet at all. He wanted to show someone else the Harry that he saw when nobody else was around; the Harry who laughed and teased and flirted and was one of the most amazing people he’d ever known. Who was afraid to show people who he was, and yet that made no sense, because who he was, the real him, was truly incredible. And yet at the same time, Harry was his, his perfect shy little secret who he kept all to himself and truly came alive only in his company (from what he could see, anyway; perhaps it was vain of him to assume that he alone knew the real Harry, but he’d never seen Harry act so comfortably with anybody else.) and Louis wanted to keep him a secret that he held against his chest forever, and never told anybody else about.

But he owed it to Harry to show people how beautiful he really was, once you peeled away all the
layers of social anxiety and insecurity and nervousness around strangers. Harry had so many different layers of undesirable qualities, like nerves and panic and uncertainty, and awkward unfriendliness, like an onion, and at first glance just as bitter. Yet if you took the time to delve deep, and peel them all away, you discovered one of the sweetest, most intelligent, most brilliant people in the world. Knowing that he had uncovered all of that...it was a nice feeling. And Louis wanted everyone else to know that Harry wasn’t surly and unsociable, a rude rich boy who felt he could ignore everyone who was ‘below’ him. He hated thinking that people thought of Harry that way. “He speaks to me,” he said quietly. “He’s cripplingly shy, and terrified of what other people think when they look at him, and yet...if you can get past all of that, he’s funny, smart, idiotic...he runs rings around me, honestly. He banter's like a pro, knows exactly what to say to unsettle you...it’s brilliant. And the fact that he doesn’t always say much means that when he does speak, it’s so much more special, because you know he has something he actually wants to say. I can’t stand it when people talk just for the sake of talking, and they ramble on for hours and hours without actually saying anything. Harry doesn’t do that. Everything he says matters. I feel horrible, because I thought he was just going to be a challenge, a bit of fun, and then I could have him as my cheap shag of the holiday and leave him behind at the end of the three weeks and that would be it. I never expected him to mean something to me. I’ve not got near his bed once this holiday – at least not whilst he was in it – and I don’t think I’ll mind if I never do, because you’re right, he does mean a lot to me. I think about him so often that it scares me...when my mind wanders, it wanders to him. He’s always lingering in the back of my mind. And I think about things he’s said, and wonder what he was thinking when he said them, and it feels like if I don’t find out, I’ll lose my mind. His smile lights up my morning and gives me sleepless nights. He infuriates me. He’s so many things that I’m not, but he’s lots of things that I am – I think he’s just enough of what I’d like to be, and enough of the things that I am for us to be such amazing friends. We just gelled, from the second we first started talking. I don’t know who’s more scared by that; him, or me. But he’s not really close to anyone, not really...and I’d like him to be close to me.”

He’d never told anyone that. Perhaps he’d thought they’d laugh, or think he was weird. But he had a strange dream, a fantasy, really, in his mind: he wanted to get into bed with Harry, fully clothed, and lie there stroking his shoulders, with Harry’s head on his chest. He wanted the younger boy to lean up, propping himself up on one sharp elbow, and press those sinful lips to the shell of his ear, and whisper every single one of his secrets against the soft curve of Louis’ earlobe. And once he’d heard them all, Louis wanted to lock them up safely inside him and feel Harry’s deepest darkest fears and desires and past mistakes fluttering inside him – and he wanted to know, and Harry to know, that they were safe with him. That he’d never let them loose.

It wasn’t the kind of desires to have about the boy you had originally objectified with the intention to grab, befriend and have sex with in the shortest amount of time possible, and Louis was almost terrified by the intensity of his desire to be the one person who Harry Styles could trust, and who he would trust. Swallowing, he awaited Niall’s reaction.

Rather than reacting to Louis’ rather emotional outburst, his outpouring of passionate and confusing feelings about Harry that had poured out of him as he warred with himself, torn between lust and the kind of deeper, more mature feelings he had for the vulnerable, nervous younger boy, Niall nibbled his lip for a moment, then burst out as if he simply couldn’t help himself, “So you haven’t boned?”

“Niall!” Louis dropped his golf club on his foot in horror; swearing furiously, he snatched it up, and then hissed, “No, we haven’t ‘boned’, as you so charmingly put it!”

“Really? Oh. I thought you would’ve, by now. In fact, the way you’re carrying on about him, you would’ve thought the two of you were engaged or something.” Niall hesitated, his eyes twinkling teasingly with humour; Louis knew he was being wound up, but he was nonetheless infuriated
despite knowing that the Irish boy was teasing him. “Why, what’s wrong with ‘boned’? Too crude a word for the boy wonder, this curly haired marvel who you’re so helplessly infatuated with? Would you rather ‘made love’? ‘Had passionate intercourse with’?”

Spluttering with laughter, Louis swiped playfully at him with his golf club. “I don’t know. Maybe.” Truthfully, he preferred both of those ridiculously old-fashioned endearments for the word sex rather than more commonly used terms such as ‘bonked’ or ‘fucked’ or whatever words he usually used when referring to his nightly exploits with previous conquests. He couldn’t imagine shagging Harry Styles. Oh, he could imagine making love to him very well, but not shagging him. The word just didn’t go hand in hand with the chaste image he had in his head of Harry, who was anything but innocent and yet with his halo of chocolate brown curls and cute dimples, seemed as pure and unsullied as a two year old.

Delightedly, Niall whacked him in return, smashing his club down on Louis’ sore ankle. “Man, you’re full of it! It’s ridiculous. You’ve gone all gooey, you should see yourself! And after all the times you’ve clocked me one for getting all moony over Hannah – this is brilliant!”

Louis growled at him. “Shut up, Horan. And come here! That was my bad ankle; I’m going to get you for that!”

He went to deal Niall a sharp smack over the head with the golf club, expecting the Irish boy to dodge – but Niall was too busy gleefully giggling at him to leap out of the way like Louis naturally assumed he would. With a loud crack, he slammed his golf club right into Niall’s skull, and the resulting crunch as Niall yelped and then staggered unsteadily, clutching his head, made Louis flinch. He hurled the club to the floor like it had attacked Niall with a mind of its own.

“Oh, God, sorry!” he cried. “Are you all right?”

“No,” Niall groaned, “what the hell was that for? You smashed my head in! You’ve killed about a thousand brain cells there! I think you’ve given me concussion!”

“Rubbish,” Louis said worriedly, but he grabbed Niall in almost a headlock and squinted worriedly through his blond hair, looking for visible marks that he’d left behind, like bruises or a sign of bleeding or something. There were none, but he still felt pretty bad.

“Oi!”

A man dressed all in white with a Mario-type moustache came huffing sternly over to them, looking put out, sweat beading on his receding hairline. Hands on his hips, he stood over them, scowling at Louis and the rather compromisingly positioned Niall, who was turning red and gurgling because Louis was holding him so tightly and in such an uncomfortable position.

“No fighting on the golf course,” he puffed, “either you play golf, or you leave. This isn’t a place for larking about; this is a place for playing golf! I saw that little stunt with the club, you know.” He picked up the abandoned club and tapped it accusingly. “This isn’t a toy!”

“No, I know. Sorry.” Louis quickly released Niall, who bobbed up rather red in the face, blushing painfully and looking dizzy. “We’ll go, shall we, Niall?”

“Yeah,” Niall agreed breathlessly. “Yeah.”

The two of them abandoned their clubs and, in fact, abandoned the game entirely, leaving the complaining manager to sort it all out for them. They sprinted giddily for the entrance, laughing like the idiots that they were, and leaving the irritable man in the white outfit with his bushy, bristly
looking moustache to huff and puff like a steam train in their wake, dancing around and struggling to pick up the equipment they had left behind. Niall recovered pretty quickly from the knock over the head, grinning as he and Louis chased each other off the obsessively mown course, onto the pathway and out of sight.
“A feast fit for a king!” Louis declared.

Harry laughed. “Oh, yes; sausage rolls, crisps, and a couple of bruised apples – what a veritable feast!” He sat down on the rug which Louis had spread out on the grass, crossed his long legs like a little child in primary school, and then grinned.

Louis huffed at him as he squatted down next to him on the ground. “Don’t turn your nose up, rich boy. Maybe your daddy could buy you solid gold sandwiches with one wave of his credit card, but I’m on limited funds, so a couple of measly sausage rolls and a battered apple are as close to a gourmet luncheon as we’re going to get.”

“I was teasing,” Harry promised, and his hand glided down Louis’ back, pausing on his spine and tracing a couple of light circles there. “I like sausage rolls. And he’s not my dad.” He leaned forward and shyly kissed Louis on the nose. “I think it’s dead sweet that you’ve done all of this, Lou, really.”

Not that he was about to let on, but Louis had been up since six scavenging the shelves of the local corner shop for affordable food so that he could manage some kind of a picnic for Harry – he couldn’t rustle up a picnic basket, so he’d had to settle for Sainsbury’s carrier bags, and instead of a blanket, they were sitting on the rug that he’d brought from his room so that they didn’t have to sit on the muddy grass. The crisps were crushed from where he’d sat on them, as Harry had tactlessly pointed out, the apples had been abused and were left with a smattering of little dark marks on their acid green outsides, and the sausage rolls were limp and flat – but he’d tried hard, and he was pleased that Harry wasn’t so up his own arse that he couldn’t appreciate Louis’ efforts, even if he had poked fun at them a little. Louis had to admit, he would have been tempted to laugh a little bit himself, had it been Harry who had provided the picnic.

Louis shrugged and picked up an apple. He examined it, checking for marks other than bruises, and then bit into it with a sharp crunch. “Well,” he said through his mouthful, “it was nothing, really. Just thought it was a nice day for a picnic.”

Biting back a laugh, Harry looked down and started fiddling with the tassels of the rug, keeping his eyes glued to the ground; he knew that if he looked at Louis properly, he was going to burst out laughing. “Nice day for it. Did you look out of the window with your eyes closed, by any chance?”

Admittedly, that wasn’t the cleverest excuse that Louis could have come up with. It had drizzled on and off all day, dismal grey clouds hung persistently overhead, watching them in silence and preparing to rain miserably down on them whenever it felt like it, and there was a bitter, cold breeze around which snatched at their hair, ruffling it wildly, and pinched viciously at their cheeks, leaving them pink. Harry’s green eyes sparkled with amusement. It was cold, damp and not at all picnic weather, and Louis would have cancelled if he hadn’t spent almost the entire night planning it and most of the morning toiling back and forth between the hotel and the corner shop, having already posted a note with the time and place for their meeting later underneath Harry’s door. Foolishly, the romantic in him had refused to let him leave the shop without recklessly spending three pounds on a single crimson rose, which he’d stupidly tried to squeeze underneath Harry’s door with the note.Obviously, it hadn’t worked, but he’d stubbornly kept trying and ended up half crushing the flower in his attempts to desperately cram through the tiny space, and despite losing rather a lot of petals and being horribly mangled, he’d managed to finally shove it underneath.

Harry was wearing it now, bless him, bedraggled and pathetic as it was – it was limp and sorry for itself, like the picnic, and like the weather – and yet without a trace of irony, he had it neatly tucked
into the buttonhole of his blazer. In fact, he even reached up to touch it every now and then, a tender stroke of the limp petals, as if he had to reassure himself it was there. He kept doing the same to Louis; brushing fingers against his arm, tapping him lightly on the back, reaching out to thread their fingers together. It was almost as if he was afraid that if he didn’t constantly check that Louis hadn’t disappeared, the moment Harry turned his back, Louis was going to vanish. Weirdly, Louis found it kind of sweet, and so that Harry didn’t feel awkward to be the one who kept turning to touch Louis in reassurance, every so often he would sneak brushes of his own in, just little ones. Subtly nudging Harry’s thigh with his knee as he leaned over him to pick up a sausage roll. Tidying his unruly fringe for him. Leaning against him slightly while he ate, like he was tired and needed support, even though he was so full of energy that he was practically bouncing, jiggling his knee up and down to expel some of the nerves. Harry seemed to pick up on what he was doing and smiled gratefully every now and then, and he repaid him by cuddling up to him, snuggling into his embraces – and when they had finished eating, Louis settled back and pulled Harry’s head onto his lap, where the younger boy set about purring like a little cat as Louis happily stroked his hair, and they both looked up at the grey sky.

“Did you find your friends yesterday?” Harry asked, closing his eyes in enjoyment, and then he wondered whether he ought to have asked that, and whether it was weird, and whether Louis would think he was checking up on him. He bit his lip anxiously, wishing he could take it back.

Louis, however, didn’t seem to notice anything amiss about the question; he stayed relaxed, absently stroking Harry’s hair, smoothing curls down over his forehead and feeling them slide silkily beneath his fingers. “Yeah, I hung out with Niall for a couple of hours. We played golf.”

Harry opened one eye and gazed lazily up at him. “You play golf? I never knew that.”

With a snort, Louis promised him, “I don’t play golf well. I just sort of blunder around trying to whack the ball with the club a decent enough distance that Niall doesn’t laugh at me. I don’t think I’m welcome there anymore anyway – turns out that you’re not supposed to use golf clubs to whack your best friend over the head with! Who knew?”

Closing his eyes again, it was Harry’s turn to snort, but he waited a while before continuing the conversation, enthralled with the almost rhythmic slip and tug of Louis’ fingers in his hair, pulling at the roots and twisting curls around his hands, and then smoothing them out again with the kind of expertise that made Harry wonder how exactly Louis knew that his hair was his main weak spot, and where on earth he had learnt to be quite so good with his hands, how he knew exactly where to pull and just how hard to make Harry’s whole body twitch with that blissful combination between pain and pleasure. It was a skill he was painfully envious of.

“You’re so violent. Why exactly did you feel it was necessary to bash his brains out with a massive stick?”

Louis rolled his eyes. “When is it not necessary to bash Niall’s brains out with a massive stick? He’s a prize knob,” he said lovingly.

“Oh, Louis, you’re so lovely to your friends. They’re so lucky to have you. You’re so patient, so non-confrontational, so complimentary! The world needs more people like you in it!” Harry grinned massively, making it completely clear that he was being sarcastic, and Louis used the opportunity of his temporary height advantage and Harry’s vulnerable position on his lap to slap him playfully on the thigh.

“Cheeky! I almost think I preferred you when you were nervous and twitchy and never said a word,” Louis teased, and before Harry could think up a good retort, he gave a tug on the roots of Harry’s hair, right at the nape of his neck, and Harry whined helplessly and arched his back as Louis
continued pulling at his hair, targeting his weak spots in one expert pull. “Come on, then; say something else, clever clogs. Smart arse. Cat got your tongue, huh?” Pressing his nose against Harry’s chin, he kissed him upside down – and even upside down, he was a lethal kisser; with the faintest, gentlest of caresses of Harry’s lips with his own, paired with another well-timed wrench on his hair, Harry was squirming and gasping in his lap, his fingers digging into Louis’ thigh.

“Ohhhhhhh….”

“That’s what I thought,” Louis whispered smugly, running his fingers through Harry’s hair and feeling the other boy go limp against him, whimpering softly underneath his kisses. “Now shut up, okay? Shut up.”

“You – I – oh –”

“You – I – oh –”

“Shut up.” Louis repeated in a catlike growl, and he had the great satisfaction of seeing Harry’s shocked, wide-open eyes widen even more, his pupils dilating and blowing out like huge black marbles in response to the touches, the tone, and the natural sequence of events which his body expected to follow. He was being well and truly seduced.

“God, Louis…God, Louis, I…” More kisses rained down on his exposed jaw, and he grabbed Louis’ face in both hands, taking two handfuls of his hair and yanking hard on Louis’ hair in response, trying to inspire similar helplessness in Louis. Of course, his efforts went almost unnoticed – or perhaps Louis was just better at controlling his lustful urges than Harry, who found them unnerving, a new and somewhat overwhelming sensation that he was still struggling to acclimatize to. Louis, at least, hadn’t been reduced to an incoherent mess just by Harry pulling on his feathery hair.

“Not so clever now, are you? Huh? Little smart arse…smart arse…arse…” Hands scrabbled wickedly at Harry’s belt, grabbing at his boxers and slipping inside to give his bum a sneaky squeeze, and Harry yelped, eyes flying open even wider in shock as an embarrassingly wavering moan ripped its way out of his throat. He closed his eyes in defeat.

The next kiss was fierce, and it burned, as if Louis had set a match to Harry’s mouth and seared it clean off. It was almost embarrassing, how much he needed it; how he moaned and arched up into the kiss, his fingers scrabbling in the fabric of Louis’ sinfully tight jeans, trying to find something to cling onto. He’d forsaken Louis’ hair and was greedily snatching at his skin, and yet it did him no good; Louis remained unmoved, almost completely unruffled by his desperate efforts at returning the seduction that Louis was so good at.

His mouth moved quickly, trying to keep up, perhaps even to gain dominance over the kiss, but Louis had no intention of letting him do that. No matter how hard Harry kissed him, Louis’ lips were always harder – sometimes hard enough to leave bruises, leaving Harry’s mouth swollen and tender. He seemed to like that; he’d run the tip of one finger over Harry’s bruised, puffy mouth, apparently fascinated by the redness of Harry’s sore mouth. When Harry’s fingers dug into Louis’ skin, Louis would hold him harder, fingers biting into his skin, leaving marks that ached for hours afterwards, made him remember how it had felt to have Louis’ fingers there for real – made him ache for more. If Harry bit him in playfulness, Louis would bite him back, hard enough to bring tears to Harry’s eyes – almost hard enough to draw blood. These things Harry quickly learned in the time they spent together that day; eventually they ended up lying together on the rug, caught in each other’s arms, kissing each other’s breath away until blood thunderted through their lungs and their vision blurred, and Harry’s whole mouth was numb and he still wanted Louis to kiss him harder, hold him closer. Their legs were tangled, he could feel his hair brushing softly against Louis’ forehead. And nobody came and stared, nobody told them to stop, Harry wasn’t afraid that he was going to do it wrong. He
just went with it, and it felt good.

They collapsed back on the rug eventually, side by side, breathlessly poking each other in the ribs every now and then with enormous grins on their faces. Harry’s mouth ached. His heart was hammering. He was exhausted and battered by passion and he still felt like it wasn’t enough. Allowing his eyes to flutter closed, he felt a small, lazy smile quirk his raw red mouth into a smirk, and he folded his hands over his rapidly rising and falling chest, waiting for his breathing to return to normal.

“I know I haven’t had much experience,” he began, “but you’re a bloody good kisser. And –”

At precisely that moment, Louis apparently thought it would be funny to shove a sausage roll straight into his mouth, filling it up and completely cutting off whatever Harry had been about to say next. The shock on Harry’s face had him rolling around on the floor in convulsions of laughter, until eventually, he wiped his eyes and lay back down again, staring straight upwards.

“You soppy bastard,” he said fondly, reaching out to ruffle Harry’s thick head of curls. “Shut up, or next time I’ll shove something a lot bigger in that gob of yours, trust me.” He closed his eyes with a wicked smirk, leaving Harry to blush and contemplate exactly what he could have meant by that, and all the possible dirty connotations of that particular suggestion.

Harry chose not to think too hard about that; he’d only just started recovering from the feeling of Louis slender body all up close and personal with his own, invading his space and pressing him against the cold ground so that all he could think about was that the world had shrunk and had pressed against him in a Louis-shaped ball of flames, achingly warm and painfully close, but not close enough. Making him burn with longing the way Louis burned so brightly against him. The last thing he needed was to find himself suddenly struggling to sit still simply by the implications of a possible sexual innuendo that Louis might have slipped into the conversation, and yet could alternatively have just been his own filthy teenage mind twisting the meaning. Although, knowing Louis, he doubted that. Settling down on the rug, he let his eyes droop closed and focused on ignoring Louis and all of his own humiliatingly uncontrollable thoughts for a while.

A startling spike of icy cold wetness plopped onto his forehead; he gave a startled yelp and his eyes flew open again, and beside him, Louis rolled over onto his side, propping himself up on his elbow and giving a little laugh. Tenderly, he reached out and flicked something off Harry’s forehead.

“Raindrop,” he explained amusedly. “I guess the rain’s finally decided to start. At least it held off while we were in the throes of mad passion on the floor, right, Hazza?” An enormous grin cracked across his face.

Harry poked out his tongue. “Mad passion,” he scoffed, although he was rather ashamed by the accuracy of it; he had gone a little bit mad for a while. “It’s just spitting, is all. It’ll stop in a bit.” As if to contradict him, a second fat raindrop landed right on the end of his nose, and glistened tantalizingly there for a few seconds.

Louis reached out and scooped it off with his finger, popping it into his mouth and pretending not to notice Harry raising his eyebrows at his weirdness. “You sure about that? It looks pretty grim up there.” He glanced appraisingly up at the sky.

Two more raindrops maddeningly landed on Harry’s face; he studiously ignored them. “We’re British, Lou, and it’s summer. If a bit of rain put us Brits off during the summer, we’d never get anything done. We’ll do what generations of Brits have done before us – grit our teeth, get our umbrellas out, and keep buggering on. It’ll stop in a minute anyway.”
“Famous last words,” Harry panted as he and Louis sprinted for the hotel with the rug spread over their heads like a makeshift umbrella, bright orange carrier bags filled with rather damp and even more squashed food swinging from their free hands. Their feet thudded on the sodden ground, filthy water splashing up and showering their ankles with dirty brown droplets with every clumsy step.

Mere minutes after he’d insisted that they weren’t going to give in to the weather, the heavens had split open like one of Louis’ Sainsbury’s bags had during the first few seconds of their run, and rain had poured down over them in a flood, slamming relentlessly down onto their shoulders. They’d scrambled to their feet and made a dash for the hotel, struggling to save themselves from being drowned in the sudden downpour, but already Harry was as limp and bedraggled as the dripping wet rose in his buttonhole. His sopping hair hung right into his eyes, the curls shocked out of it so it hung down to his chin, so thick that he could barely see through it. It was only Louis’ tight hand on his arm which kept him on course, stopped him from blundering off in the wrong direction and ricocheting off the hotel wall or something.

They staggered into the foyer, soaking wet, confused and most of all, shaking with laughter. Louis threw the wet rug down onto the floor and hurled his arms around Harry’s neck, burying his face in Harry’s shoulder.

“Next time,” he murmured, “maybe you should just keep your mouth shut.” And then he laughed at him again, right into the place where Harry’s neck and shoulder joined.

Beside him, Harry couldn’t help but splutter with laughter himself. “I’m cursed. Just cover my mouth in duct tape; don’t let me comment on the weather, I’ll only make it worse.”

“Don’t have any duct tape, but I’m sure I’ll find another way of making you stop talking.” And sure enough, Louis sealed Harry’s mouth shut with his own, carefully pushing Harry’s slightly wavy wet fringe out of his eyes. He pulled away, leaving Harry dizzy and weak at the knees, and then his lips were on the corner of Harry’s mouth as he whispered, “oh look…one hundred percent effective. I’m a technical genius.”

Normally, Harry would have punched him and corrected him, telling him that he was a twat – but just once, he decided to let it slide.
“Okay, so I know that yesterday’s plan fell a little flat, but today is definitely going to be a good one. I’ve checked the weather forecast; no rain. I checked twice. It’s going to be a beautiful day; you’ll love this, I promise. It’s going to be brilliant!”

How could Harry ever believe otherwise, with an expression as wonderful as that on Louis’ face? When he looked like he had never smiled so much, when his eyes danced with excitement, when his grip on Harry’s wrist was so hard that it almost hurt? Louis could have been preparing to tie him up and eat him alive, and as long as he smiled just like that while he did it, Harry would still think it was an absolutely brilliant idea.

He was a little less confident about this when Louis dragged him to a stop by the lake beside the hotel, and proudly presented him with a little red rowing boat that was moored by the edge, clear water lapping at its sides, and the sun shining on the water so that it was dazzling, like someone had dunked a disco ball just underneath the surface and shone a torch on it; the water glistened. Harry apprehensively eyed the boat. He was a confident swimmer, and so was Louis, (and he’d long since learnt to leave all of his electrical devices back in the hotel, since Louis seemed to have a penchant for throwing him into pools and other watery places) but he wasn’t sure whether Louis would be competent at steering a boat, and he himself had no experience whatsoever with that sort of thing.

“Oh,” he said inadequately. “It’s a boat.”

Louis patted him on the back. “Indeed it is,” he agreed. “It is a boat. What do you think?”

“Um.” Harry swallowed. “It’s a very nice boat,” he offered hesitantly. “Very…red.”

“Yes. It’s a red boat.” Louis looked inordinately pleased with himself. “I hired us a boat! I thought we could sail it. I thought it might be cute, you know? Sailing a little red boat. On a little lake. On a nice day.”

“I’m not so sure that you don’t have some kind of ulterior motive for this, you know.”

He pretended to be offended. “Why, how on earth would you come to that conclusion?”

“You have previous,” Harry said dryly. “Come on, out with it. What’s your plan? This is all far too cutesy and innocent for you.”

“Innocent is my middle name! I’m all in favour of innocent activities these days. Picnics. Little boat rides. I have plenty of other, similarly innocent activities stuffed up my sleeve for the next couple of days, Harold, don’t you worry. Although I will confess that I do have some form of an ulterior motive for this particular activity…”

“I knew it! Come on, then; spill. Otherwise I won’t move an inch.” He dropped to the ground, crossed his legs and sat on the floor like a gangly little child, grinning cheekily up at Louis. He flicked an unruly stray curl out of his eyes. “What’s your motive? Come on – tell me!”

Louis sighed and sat opposite him in exactly the same position, propping his chin up on one hand and examining Harry, his eyes flickering over every inch of the other boy’s face as if he was trying to read him. “My motive…is this hat.” And he dramatically swept a sea captain’s hat out from behind his back, placing it carefully on top of Harry’s wildly curly hair.

An enormous smile spread across his face; he wasn’t sure who was grinning more, Harry or him.
Harry tilted his head slightly to the left and the hat slid at a corresponding angle on his head, knocking a couple of loose brown curls over his face so that one bright green eye was obscured a little. His smile was dazzling, as brilliant as a lightbulb. Louis couldn’t resist reaching out to take his large, pale hand, and he squeezed it, biting down on his lower lip as he appraised the sight. Balanced precariously on top of Harry’s curls, the hat looked gorgeous on him.

“I was right – it looks amazing on you.”

Harry’s mouth quirked into yet another smile, this one fond, amused, a little bit teasing. “Some ulterior motive that was, making me wear a silly hat.”

“It’s not a silly hat! I think it’s rather sexy, actually.”

“Oh, so your motive was to make me wear this supposedly ‘sexy’ hat in order to feed your silly hat fetish?” Harry slapped him playfully on the leg. “I should make you give in to my fetish. Just as soon as I think of one.” He shook his head slightly, and the hat shifted again, sliding backwards and making his eye visible again. “Can I take it off now?”

“Don’t you dare! It’s hot, all right? And we’re going on a boat ride; the hat is appropriate. Keep it on, and let’s go.”

He pulled Harry to his feet and led him towards the boat, helping him in – and then they spent the next couple of minutes readying the boat, and themselves, for the trip. Louis was strangely protective, which was sweet; despite having no idea about how to fix a life jacket, he spent nearly ten minutes trying to strap Harry into the vest, snapping clips together and tightening straps, and only once Harry was securely laced into the luminous orange monstrosity did he start fixing his own. Once they’d both fixed the life jackets to perfection, and Louis had almost obsessively checked all of the boating equipment at least six times, he finally raised an oar and pushed the boat off from the side, and feeling incredibly proud of himself (and his biceps) steered them towards the centre of the lake with slow, powerful strokes, seeming completely confident. Harry was almost tricked into thinking that he knew what he was doing.

“What did I tell you? I said it was going to be great! Just look at that sky! Have you ever seen anything so blue in all your life?”

Lounging in the back of the boat with his left hand trailing lazily in the water, Harry watched him with the corner of his lip twitching upwards in the tiniest smile. His eyes were soft like the pillows on Louis’ bed, as soft as he imagined Harry’s skin would be.

“Only your eyes, sweet,” he said.

In spite of himself, Louis laughed, throwing his head back as he pushed on the oars and the boat drifted a little further away from the shore. “And where did you pick that one up, then? The back of a cereal packet? Christmas cracker? Facebook?” He shook his head in amusement. “Your chat-up lines don’t get any better, do they?”

“Of course not,” Harry grinned, sitting up a little.

He couldn’t quite believe the whole thing, really; it was all still a bit surreal. Only a week or so ago, he would never have even contemplated talking to a stranger – and now here he was, sat in a little rowing boat with a guy he could only have known for just under two weeks, who it felt like he’d known forever. Who – clichéd though it might sound – knew him better than anyone else did, whose company was more comfortable than even his own, which was what he was used to. Being with Louis was like breathing – he almost forgot what he was doing, took the miracle for granted, and yet
when he stopped to think about it, he was almost overwhelmed with the sheer ridiculousness of it. Something so powerful, and yet he rarely even stopped to think about it anymore. He’d stopped questioning why Louis wanted to be with him, why he seemed to come alive when Louis was around. He’d even stopped questioning what it meant that the only relationship he’d ever had was with a man, that he couldn’t even contemplate another one, with a man, woman, with anyone, romantic or otherwise. Louis was the one person he wanted to be with.

Everyone else’s voice was an irritating buzz, a constant grating on his skin like fingernails being dragged relentlessly down his arm. Other people’s laughter was shrill and stupid, made him want to clutch his ears in despair. The subjects of conversation that were on other people’s lips were so boring that he was tempted to rip his hair out.

That had always slightly been the case, but now it was sufficiently bad that other people were starting to notice. His mother had sternly reprimanded him for shooting daggers at Robin with his eyes whilst he was blathering on about something or other, and had been unable to restrain his annoyance at being caught in the conversation when he wanted to lock himself in his room and think, about all the things Louis had said and done that day. He liked to analyse. Having dinner and listening to his stepfather talk about golf and cars interfered with his analysing. Harry had never intentionally been rude. But he had stopped even replying to Liam mid-conversation, snapped at his sister, sat in stony silence through a day’s worth of meals, and perked up only when Louis rang the phone in his room and they sat up chatting until way past midnight.

What had Louis done to him? How had he intensified Harry’s reluctance to socialize into complete and utter loathing for anyone who wasn’t skinny, blue-eyed and called Louis Tomlinson? How had he made it so that any company other than his was little more than torture? These were unanswerable questions, seemingly, and they plagued upon Harry’s mind all day and night. Kept him awake, some nights, eyes wide open as he stared up at the white hotel ceiling, fiddling with the hem of the generic floral duvet, thinking wistfully of his own bed at home with the chocolate brown duvet and lyrics sprawling tastefully across the walls. He even had luminous glowing stars tacked to the ceiling of his bedroom at home. He wasn’t sure whether it was thoughts of Louis or the unfamiliar bed which made him more restless, but in any case, he wasn’t getting as much sleep as he used to these days.

Concern flitted across his face, and Harry felt his exhaustion, the creases in his forehead as he frowned slightly; his eyes ached and he could practically feel the dark, bruise-like shadows that lurked beneath them.

He had hoped that Louis wouldn’t notice, but noticing things was something which Louis was inordinately good at. His concern mirrored Harry’s, except it lingered, and he paused in his rowing to reach out and touch him lightly on the hand, his soft brown eyes coloured with worry.

“Hey,” he said softly, “are you all right?”

“I’m good.” Another smile, masking his concern behind a flash of teeth.

Louis’ thumb carefully stroked the back of his hand, up and down, soothing him. He felt his expression soften like the lines of his face had been drawn with chalk, and each sweep of Louis’ thumb blurred the lines, making them less harsh. Another thing Louis was good at was giving you his full attention when he knew it was important; he had all but dropped the oars, resting them on his knees, and those blue eyes were serious and caring as they took Harry in, trying to read his expression. “Are you sure?”

Oh, hell, how did he do that thing with his voice? It lowered and swooped around the words, curling almost seductively around each syllable, making it sound incredible. This was the voice that persuaded, the voice that showed how much Louis cared. The voice which urged Harry to spill out
all of his troubles with every sound that came from it. It whispered to him in his dreams some nights, and now it was haunting his days as well. It was almost too much.

His fingers curled carefully around Louis’ in response. “I’m just a bit…you know. It’s a lot to take in. With my social anxiety, and all – I never expected to find anyone at all, let alone someone who would make me feel so…” he trailed off inadequately. “It’s all been such a surprise. When I’m with you, I feel different. Like all the things about myself I hate, like my fear of strangers, and all that stuff…like they’re balloons that are tied to me, and when I’m with you, you cut the strings. You’ve changed me, Louis. Every second I’m with you, I’m a little bit different. And it’s great, don’t get me wrong, but it’s so much, so soon, and I’ve never had a relationship before, and I keep wondering…is it always…like this? Is it always so…sudden?”

Louis looked stricken. “Oh, God, have I been coming on too strong? Have I been rushing you? Because I never meant to make you uncomfortable, Harry, if this has been moving on too quickly, then we can slow things down, take a step back –”

“No!” Harry interrupted, so quickly that he stunned himself. “No…that’s not what I want. Didn’t I just tell you that this is the most incredible thing I’ve ever felt? That being with you is…amazing? You change me. And I like the things you do to me. I’m terrified of everyone, Louis, but this…this is a new kind of fear. I like this. I don’t want this to change.”

Their eyes were locked together. Harry’s chest hurt. He wasn’t sure he could look away. Something was kicking around in his stomach, punching at his insides, tearing his intestines and tying them in knots. Louis leaned forwards, placed gentle hands on his shoulders and then their mouths lightly touched and he caressed Harry’s lips with his own, so gentle with him as always. Louis bantered like a randy old man in a pub, but when it really mattered, he dropped the flirtation and the stupidity and he was so achingly careful, so patient and sweet that it took Harry’s breath away. He knew he was incredibly lucky – not everyone was as considerate, as gentle as Louis. Few people would have cared for him as long and been as tolerant with him as Louis had. So many people would have given up on him long ago.

Louis never had, and he didn’t think he’d ever stop being overwhelmingly grateful for that. He hoped nobody would ever let him. If he ever grew complacent, he hoped somebody would remind him that Louis was the first person not to run from him when they realized how shy, how fragile, how reclusive he was. And he would always be terrified of the possibility that Louis would tire of him, get sick of his instinct to shy away from people. But hopefully, that lingering fear would be enough to make sure that he never took Louis for granted.

Sitting back, Louis smiled. “I’m so glad you said that – I don’t like making promises I can’t keep… I don’t think I could stay away from you, Harry.”

“Is it always like this?” Harry asked, his green eyes burning with curiosity. “You’re way more experienced than I am. I’ve never done this…does it always feel so overwhelming?”

“Not always. I’ve had a couple of serious relationships before, but nothing like this…never quite like this.” It was true. Oh, he’d been physically closer with plenty of people, but on such a deeply emotional level…he’d only ever come close with Hannah, and his feelings for her had been purely platonic in the end. More like she was his sister than anything; that was what ended it. She was too much like a sister to him. It had gotten to the stage where kissing her made him visibly cringe; trying to do anything more than that made him feel physically ill. They were best friends now, and he couldn’t imagine anything more. At a point they’d been so close that he’d thought maybe this was It. Love. Maybe Hannah was The One.

It seemed laughable, now, considering the way he’d felt about Hannah, when the two of them had
only been silly teenagers fooling around and thinking they knew everything there was to know, thinking that the world was theirs and they understood life and love and knew how their minds worked. They’d thought they knew how love felt.

With Harry, it was deeper. Right underneath his skin, reaching right inside with him, to the furthest depths, further than anything had ever reached before. And he still didn’t think it was love, not yet. It still felt too shallow – yet compared to his feelings for Hannah, it was still like comparing a puddle to an ocean. Hannah was his best friend, had been for years, but he still felt that he knew Harry better. Harry’s face would be far harder to forget. Despite knowing Hannah since primary school, Harry would linger for far longer in his thoughts, had far more impact in his mind. He’d tattooed himself behind Louis’ eyes; he was all that he could see when he closed them. He was both terrified and in awe of how that felt.

“And does it always feel…the way this feels?” Harry was clumsy with his words; struggled to put his meaning across.

Louis was confused. “The kissing, you mean? It really depends on who you’re with. Some people’s technique is better than others. If you’re worrying about that, then I’d like to take the opportunity to assure you that you’re an excellent kisser.”

Harry shook his head; his curls bounced and the hat was nearly sent flying into the water. “No… not just the kissing. All of it. Going from liking someone to actually being with them…knowing them, caring about them, starting to feel like they’re…all that matters. That you don’t know what you’d do if they weren’t around anymore.” He reddened; he was spilling some of his deepest thoughts out onto the surface of the lake. Louis stayed silent and serene, listening to all of them with a seriousness which was rare for him. “Does it always feel so much like falling?”

“I’ve never liked that turn of phrase,” Louis admitted. “Falling…might be an accurate description for the sensation of losing yourself to someone else, but I’ve always disliked the connotations. You hurt yourself when you fall. It’s associated with pain. It’s a bad thing, falling. Accurate, in some cases, but not in all of them. So I wouldn’t really say it’s like falling at all.”

Fascinated, Harry asked, “What, then? How would you describe it.”

Louis met his gaze steadily as he said solemnly, “Like coming home.”

Staggered, Harry flopped limply against the side of the boat. He wasn’t really sure how Louis had just reached right into his head and managed to scoop out his innermost thoughts and make them coherent, but somehow, he had done it. It made Harry feel a bit dizzy.

Unfortunately, he leaned too fast and gave too much of his weight to the left side of the boat. The exasperated look on Louis’ face as the little wooden boat tilted and the wood creaked said it all; Harry barely had enough time to raise his eyebrows and shrug apologetically before the boat overturned, capsizing completely and sending them both plunging into the icy, frigid depths of the previously calm pond. Enormous ripples slid across the surface around them as the two of them fell in with a splash, and Harry swore at the coldness of it as he grabbed Louis by the arm, hanging onto him because he was the only warm thing in the vicinity.

“God! What is it with you and dumping me in freezing cold water?”

“It was your fault this time! You leaned out too far!”

“Who decided to jump in the boat in the first place? You did! Who hasn’t a clue how to sail or row or any of the stuff necessary for a boat ride? You don’t.”
Louis poked out his little pink tongue and swam forwards, wrapping his legs around Harry’s waist and clinging to him like a monkey. It shocked Harry so much that he almost froze and sank like a stone. Louis didn’t seem to notice. “Oh…you lost your sexy hat,” he said mournfully.

“How much.”

“Oh, wait – no, you didn’t! Here it is!” The hat was floating upside down like a little boat; Louis scooped it up and dumped it back onto Harry’s head. They quickly discovered that it had been full of water when Harry shrieked as he was completely drenched in freezing water, even more so than he had been already. Louis burst out laughing.

“I fucking hate you,” Harry growled against his neck, burrowing his face into the place where Louis’ neck and shoulders met and warming his frozen lips against Louis’ jugular vein.

With a giggle, Louis assured him, “You’re not the first to say that, believe me.”

He caught at the overturned boat and clung to it with one hand, and as Harry dipped forwards and nervously captured his water-beaded lips in a hesitant kiss, Louis placed his other hand on the small of Harry’s back and nibbled the other boy’s lip, losing himself in the movement of their mouths. The only warm thing he could feel in that whole freezing cold lake was Harry’s mouth, pressed firmly against his.

And just like he’d said, it felt like home.
Chapter 14

Louis had ended up making a solemn promise that their next ‘date’ would not involve water of any kind, and it was a promise he had resolved to keep. Which was why, repeating the promise in Harry’s ear to reassure him, he guided him onto the roof via the skylight on the top floor, giving him a leg up and then pulling up a chair to scramble up himself.

It had taken a lot of flirting and begging to persuade one of the plainer waitresses to tell him where the staff staircase was which would take them to the top floor (most people would have targeted the pretty waitresses, but the thing about flirting with pretty girls is that they tend to figure out what you’re up to and keep quiet, whereas the plainer ones are flattered by the attention and far easier to get information out of). It had taken a lot more work than that to get one of them to give him a key to said staircase, but seeing Harry’s hair flutter in the breeze as he stood on the edge of the rooftop and stared down over the sprawling hotel ground below, watching his excited expression as he looked down upon it all…it made all of Louis’ efforts worth it.

He didn’t turn around as Louis approached. His attentions were fixated on the land six floors below them, his green eyes flickering over every visible inch and committing all of it to memory – as if he thought that for some reason, the sprawling grey buildings and precisely-mown grass below were actually worth remembering. Louis couldn’t understand why something so simple and ordinary could possibly be worth such wide-eyed appreciation; Harry appeared to be catching his breath as he looked out upon it all, as if he was stunned by the sight, which confused Louis no end. He’d seen so many things that were more wonderful than that.

A dandelion puff, with all the seeds still clinging on, just after you’d picked it but just before you blew them all off. The patterns ice made on the car windows in the dead of winter. Seeing his baby sister’s fingers curled around one of his only a few days after she’d been born. The flames of the candles on his birthday cake when he was six years old, and they’d leapt entrancingly high. Harry’s smile, an expression that took his breath away and made him feel delirious and almost dizzy when his eyes sparkled just so and the angle was exactly right. Those things, he never wanted to forget.

He couldn’t understand how a car park, some roads and a couple of obsessively trimmed fields could possibly enthral Harry so much when there were things like that to be seen.

The wind caught Harry’s already messy hair and tossed it around on top of his head, throwing it into his eyes and then out again, toying with it, basically. Louis almost felt jealous; he had a sudden and overwhelming urge to start sifting his hands through the thick curls, destroying Harry’s hair even more thoroughly. It was an absolute mess, the wind only intensifying that, and Louis wanted his hands to join it in the effort…to twist in Harry’s hair and ruin the vague shape that it had been in, turning it into a dishevelled curly mess. He shivered a little bit at the very thought of it.

They didn’t speak for a while; Harry was still staring, wide-eyed, struggling to take it all in, and Louis stayed silent, allowing him to savour and enjoy it all without distraction, maybe taking in a little bit of it himself, although he was far more captivated by the expression on Harry’s face as he looked at it all in amazement, shaking his head so that his curls bounced. Not that he’d ever admit it, but Harry’s fascination had cast a kind of spell over them; the only sound filtering through the silence was the wind whistling, and the faintly drifting sound of traffic from far below. There was a mutual silence in the air, and Louis didn’t want to be the one to break it. For once, he was happy to stay silent.

“It’s beautiful,” Harry said. “I mean, I know half of it is…rooftops and gardens and the golf course that you’ve been banned from and trees and roads and people wandering around, and bins and shops
and alleyways and all sorts of rubbish, but it’s beautiful. All of it. Even the traffic…the way it glitters. The sun makes it all sparkle. Everything looks nicer when the sun shines, don’t you think?"

Louis nodded mutely, but Harry was still entranced by the picture he was painting, more for himself than anybody else. He almost seemed to have forgotten that Louis was there; almost dreamily, he was talking mostly to himself.

“Just being able to look down on all of it, and no matter how far you look, you can never see everything…there’s always something that escapes your notice, something you didn’t see… it makes me feel so small.”

Standing beside him, Louis slipped an arm around his waist and rested his head on Harry’s shoulder. “I never really thought about it like that. That’s quite sad.”

Harry came slightly out of his reverie; he turned to look at Louis in surprise. “No, I like it. The world is so huge, and there’s so many people in it…there’s so much more than just me, and you. So many more things for people to focus their attention on…why would they ever want to look at me? They won’t notice me. And that makes me feel a little bit better. You know I don’t like being seen – looking at all of that, and knowing how no one will ever see me, it makes me feel kind of…kind of safe. I know there’s only one person who actually looks at me and sees someone, only one person who really knows who I am. Only one person who wants to know, who I want to know.” He nuzzled the top of Louis’ head with his nose. “He’s right here with me, standing right by my side.”

It made Louis feel a little solemn to realize that Harry had just told one of his most innermost thoughts to him, especially as Harry was a really private person anyway. He gave him a tiny little squeeze, and Harry snuggled a little more closely against him, away from the cold bite of the wind. He felt like he ought to impart some deep, dark secret of his own in return, but none would spring to mind – except for the secret terror of being a slut, and somehow he didn’t think that was really appropriate for the situation. He stayed silent instead.

The lack of words was peaceful, drifting between them, and Louis felt like he could get used to this – standing with Harry, not saying anything, just enjoying his company and the way he smelled and felt and the way his hair tickled Louis’ cheek, but he had to stand on his tiptoes first to keep them on the same level. He liked that far more than he should.

“Louis?”

“Yeah.”

“I want to tell you something…”

“Okay.”

But Harry’s eyes were a little too serious, his expression a little too solemn, and Louis knew that he was going to say something which couldn’t easily be taken back and he wasn’t so sure he wanted to hear it. In fact, he had a pretty good idea of what Harry was about to say to him, and he didn’t want to hear the words leave his mouth – not like this. Not on top of a building, where the wind could so easily snatch the precious words away and ruin the first time they were said forever. Not when he was a little bit afraid that he might feel the same way, and he was frightened to think of what it might mean, and that he’d have to face up to it if he let Harry say it.

So he lunged forwards and glued his lips firmly to Harry’s, holding his waist, keeping him silent. Harry’s eyes flew open in surprise, and he gave a strangled noise as Louis kissed him, smiling into the kiss, enjoying the embrace. His eyes dropped closed again, and Harry moved with it, swaying in
Louis’ arms, their bodies pressed together, forgetting the words he’d been about to say, to Louis’ relief. As long as the words stayed locked inside, he felt safe. And now that he’d interrupted, it would take Harry a long time to work up the courage to even think about saying them again. For now, he was safe. Until Harry remembered and decided to bring up those three terrifying little words again.

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He decided they’d discuss it over dinner.

They’d settled down in a discreet table in the corner, and Harry was mischievously waving his stepdad’s apparently limitless credit card underneath the waiter’s nose whilst Louis rummaged in his wallet for the little slip of paper which confirmed that he had an all-expenses paid transaction in place. Between them, they would be able to fulfill their challenge: to sample one of everything on the menu.

It was all down to a reasonably harmless comment that Harry had made on the way to the dining hall about everything looking so good that he wasn’t sure he could choose, to which Louis had teasingly responded that maybe he should have a little bit of everything, just to be sure he didn’t miss out on anything. And nobody had been more surprised than he was when Harry looked down at him, sparkling with amusement, and said, “Okay then”.

The waiters piled plate after plate onto the table in front of them – in fact, they had to pull up several more tables so that there would be enough room for all of the food. A couple of people started staring at them, but for once, Harry didn’t even seem to notice; he was completely enamoured, his eyes fixed on Louis and a goofy grin plastered all over his face as he leaned his chin in his hand.

Eventually, the whispering staff tactfully withdrew, leaving them with their food, and Louis decided to begin with the spaghetti, seductively sucking a long strand of spaghetti into his mouths, between his pursed lips. He raised his eyebrows as the strand vanished into his mouth, and Harry hid a laugh behind his hand even as he surreptitiously slipped a napkin off the table and draped it nonchalantly over his lap. The gesture didn’t go unnoticed by Louis, who smirked at him and alluringly licked sauce off his lips, making Harry blush.

“Well, the spaghetti certainly gets my vote,” he announced, pulling another strand between his lips so that it dangled loosely from his mouth like a bird with a worm. Daringly, he leaned forwards, and after a moment’s hesitation, Harry dipped across the table, tilted his head and captured the end of the spaghetti between his own plump lips, secretly hoping that they would have a Lady And The Tramp moment and end up reeling each other in as they each sucked on one end of the strand, and end up kissing.

It didn’t work at all like that, of course – Harry bit down on the spaghetti a little too hard, his teeth catching on the strand, and it snapped, falling out of his mouth and swinging back towards Louis, where it ended up sticking to his neck like a ropey, sauce-coated vein. Louis giggled, and Harry giggled back, rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment while he averted his gaze so that Louis could peel the spaghetti off his neck with minimal embarrassment.

“Well, whoops,” Harry whispered, and Louis snorted with laughter.

“I suppose with our combined lack of coordination, we shouldn’t really have expected that to work.” Harry agreed, “Probably not,” and then he reached across the table to take Louis’ hand.

It was a pleasant surprise, and Louis felt his mouth twitch into a smile. “Well, someone’s getting
brave,” he commented happily, stroking the back of Harry’s hand with his thumb.

He flushed bright scarlet. “Oh, I – I just – I just thought – um –” Harry tried to snatch his hand away in embarrassment, clearly believing that Louis was making fun of him.

Determinedly, Louis hung on. “No, it’s nice. I’m just a little surprised, that’s all. I didn’t think you were one for PDAs. You’re kind of nervous, you know? I wouldn’t have thought you’d really want to hold hands in public, and stuff like that.”

“Who cares what people think?” Harry asked bravely. “If I want to hold hands with my boyfriend, then why shouldn’t I?”

You care, Louis thought, but he decided to keep it to himself. If anyone wanted to pick a fight with Harry, he most certainly wouldn’t let that slide. If anyone said so much as one cruel word about their hand-holding, that person wouldn’t have enough of a mouth left to say anything else once he was finished with them. Harry inspired almost frighteningly protective feelings in him; he almost felt a little bit shocked by it.

“Good on you,” he said instead, and punctuated it with an enormous grin.

Harry reached for another plate, pulling an enormous chunk of salmon towards him, which he tentatively prodded with his fork. He loved salmon, but he was a bit worried about having fishy breath – what if they wanted to kiss later on?

Apparently, Louis had no such qualms; a loud crunch made Harry flinch and his gaze flickered upwards in surprise, only to find Louis enthusiastically tucking into an enormous slice of garlic bread, munching animatedly whilst making noises of appreciation. Clearly, fears about bad breath weren’t going to be an issue as far as Louis was concerned.

“Are you going to pick at that all night, or can I have it? I thought we were going to have some of everything.” His teasing tone was a challenge, and as he reached for the large glass of red wine he’d ordered one of the servers to pour for him, cupping it in his hand and swilling a little wine around inside his mouth, Louis looked incredibly sexy, as well as a bit cheeky, too.

Well, Harry had been about to protest that he fully intended to have some of everything, he’d barely started yet, but he found himself being sidetracked by the alcohol which Louis was cheerfully downing like it was nothing more potent than Ribena. “Jesus, Lou, go easy on that stuff! I don’t want to be carrying you up three flights of stairs again!”

“That was down to a sprained ankle, not too much wine. Besides, this stuff is nothing. Compared to some of the things I’ve downed in my time, this is like water next to paint stripper. I’ve drunk things so fierce that they’ve taken the top off my head, mixed so many drinks that I might as well have chugged down a glass of bleach – don’t you worry about me. Relax! Enjoy it. I think maybe you ought to have a drink, loosen up a bit. What’s your poison? White? Red? A bit of champagne, maybe, being the posh little princess that you are? We’ve got all three.” Louis tapped a tinkling little tune on the three bottles, raising his eyebrows. “Live a little.”

“Just because I take care of my liver,” Harry grumbled, but he swiped the bottle of white wine and held it to his lips, downing a triple measure and violently choking on the unexpected dryness of it. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, then set the bottle down again. “Happy?”

Louis surveyed him over the top of his wine glass, blue eyes seeming to smoulder away at him like a bonfire heaped with sapphires. Something between amusement and lust had his whole expression dark and extremely intense, almost passionate in the way his irises were fixed on Harry’s wine-
dampened lips. “Exceedingly.”

“I’m never going to eat again,” groaned Louis.

“I second that.” Harry was clutching his stomach with one hand and tugging Louis along with the other, struggling to find their way to the toilets through the haze of nausea and tipsiness that had descended upon them like a cloud. “I think I’ve gone into a food coma. It was the profiteroles that did it; I knew I should have started taking it easy after the eighth. If I so much as look at another chocolate-based dessert again, I’m going to throw up.”

Louis had turned an extremely interesting shade of green at the very mention of that particular pudding, of which he and Harry had both had ample amounts. Their excuse had been that they weren’t sure whether they liked it or not, and should probably sample a couple more, but in the end Harry was reasonably sure they’d stuffed more profiteroles than anything else into their mouths in the whole night. “I don’t think I even need an incentive – pretty sure I’m going to throw up anyway,” he gasped. “If I redecorate the floor, please make sure I don’t lie in it.”

In spite of himself and his nausea, Harry managed a hoarse chuckle. “You want me to hold your hair back for you while you vomit, too?”

“Hell yes. What are girlfriends for?” Louis asked in a silly falsetto, batting his eyelashes. He’d never felt so sick in his whole life, but he was still up to clowning about. “You hold my hair, and I’ll make sure you don’t splatter sick all over your pretty dress.”

Harry stuck his middle finger up so violently that he almost shoved it up Louis’ nose. “Even when you’re struggling not to throw up, you still manage to be an absolute arse. I’m not sure whether I admire that or not.”

Rather than answering, Louis clapped a hand over his mouth, causing Harry to feel extremely glad that they’d just found a rather conveniently positioned bathroom. Shoving Harry away, the older boy let out a strangled groan and staggered through the door, stumbling inside and then slamming the door behind him. Several mangled retching sounds tore their way out of his throat mere seconds later, and Harry had to turn away to prevent his own stomach from overturning; he’d always been a sympathy sicker, and he didn’t particularly want to lose his dignity (or the contents of his stomach) to the floor. He breathed in shallowly, and through his mouth, so he couldn’t smell it.

When there was a break between Louis’ groaning, heaving and the horrible splattering sounds he was making, and the pause left silence between them, Harry leaned against the wall and closed his eyes, wondering if he looked quite as sallow and sickly as he felt. He certainly hoped not; it wasn’t attractive.

“Lou…don’t take it personally if I pass on our goodnight kiss tonight, will you?” he called through the door. “It’s just…you know…vomit breath. Nasty.”

He heard Louis manage a faint laugh from the other side of the door. “Don’t worry, the feeling’s mutual; I saw you eating copious amounts of that potato salad, you know the one filled with onions? Onion breath isn’t high on my list of turn-ons either. Let’s skip the snog, otherwise we’ll both fumigate each other to death. I’m sure we’ll both live without the kiss, just for tonight.”

Harry’s mouth quirked into an unwilling grin. “Has anyone ever told you you’re a total prat?”

“I had heard the rumour.” Louis’ voice echoed through the little bathroom; Harry could hear him
breathing shallowly, imagine him on his knees, clinging to the porcelain toilet bowl with both hands. It was hardly an attractive image, but he felt a rush of helpless fondness for the older boy anyway.

“Well, it’s true…you’re the biggest prat I’ve ever met. But you’re also the most amazing one.” Harry swallowed, gathering his courage, and then he managed, “I’m so glad I met you, Louis.”

Louis’ voice shook with the effects of his nausea as he weakly replied, “Harry… I’m so, so glad I met you too.”

Pause.

“Even if it is your fault that I’m crouching on a bloody freezing cold floor chucking my guts up because you decided to have one of everything on the menu, you twat. Stupidest idea I’ve ever heard in my life.”

Perhaps Harry ought to have been offended – but he wasn’t. He threw back his head and laughed uproariously, stunning himself with the depth and sincerity behind the laugh, eyes closed. Maybe laughter really was the best medicine, because he didn’t feel sick, or dizzy, or wobbly, and the ache in his stomach was from his laughter rather than from the unpleasant feeling that he was stretching from the inside to accommodate for the massive amount of food he’d eaten. His laugh bounced off the walls and hit him like a smack in the face, shocking himself with the loudness of it, but he didn’t think he could stop. He certainly didn’t have the inclination to. In the morning, he’d hate himself even more than he already did, when he became dehydrated as well as bloated and stuffed to the seams full of food, but right at that moment, he felt like he’d been drifting around on the planet for eighteen years without a soul, and the moment Louis had kissed him, he’d breathed life into Harry with his succulent lips. It was as if he’d just been born.
Harry stayed relatively calm as he walked down the stairs towards the pool, making sure to keep the bounce out of his step. His expression stayed carefully blank as usual, his mouth set into a flat line rather than the smile threatening to quirk his whole expression into delight. His hands were stuffed into the pockets of his jeans, the long fingers of his left hand carefully tangled around the key in his pocket with the plastic tag attached to it that read ‘*Honeymoon Suite*’ in elaborate gold italic lettering. It wasn’t the first time that he’d been thankful to his stepfather both for having an unlimited gold membership card, and to giving him a ridiculous amount of money in an attempt to win his favour (if anything, the gesture would have only made Harry more inclined to dislike him; he didn’t think much of having his affections bought. Still, he took the money anyway, knowing that Robin was a nice guy, if a little misguided). It meant that he’d been able to tip the receptionist, who today had been replaced by a woman called Jean, who had a bun and a stern expression and glasses that hung around her neck on a silver chain, and lipstick that matched her nail varnish exactly. Prim and proper as she looked, she’d accepted the money quickly enough, slipping it inside her bodice (Harry had suppressed a shudder at the sight of the folded notes being slipped down into her dress and sliding with a rasp down her wrinkly neck) taken his card, and with a few discreet whispers and a signature here and there, he’d scribbled his name on the dotted line, making it small enough not to be easily readable and completely different from his usual signature (no harm in being cautious after all) she’d handed him the Honeymoon Suite key and, with raised eyebrows, bid him good day.

He could well have imagined the slight twinkle of amusement in her watery blue eyes, or the slight raise of her eyebrows. In fact, the complete lack of reaction on the rest of her face led him to believe that perhaps he had – perhaps he was being paranoid, perhaps she hadn’t put two and two together. But really, he was a teenage boy who was shifting around like a child on Christmas Eve; they both knew exactly why he was booking the honeymoon suite, with its luxurious king-size bed and rather thick walls.

Hopefully, however, only one out of the two of them knew who he was going to be sharing it with.

Louis was waiting on the wall outside the hotel, swinging his legs and smiling at the ground as he too struggled to fight the urge to smile, clearly just as excited as Harry was, and perhaps even worse at hiding it. When it came to lying directly, Louis was a pro, whereas Harry melted into a stammering heap and struggled to force his way through a convincing sentence, all the while with a stupid, embarrassed grin on his face which clearly stated that he was telling a complete lie. In all other respects, though, Louis was nothing if not blindingly obvious.

He had his back to Harry, meaning that it was all too easy for Harry to creep up on him from behind and place his hands on the wall either side of Louis. It surprised him that the older boy hadn’t heard him coming, hadn’t sensed his approach – but it made things a bit more *fun*. Enjoying the advantage, and the wicked streak of boldness that seemed to surface whenever he was around Louis, he clamped his hands down on Louis’ shoulders, hard.

With a yelp, Louis flinched so hard he almost fell off the wall; if Harry hadn’t been clinging to him,
he almost certainly would have. “Hey,” he complained, giving Harry a nudge without turning around, “what was that for?”

Harry couldn’t help but laugh; amusement clogged his throat and for the next few minutes he simply laughed, enjoying Louis’ reaction. When he sensed that Louis had forgiven him, but had also gotten over the momentary amusement that he’d had over the situation, he leaned down to whisper into Louis’ ear, breath ruffling his hair, “I got it.”

Louis stiffened, his whole body going upright on the wall, and Harry momentarily enjoyed his surprise, too, standing so closely behind him that nobody would see the way he was surreptitiously running his hands up and down Louis’ back, astonished at his own presumption, and yet savouring the hard tension of Louis’ muscles underneath his hands.

“Oh,” Louis breathed. “Really?”

“Mm hmm.” Harry leaned in a little closer to murmur, “I had a little peek before I came down. It’s glorious, Lou, really. There’s an en suite bathroom, a huge flat screen HD TV, a gorgeous king-sized bed with two pillows on each side, a golden duvet cover, really fancy curtains…”

Louis snorted. “This is the room we’re planning on having sex in, and you’re focusing on the curtains? Don’t you think there are other…necessities…that should be taken care of first?”

It was Harry’s turn to “Oh”, but he frowned and bit down on his lip. “Whoops. I didn’t think about that part.” I was focusing on the romantic details. He didn’t say it out loud, but he didn’t have to.

Patting his pocket, Louis told him, “It’s a good job one of us came prepared. I got the stuff. And plenty of it, too.” He coughed, looking a little embarrassed. “I didn’t want us to be caught short…you know…in case we wanted to do it more than once…”

Despite his own embarrassment, Harry smirked. “You bought the whole store, then, I take it?”

“Pretty much. The girl on the counter looked at me like she thought I was a pimp – buying in bulk so I could give them to an army of prostitutes waiting outside.”

“That many, huh? You must have confidence in my abilities…what if I mess it up so badly that you never want to look at me again, never mind have sex with me?” Harry’s tone was light, but there was real worry behind his eyes, like he thought it might actually be an issue.

Louis swivelled around on the wall to look at him, swinging his legs over so that Harry stood in front of him; he tried to take the other boy’s hands, but Harry’s fingers were so enormous in comparison that it ended up looking more like Harry was holding his, rather than the other way around. He decided to begin with a kind lie – well, possibly a lie. More like a half-truth. “Hey. You won’t mess up. It’s near impossible to mess it up. Anyway, if I don’t like what you’re doing, you’ll know about it; I’m not the type to suffer in silence, don’t you worry.” He chuckled, then, seeing that Harry still looked anxious, cupped his cheek with one hand and stroked a thumb down his cheek. “You’re sure you’re ready for this? It’s a big step; you don’t have to do it.”

“No!” Harry protested fiercely, “I do want to. I really, really do. I just don’t want to do it wrong.”

“I’ll talk you through it if you need me to. It doesn’t have to be perfect, it’s just supposed to be fun. And it is, trust me. Anyway, it’s not like I’m into any of that kinky stuff – we’ll just do it, and it’ll be fine. And then afterwards we can have a massive pillow-fight with all four pillows!”

In spite of himself, Harry laughed, and jumping off the wall, Louis gave him an enormous hug. “Are we good?”
“Yeah,” Harry said, burying his face in Louis’ neck and breathing in deeply. “We’re good.”

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“Very, very, very, very, very, very good!”

Louis laughed. “That good, huh?”

Harry’s eyes sparkled. “Better.”

They had raced up the stairs to the honeymoon suite, holding hands so they could tug each other faster when one of them started getting breathless, laughing and being the stupid kids that they were. Every so often they would stop and just look at each other, and then Louis would grab Harry by the arms and yank him forwards and kiss him hard, while Harry clung to the banister so that they wouldn’t be in danger of reconstructing their first kiss, and Louis laughed against his mouth so that their teeth clicked together, and neither of them cared. Every so often, they would switch, and it would be Harry who leaned down to kiss Louis while Louis groped at the wall to keep them both safely in place, resisting the urge to let his hands gravitate to their usual place; buried deeply in Harry’s hair.

Still, their next kiss was different from the others; a little more heated, and Harry found himself being unceremoniously slammed up against the wall with Louis’ fingers raking almost desperately through his hair, his mouth moving along Harry’s collarbone and ravaging his neck, leaving blotchy purple markings on the pale skin that might as well have been giant signs marking his territory, reminding the whole world that Harry was his. Harry didn’t seem to mind; his clasped hands rested lightly on the back of Louis’ neck, and his head was tilted back to give Louis better access to his neck. Pulling his fingers free of Harry’s thick, curly hair, Louis moved them to his waist and grasped his sharp hip bones hard enough that there might be bruises later, but again, Harry had no intention of objecting.

Shoving a little bit too hard, Louis knocked Harry against the door of the hotel room so that he banged his head, and Harry flinched as blurry black spots trailed across his vision in response to the bang. Groaning an apology, Louis kissed him harder, stroking the back of his head with one hand and holding him even harder with the other, while Harry stroked his back and tugged at his jacket, not caring one bit about the knock; he was more interested in how Louis’ lips were moving on his, the smell of his hair and the gorgeous scent of his skin that was all Harry could smell because Louis was all up in his personal space, the heat of his body that made Harry feel hot all over, feeling a blush creep up his cheeks.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but didn’t we get this room so that we wouldn’t have to have sex in the corridor?” he breathed against Louis’ neck as Louis kicked his legs apart so that he could stand between them, as close to Harry as he could get.

“Don’t know if we’re gonna make it that far,” Louis told him breathlessly, kissing his neck again and again and leaving little damp shiny marks on his skin everywhere that his mouth touched.

Harry laughed in outrage and gave him a little shove, grabbing him by the waist and pulling him back against him when he staggered back a little. “Excuse me, I’ll have you know I have very high standards! I’m not having sex in any corridor, thank you very much.” He gave Louis a playful slap on the hip and Louis dug his fingers into Harry’s hipbone in response.

“Oh, you snob! What, is this well-polished high quality floor not good enough for you? Does it not meet your high standards? You spoilt little rich boy!”

“Well, obviously. I’ll accept nothing less than a four-poster bed with a duvet embroidered in Venice,
and I expect a fifty-piece orchestra to play sexy music while I cunningly seduce you with my wily ways.” He waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

“I’ll be the one doing the seducing,” Louis muttered, and then he started grabbing at the back of Harry’s trousers while Harry laughed at him and tried to slap his wandering hands away, albeit with very little effort behind the gesture.

“Do you mind? Reference previous comment about not doing it in the corridor – undressing comes under the same connotations. Leave out!” But he giggled like a schoolgirl while he said it, his hand grabbing the roving fingers of Louis’ left hand and holding it tight.

Louis groaned and Harry kissed him again, until Louis leaned away, his right hand still pawing frantically at Harry’s arse. “Ugh…I’m looking for the keys, you idiot!”

“Right, right, sorry!” Harry started digging around in his pocket, then shoved the keys into Louis’ hand with the sound of clinking metal. It took Louis a couple of tries as he shakily attempted to stab the key into the lock without tearing his gaze away from Harry – but then the door flew open, and all of a sudden, they were inside.

They collapsed onto the bed in a fit of the giggles, and Harry knew that it wasn’t really the right time for Louis to make him laugh, because they were going to have sex and sex isn’t funny, not really, not once you pass the age of about fifteen, but at the same time, they were going to have sex, and that was absolutely hilarious. He couldn’t stop the explosions of laughter; his whole body shook with them, and beside him, Louis was laughing too.

Halfway through a breathless giggle, Louis rolled over and caught Harry’s face in his hands, and kissed him, and all of a sudden things kind of got a bit more serious. Because one of Louis’ legs was trapped between Harry’s thighs, and a rather sensitive part of Harry was being pressed against by said leg, and Harry would have been lying if he’d said it didn’t feel good. In fact, he felt fantastic, so fantastic that he was pressing up against Louis to intensify the pressure, get a bit more friction. Louis bit down gently on Harry’s lower lip, and Harry gasped a little and then shut his eyes in embarrassment, his hands tracing the contours of Louis’ shoulders, tugging meaningfully at the collar of his shirt.

Louis practically ripped it off, seams audibly straining with little crackles as the fabric protested at his roughness, but then his shirt was on the floor and Harry was tracing the firm lines of his body with one finger, stretching up to press hot little kisses into the skin of Louis’ neck, while Louis’ shaking hands fumbled with Harry’s shirt. In the end, with a little growl, Harry pushed him off and tugged the offending article over his head, throwing it to the ground, and then there they were. Shirtless, and in each other’s arms. It wasn’t anywhere near enough. Harry ached to explore every inch of Louis’ body with his hands, his mouth, his tongue, trace every little line and stroke every millimetre of silky skin, commit every beautiful part of Louis completely to memory, and learn everything there was to know about how Louis’ body worked; he wanted Louis to do the same to him. He was hot all over, and shaking, too, and a courage he’d never known he had was making him pull on the waistband of Louis’ Chinos.

Louis removed those too, and all of a sudden, there he was. Straddling Harry with a knee on either side of his waist, sitting on him wearing nothing but a pair of tight black boxers, and Harry could see the shape of his bulge through the thin material which at that moment felt like it could have been inches thick, keeping him from touching Louis’ skin, from seeing what he truly wanted to be his, what he needed right now before he lost his mind completely.

Harry was determined to unleash it, but maybe, just maybe, he’d better take his trousers off first. So he started squirming and clumsily kicking, Louis’ shaking hands helping him remove them, until
there they both lay, trouser-less. The whole idea of it was kind of unnerving, and Louis seemed to sense his sudden anxiety, pressing his lips carefully to Harry’s, moving them slowly. Harry hoped that was an indication of how the rest of the night was going to go; a part of him wanted Louis to grab him and fuck him hard, and relentlessly, and make his expression burst into fireworks and sparkly things and make him come with such intensity that he struggled to breathe through it, but the more sensible part reminded him that it was his first time, he didn’t have much of a clue what he was doing, and he’d rather be gentle about it than do something wrong and ruin it all. Horror stories about torn anal walls and horrible sex diseases came fluttering to mind, doing nothing to reassure him. He focused on kissing Louis instead, deepening the kiss, reminding himself that this was Louis and he was kind of a little bit in love with him, and Louis would be careful with him, like he always had been.

Detaching his lips from Harry’s, Louis relocated them to his ear, fighting his way through layers of curls to get there and nibbling carefully on Harry’s earlobe, making Harry’s breath catch as he shivered longingly. “Okay?”

“Well,” Harry agreed, and his voice was strained, as he struggled to hold back an embarrassing kind of moan that he could feel bubbling in the back of his throat.

“You’re sure? Because we can stop if you –”

Even the thought of that made Harry feel a little faint; he thought he might explode if they didn’t act soon. “Christ, Louis. Don’t you dare. Don’t you…dare.” He swallowed very hard, closed his eyes, licked his lips. “Please. I’m fine. I just want…need….” Words were too clumsy to convey what he needed, so he settled for a kiss instead, laying it onto Louis’ shoulder. “You.”

Mercifully, Louis didn’t demand a contract in writing or a legally binding statement of some sort; he just got on with taking off his boxers, too – and there he was. Jesus. Harry couldn’t take his eyes off it – a dick, and not just any dick; Louis’ dick, and there it was, hard for him. And it was big, too; it looked far too big to be inside of him, how would it ever fit –?

“Still okay?” Louis’ eyes were wide and anxious.

Harry snorted. He wanted to be slow and careful, yeah, but he didn’t want to feel like he was being mothered, and it was starting to seem that way. “Shut up.” He dragged Louis down and kissed him again, clumsily this time, and felt Louis’ dick pressing against his stomach. Impatient now, he started struggling with his own boxers, wanting rid of them, wanting them as far away as possible, and Louis seemed to share the sentiment.

Before all too long, there they both lay, and Harry’s hands were everywhere, trembling as they discovered new parts of Louis’ body and explored them all, touching, stroking, even pinching at times when he got a little more daring. In response, Louis quivered and panted when he was doing things right, and if he wasn’t so keen, he would wrinkle his nose a little, so that Harry soon learnt which places he should touch, and which he should steer clear of. Louis seemed almost shy to do the same, so that in the end, Harry basically guided Louis’ hands to places on his body that he felt needed attention, and for a while there was just the slide of sweaty skin on skin and the odd low gasp as new sensations tugged wildly at them both, pulling sighs out of their mouths.

“Ready?” Louis asked eventually, his blue eyes wide and tight around the edges with worry, darkened as they were with desire – longing for Harry, which he would deny instantly given the first indication that Harry had changed his mind. “Are you completely sure about this? Because if you don’t want to do this, I’d completely understand; I just want to make sure that you’re comfortable with it. Are you absolutely certain –?”
A pale, long hand clamped down over his mouth, silencing him, and Harry half-groaned, “Shut up. No, I’m not absolutely certain, but I’m going to do it anyway, so please just shut up and get on with it! Preferably before I go insane?” He squeezed Louis’ elbow and smiled a little tiredly; the day was ending, and he was starting to feel a bit worn out. People still exhausted him – Louis less than most, but he was still flagging. “You worry about me too much, you know. I’m not as delicate and helpless as you seem to think.”

In response, Louis kissed him, his fingers tangling in the tight little ringlet curls at the nape of Harry’s neck; Harry’s mouth was warm and soft against his, and he felt a smile curving his lips upwards, making the kiss a little clumsy. “You, uh…you might want to roll over,” he said gently, “I mean, you can do it this way, but I think we’d probably better stick with the basics tonight.”

“Oh, right. Yeah.” Louis slid off him and knelt on the floor, rummaging in the pocket of his trousers for the little packet he’d stowed in there (he’d stowed about seven packets, actually, in case Harry happened to have particularly insatiable sexual appetites, but one would do for now) while Harry lay on his stomach with his head turned to the left, watching him and biting down on his lip while he appraised the toned golden brown skin of Louis’ body. He was more than ready for this now, to feel his delectable muscles against his back, his hot mouth wandering up Harry’s neck – but at the same time, he was still extremely worried about the rather impressive size of Louis’ dick and how on earth it was going to fit inside him.

Louis’ fingers, which he’d quickly slicked up with the lube that had also been crammed into his pocket, traced the outline of Harry’s hole, and Harry shivered and whined in response, closing his eyes and just letting Louis work. It was a testament to how much he trusted Louis that after only a few seconds, the first of Louis’ fingers slipped inside, and Harry’s silky warmth clenched around him a little and then, with a shudder, he relaxed all of his muscles. With his free hand, Louis squeezed Harry’s fingers.

“You’re doing amazingly,” he whispered. “You’re doing great.”

“More,” Harry commanded hoarsely. “Give me another one. Go on.”

“What, already?” Louis was shocked; he’d expected that it would take Harry ages to acclimatise to the new sensation. It had been that way with him on his first time.

“Yeah. Feels…” Harry shivered in pleasure as Louis’ finger shifted a little inside of him. “Good.”

Not waiting a second longer, Louis followed the first finger with the second, and waited as Harry shifted about a little, trying to get comfortable with the new feeling; feeling his fingers moving around inside Harry had Louis struggling to stay focused on the job at hand, and he was extremely tempted to give himself a quick squeeze, just for a little bit of friction. Still, he ignored the impulse and curled his fingers slightly, hearing Harry gasp and cry out as he rocked backwards onto Louis’ fingers, his mouth slightly open, eyes closed.

Louis leaned anxiously around him, trying to judge whether that reaction was good or bad. “Still okay?” he asked cautiously, preparing to remove his fingers.

“Oh, shut up! Better than okay, better than okay, you know that…” Harry pressed against him, and Louis was almost astonished to see his two fingers vanishing inside Harry all the way up to the knuckles. “Come on, one more, just to see… I need to see if I can take it…”

Almost agonizingly slowly, Louis carefully eased another of his fingers inside, and this time Harry wrinkled his nose a little as he stretched, staying perfectly still as he struggled to accommodate for it. A little daringly, Louis flexed his fingers, and Harry whimpered and grabbed at the wrist of his free
hand, fingernails digging into his tanned skin.

“Oh, shit, sorry –”

“Not – no, it’s fine…better than fine…oh, Louis, please…” Almost crying, Harry was quite literally pleading with him, and if that wasn’t the hottest thing Louis had ever seen in his life, he didn’t know what was.

“I’m going to have to – I’m sorry, I just need –” well, he couldn’t put a condom on one-handed, so he regretfully slid his fingers out, Harry’s answering whine making him shudder with desire as he ripped open the little packet and started rolling the condom over his dick. The curly haired boy was hesitantly probing himself with those long fingers, keeping himself open, and Louis abruptly changed his mind; that was the hottest thing he’d ever seen in his life, no contest.

He scrambled on top of Harry, lining himself up, and Harry took his fingers away as Louis pressed carefully up against his entrance. At first, for one horribly embarrassing moment, Harry thought it wasn’t going to work and there must be something wrong with him and they’d both gotten all worked up for nothing, and it was going to fail miserably and he was going to have to go and jump off a building in humiliation – and then Louis cried out and something inside Harry gave, and then Louis was inside, filling him almost completely up, and it was so overwhelming that Harry himself cried a little, wildly grabbing for Louis’ hand and squeezing it hard.

It was Louis’ instinct to once again ask if he was alright, but he was somewhat overwhelmed with the sensation of being buried so deeply inside Harry that he wasn’t sure he’d ever find his way out again, wasn’t sure he wanted to. Beneath him, Harry was shaking, and Louis whispered nonsense and trailed kisses across his shoulders in reassurance, trying to soothe him.

Once Harry’s shudders had decreased a little, and Louis felt a little less like he was torturing him, he carefully pushed himself up a little, sliding out ever so slightly. There was a moment’s expectancy as they both waited – and then he plunged back in with the sound of skin hitting skin, and Harry sharply breathed inwards and squeezed his eyes shut in response to the pain, whilst one of his hands fist in the duvet and the other scrabbled frantically at Louis’ arm as the older boy reached a new depth inside him, hitting his sweet spot with a hiss of exertion.

They both gasped a little at the sensation, and Harry even whimpered a little, his eyes watering from the pain which came with it. Louis’ hands were hard on Harry’s hips; there would be bruises there later, and his whole body ached with the need to keep touching Harry, to have Harry this close forever. Turning his head to try and steal another kiss from Louis’ lips, Harry managed a wobbly, dazed smile.

“You okay?”

“Stop asking me that. Do it again, Louis, please?”

Taking a deep breath, he pulled back again and thrust into Harry, a little more confidently this time, and had the satisfaction of hearing Harry cry out again. Suddenly feeling a lot more self-assured, Louis sped up, pounding into Harry over and over with fingers digging sharply into his angular hip bones and his face burying itself in Harry’s hair, inhaling, and his movements began blurring into one, a relentless in and out as he hit that perfect spot again and again, hearing Harry’s cries, feeling him shaking underneath him. It had been too long, really, and Louis was clumsy and breathless and struggled to keep up a steady rhythm, but Harry wasn’t complaining – the complete opposite, in fact. He was biting down on the pillows and the duvet and grabbing handfuls of fabric in an effort to try and keep his voice down, which Louis didn’t much like; by this point, he was past caring about Harry’s shyness and his adorable need to keep things on the down low. He wanted the whole world
to hear Harry’s cries, to hear his name filling Harry’s lungs and then bursting out because he couldn’t hold it in any longer, so that everyone would know what he was doing, so that he could have the pride of knowing that he had been the first person who’d ever made Harry Styles lose control of his previously unflattering silence.

He wanted it so badly that he resorted to rather dirty tricks to make it happen. He raked his fingernails down Harry’s back so that the younger boy trembled; grabbed fistfuls of his hair and ran his fingers relentlessly through it, not even bothering to be gentle, just mauling the thick curls and enjoying the way Harry struggled even more to keep his mouth shut with each rough tug that Louis gave on his roots. He bit Harry all over, leaving marks on his shoulder blades, neck, shoulders, back, anywhere he could reach, really.

Knowing full well that he didn’t have much time left before he was going to be no use to Harry whatsoever, or to anyone, really, Louis intensified his efforts, leaning forwards to whisper through Harry’s sweaty hair into his ear. He whispered dirty things, filthy words that would stay between them forever, that turned Harry’s pink cheeks scarlet and made his eyes close as he bit down hard on his lip, almost enough to make it bleed. And as Louis nipped on Harry’s earlobe, Harry’s green eyes flew open and he let out a strangled yelp, his whole body jerking as he reached his peak and then fell right over the edge of the highest proverbial mountain he’d ever climbed in his life, burning all over with an impossible heat, spilling messily all over the sheets, forgetting all of his earlier embarrassment and concerns that the maids would know what they’d been doing as if he’d never even thought of them, as if the thought had never even crossed his mind.

“LOU –”

He didn’t even get the whole name out before he was drowned out by Louis’ responding cry, as he slammed into Harry one last time and came, his nails digging hard into Harry’s shoulders as he clung to him, as if his ecstasy was going to rip him off the surface of the planet and Harry Styles was the only thing keeping him there. Eyes squeezing shut, he held Harry tightly until it was all over, and then as he carefully started to pull out, they both collapsed against the bed into each other’s arms. Harry was wide-eyed and shaking, shuddering through the aftershocks with his breaths short and heavy, coming in little pants.

Despite having muscles which felt like jelly, Louis managed to summon the strength to pull Harry on top of him; the boy nestled against him, cushioning his curly head against Louis’ ribs so that Harry’s head rested on his heaving chest. With shaking hands, Louis exhaustedly stroked his hair, noting that Harry was as sticky and sweaty as he was, and he smelled so different from usual; like sex and exhaustion and yet underneath all of that, without any of the cologne that he usually surrounded him like a misty cloud of scent, he smelled like himself, and then, amazingly, of Louis. It was incredible.

Lying in his arms, struggling not to fall asleep, Harry smelled like home.

“I love you,” Harry murmured sleepily, turning his head and snuggling into Louis’ chest.

It was the first time he’d ever said it, and Louis felt his heart slam painfully into the inside of his chest, like a punch from the inside. This was what he’d been aiming for all along; to make Harry fall in love with him, to make Harry have sex with him, to make sure that the little rich boy got something cheap for the first time in his life. But strangely, Louis didn’t feel victorious, as he had expected. He didn’t even feel a little bit pleased. In fact, he felt strangely empty, as he realized that all of a sudden, what he’d been working towards the whole holiday had finally happened, and he had no idea what he was going to do for the rest of it.

Then Harry kissed him hesitantly, almost shyly, on the collarbone, and Louis’ grip on his waist tightened in response as he draped an arm over him. It hadn’t been cheap, or meaningless, or any of
the things he’d originally intended for it to be. In fact, it had been absolutely incredible, and Harry was still nestled in his arms, staring up at him with a small, tired smile playing on his lips, Louis realized that he had absolutely no intention of throwing Harry away after he’d used him, nor had he really been intending to do that for quite a while. Because he’d always meant to trick Harry into falling for him, but somehow, when Harry had fallen, he’d dragged Louis down with him. When he fell, Louis caught him. And somehow, he was in love with Harry, too

The realization didn’t trouble him anywhere near as much as it would have done a couple of weeks ago; in fact, he found it strangely comforting. His purpose now was to be with Harry, he was finally admitting that he didn’t just want to be the guy who taught him never to let his guard down again. He wanted to be the guy who taught him that sometimes it’s okay to fall in love, to let someone past your boundaries…he’d been that guy to a certain extent already, and he wanted to carry on. His arms were still tight and protective around Harry, one of his hands reached up to carefully stroke his tangled hair, and he wondered whether they ought to have a shower or not before things started drying and getting itchy and uncomfortable; they couldn’t really sleep in the bed now, not in the state it was in, it wasn’t due to be changed until the next morning, and it seemed pointless to shower and then get back into the mess again.

Harry yawned adorably, and Louis sighed, lolling back against the pillows and staring up at the ceiling while his fingers tangled in Harry’s hair once again. He was too tired to think; his thoughts were muddled, he felt heavy and sleepy and stupid, and he just wanted to lie there and forget everything.

Forget that Stan would stare the next morning when he and Harry ambled down to breakfast hand in hand. Forget that Harry’s family might have a few words to say when they discovered that he’d spent the night in the honeymoon suite rather than in his own room, with a man they’d never spoken to before. Forget that no matter how innocent his motives were now, they had been anything but, and he didn’t want Harry to find out that originally, he’d been Stan and Louis’ idea of a quick and easy fuck.

A quick and easy fuck – his Harry! It was laughable. Harry had been the most difficult fuck he’d ever known; it had taken him days to even get the boy to look him in the eye, let alone make him take his trousers off. But now...now, he could scarcely imagine a single day passing by without Harry in it. Couldn’t think of how it would feel to go to sleep at night without hearing Harry’s voice rumbling sleepily on the end of the phone, mumbling an exhausted ‘goodnight’ before they both tumbled into bed. It was like being in love with Harry was all he’d ever known.

“I love you too,” he whispered, and as he said it, he felt something lift off his chest, a little of the tension drifting away. He snuggled down in their bed and closed his eyes, feeling the warm, soft weight of Harry’s body against him, his fingers trailing lovingly down Louis’ stomach, making little elegant swirls down his skin that tingled with every touch. He was in love. That was new. That was brilliant. “Harry…I love you too.”
Chapter 16

“Hey, stranger!”

At the sound of Stan’s voice, Louis instantly flinched, stopping dead, but he didn’t turn around, kept his back turned. It had been days since he’d so much as waved at Stan from across the courtyard, and he wouldn’t have been surprised if Stan had been sharp with him. He didn’t sound like he was annoyed about it, and holding grudges wasn’t Stan’s way, but Louis still felt a little cautious anyway; Harry had been blossoming so well lately that Louis was hoping he might bring the subject of his friends back up again soon, and that wouldn’t work if Stan was going to be ratty with him. If he was going to blame Harry for effectively stealing his best friend for most of the holiday, Louis wanted the chance to smooth things over before he tried to introduce them.

Stan was still calling after him, jogging towards him from beside the fountain. He didn’t sound mad. “Wait up, I want a word with you! I thought you’d taken the cab home and done a disappearing act on us; you’ve been disappointingly absent. Missing in action!”

“Yeah, sorry.” Louis turned and bravely made eye contact with him, to find that Stan seemed just the same as he always did, if a little breathless from running. It was a pleasant surprise. “How’s things with you?”

“Same old, same old. Hot chicks in abundance, and I managed to find myself some giant sunglasses so I can ogle without being caught. What about you? Any luck with your little curly haired summer-project?”

Louis was about to downplay it, and pretend that he and Harry had just become close friends, but then he figured, why bother? It wasn’t hard to see the way that they looked at each other; he’d started avoiding reflective surfaces lately due to the goofy, extremely gooey looks he was in the habit of throwing Harry’s way which made him feel very stupid when he spotted them on his face. Stan knew him too well; he’d catch on easily, and then want to know why Louis had denied it. And he was about to get given fifty quid, if he admitted it.

“Well, actually –”

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Harry hoped Louis would find it cute and not stalker-ish that he had been tailing him around for the last forty minutes.

They’d arranged to meet up later, but Harry had dared to venture out of his room and come across Louis in the stairwell, and he’d been covertly following him around the hotel for more than half an hour, enjoying the opportunity to see a side of Louis which wasn’t all banter and sex-hair and teasing expressions. Thinking that he wouldn’t have to be presentable for another couple of hours, Louis had been wandering around wearing an old threadbare hoodie, ripped and muddy espadrilles and what looked like plaid pyjama pants, with his hair hastily shoved off his face and looking like he might not have brushed it – a true bed head, and Harry most definitely liked it.

After their first extremely successful attempt at sex, they’d done it four more times, leaving Louis with hair which had clearly had Harry’s long fingers run through it with immense satisfaction – he’d smoothed it down a bit after they’d woken up and scampered back off to their respective rooms so that their travelling companions wouldn’t notice anything amiss, but somehow it had become a rumpled mess again, and Harry nodded approvingly. He liked it.
Here he was, following Louis around like it was a kind of game, seeing how he reacted with other people. He waved at the staff, grinned tiredly at people who greeted him as he walked by (apparently everyone in the hotel knew Louis, and gave him a warm salutation, even the old lady who smelt of cats who’d been coming to the hotel annually for as long as Harry could remember, and usually kept her fuchsia-painted lips in a stern line and never spoke a word to anyone). He was clearly tired out, but not at all snappy, and as he shuffled through the corridors and across the courtyard, he looked happy. Harry had made him feel that way, and he enjoyed knowing that the ridiculous goofy grin on Louis’ face had not only been put there by him, but was being kept there by him as well. It felt amazing.

Still, he only had limited amounts of self-restraint, and Louis was beginning to look very sexy indeed, with the dishevelled just-tumbled-out-of-Harry’s-bed look that he had going on, and he had decided that he was going to sneak up on him and jump out from behind a statue or something and give him a big kiss in front of everyone, just to shock him. His own face had lit up with a wicked grin at the thought. Noiseless in his Converse, he snuck towards Louis, hiding behind a decorative plant pot, and was about to call a greeting so that he didn’t frighten Louis completely to death when someone else beat him to it.

“Hey, stranger!”

Harry didn’t recognize the voice, but apparently Louis did; he stiffened, pausing but not turning to face the person who had called him, and Harry watched as a boy with feathery pale brown hair who he recognized as a friend of Louis’ jogged up behind him, clapping him warmly on the shoulder. He was about to eavesdrop in a conversation, he knew, but he couldn’t resist; he wanted to see how Louis reacted with his other friends, whether it was significantly different from the way he’d always treated Harry.

“Wait up, I want a word with you! I thought you’d taken the cab home and done a disappearing act on us; you’ve been disappointingly absent. Missing in action!”

Not missing; with me, Harry thought, and he couldn’t help but feel extremely pleased by the thought that Louis’ friends had noticed his absence, and it was caused because he’d devoted such a significant amount of his time to Harry.

Louis shrugged sheepishly. “Yeah, sorry. How’s things with you?”

“Same old, same old. Hot chicks in abundance, and I managed to find myself some giant sunglasses so I can ogle without being caught.” A cheeky grin bounced between them, and Louis returned it, laughing slightly as he slapped his friend lightly on the arm. “What about you? Any luck with your little curly haired summer-project?”

That caused Harry to frown in bewilderment as he struggled to comprehend what had just been said. Only a few simple words, but they made him feel funny – a little bit dizzy. Curly haired… summer… project? Continuing to listen, he bit down hard on his lip, listening hard so that he wouldn’t miss a single word.

Almost without noticing, he’d wrapped one of his curls around his finger and was holding it tightly in a silky chocolate brown ring around his index finger.

“Well, actually –”

“Ha! Don’t tell me,” the other boy crowed delightedly, “no luck, am I right, or am I right? He turned you down again, didn’t he? You’ve got your work cut out with that one, Lou; I think you should accept that you’re not going to get anything out of him.”
“Oh? And what makes you so sure that I’ve not gotten anything out of him?”

The boy snorted. “Please. You’ve got ‘sexually frustrated’ written all over you, Lou! I can read you like a book.”

The expression on Louis’ face could only be described as smug. “In that case, maybe you need to go back to primary school and learn to read a bit better, Stanley, because you’ve got completely the wrong end of the stick. My summer project, as you like to call him, is going to get me an A-grade. And fifty quid.” He held out his hand and raised his eyebrows. “Pay up, Lucas.”

Stanley (or Lucas’?) mouth fell open in awe. “No!”

“Oh, yes.”

“You’re joshing me?”

“I most certainly am not joshing you.”

In spite of himself, Stan looked almightily impressed. “There’s no way you got into those solid gold boxers. Never. You’re not telling me you got into those swish designer pants after all that trouble you had with him? How the hell did you do it?”

Louis grinned. “They call it charisma, I believe. And a lot of luck, and some timely cooperation on his part. He’s nowhere near as reluctant to put out as he’d have liked me to think, trust me.”

“And was he worth it?” asked Lucas/Stanley eagerly. “I mean, it’d be pretty gutting after all that effort if you got into his posh four-poster bed and then found out he was a crap shag, right?”

“He wasn’t. He was excellent in the bedroom, as a matter of fact.”

“For a beginner?”

“For anyone! I got a bit of a shock, actually. Once he got over the nerves, he was incredible. He’s so lovely, Stan, you should have been there – well, not literally, that would be weird, but you know what I mean! He’s so sweet, and…” Louis hesitated, clearly wondering which details he ought to divulge and which he should keep to himself. “He’s brilliant,” he whispered.

Stan grinned at him, looping an arm around his shoulders in a matey way, giving him a squeeze. “Not bad, then, for a fifty pound fuck.”

“Especially since I’m the one getting the fifty. Come on, hand it over. I won fair and square.”

Rolling his eyes with a long-suffering sigh, Stan delved into his pocket, fished his wallet out and rifled through it until he found a crumpled fifty pound note, which he unceremoniously shoved into Louis’ hands.

“Well, I don’t know how you did it, but a bet’s a bet. Well done.”

“Thanks. But if I’m honest, I got a lot more than a fifty pound note out of it…”

Harry turned away. He couldn’t bear to hear any more. His stomach was convulsing and the whole world had grown cold and hard; his shook his head back and forth with his hands over his ears, stuck in a bottomless pit of denial. Their horrible words bounced around inside his skull, seeming to mock him; he could feel the horrible sound of them reverberating through him so that the newly tender parts of his body ached.
Parts of his body that had been made tender by Louis’ wandering hands, the light press and bite and suck of his mouth, the hard grasp of his hands as he held Harry against the bed and made love to him. And he’d thought that Louis did love him, in more ways than one. How wrong could you be? It was almost laughable, really. He’d given Louis everything he had, and Louis had taken it, and it had all been over some cheap joke! Some infantile bet he had with one of his mates, and Harry had allowed himself to be suckerked in, fallen for every line Louis fed him, hook, line and sinker. He’d never trusted anyone before, and this had only taught him what he’d always thought before Louis came stumbling into his life and clumsily knocked all of his walls down: trust no one, because it all goes horribly wrong in the end. If you trust someone, you’re basically giving them the key to your heart – the piece of thread that they need to unravel you entirely and leave you a broken mess on the floor. For the life of him, he’d never once thought that Louis could be capable of that.

Showed how well he knew the guy he was in love with, didn’t it?

His fingers dug into his ears, as he blatantly refused to listen to another word of it and covered his ears with his hands. Sliding out from behind the statue, he silently picked his way through the bush he’d been lurking behind and vanished out of sight, practically running away from Louis because he couldn’t bear to look at him anymore.

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“Go on, then – enlighten me. What else did you get other than fifty-quid of my hard-borrowed money? A soul mate? True love?” Stan was sending him up, but Louis didn’t much care.

“I don’t know. Maybe. I think I am in love with him, Stan. I care ridiculous amounts about the kid; I’d have given up on him ages ago if I didn’t. He’s shy, but seeing him open up makes me the happiest I’ve ever been. He trusts me and he opened himself up to me –”

Stan snorted.

“Shut up! You know what I mean. He’s not just the shy snooty kid everyone thinks he is, Stan, he’s brave and brilliant and more than a match for me. He makes me laugh, he infuriates me, he got me down from a tree when I was drunk and leapt into a lake with me and he’s –”

“Gone.”

Confused, Louis frowned at him. “What?”

“He’s gone. He was stood behind that statue watching us until a couple of seconds ago, but he just left.”

Louis’ cheeks burned. “What? Shit, Stan, why didn’t you tell me?” He was starting to panic at the thought, turning desperately around and scanning the grounds for a head of dark curls. “Oh, God, what if he heard us? I was just going on about what a great lay he was and how he was hot and I made him sound like some cheap holiday fling! If he heard that he’ll –”

“Relax, he didn’t hear us! He was way over next to that ugly sculpture thing, there’s no way he could have heard us from all the way over there. You’d have to have elephant ears to pick something up from that kind of distance.”

“Really? You’re sure?”

“Positive,” Stan said confidently. “He’d never have picked up on it from all the way over there.”

“Yeah,” Louis muttered, his gaze dropping to the ground in shame. He couldn’t believe he’d just
talked about Harry like that, objectifying him, making him sound like nothing so that he could play the big man who fucked the rich kid. It was exactly the sentiments and the motives he was supposed to have had from the beginning, but if he’d ever felt that way he most certainly didn’t now, and the thought of Harry hearing even one word of that…it made him feel ill to think of it. Harry didn’t trust people in the first place; it would have destroyed his newly built but fragile confidence completely if he believe that the one person he’d trusted implicitly was laughing behind his back and thinking of him as a stupid holiday fling that he would throw away afterwards like one of the condoms they’d used. Because Harry was so much more to him than that, and he couldn’t bear the thought of the boy thinking otherwise. “I hope so.”
Chapter 17

He let himself into Harry’s room trying not to look either guilty or too nonchalant, but an appropriate mix of both, and to his surprise, Harry didn’t appear to be in it, although the open and half-packed suitcase had his stomach tightening with unease. Shrugging, Louis sat on the edge of Harry’s bed and started swinging his legs absentmindedly, waiting for Harry to return from wherever he’d gone.

The door of the en suite bathroom opened far too quickly, the confrontation coming far faster than Louis would have liked, and Harry came wandering out with damp hair wearing jeans, a loose hoodie and carrying toothpaste, a facecloth and a towel in his arms. When he spotted Louis, he stopped dead, his cheeks flushed, and Louis saw that although he’d clearly had a shower to try and clean himself up a bit, his eyes were red, eyelashes spiky, and Louis could see from his trembling lower lip that he’d been crying. He could also see from the way Harry’s jaw suddenly flexed that he was extremely worked up, and he didn’t know whether that was going to take the form of anger or just sporadic crying.

The silence stretched between them and Louis quickly worked out that Harry’s reaction was going to be tailored accordingly to how he initiated the conversation, so he decided to tread very carefully. He also decided to dive straight in there – like ripping a plaster off, it was better to just get it over with so that the stinging faded quicker.

“Hey,” he said softly.

Apparently, that was completely the wrong response, because Harry’s whole face darkened and he stalked forwards, screwing the towel up into a ball, slammed it into the suitcase and then turned on him. He was shaking, with a depth of emotion that Louis had never even known could find a place on Harry’s usually calm face, and Louis anxiously resisted the urge to back away from him – it didn’t take a genius to work out that Harry would be even more infuriated by that.

“Is that all you can say? The most eloquent thing you can think of? The only thing that’s come into your head that you feel you should say? Hey.” Harry’s mouth contorted around the word, and Louis was wasn’t sure whether he was more terrified or turned on to hear Harry’s voice sound so bitter and twisted.

His teeth sunk into his lower lip as he asked quietly, “What would you have me say instead?”

Harry gave a short, humourless laugh, and his nostrils flared with barely restrained rage. “How about, ‘hey there, summer project’? Or even better… ‘what’s up, fifty-pound fuck’?” And then all of a sudden, he lost his hold on the simmering anger that had been the only thing keeping him from acknowledging just how hurt he had been by those thoughtless, awful words, and his eyes were wet, his vision blurring like he’d borrowed someone’s glasses and shoved them onto his nose. His instinct was to wipe them away, but he held his head high and kept his hands by his side; he had very little left in the way of pride, but he was holding on to the tatters of whatever dignity he had left; he wouldn’t give Louis the dignity of seeing him wipe away his tears.

Louis’ mouth fell open. “Oh, God.”

“Funny,” Harry said viciously, “That was what I said. When I was letting you make love to me, or at least, that’s what I thought you were doing. Makes me feel quite ridiculous now. There’s nothing loving about what we did. Did you have a good laugh afterwards? Did you let me give you everything I had and then laugh?” He was trembling, and God, it was the most awful, heartbreaking sight Louis had ever seen. “You do realize that I never even kissed anyone before you, I didn’t think
I ever would. I didn’t realize I could feel this way about anyone. And you took everything I had, and then you scampered off to collect your betting money.”

“Harry, please –” Louis reached out to grab his arm, maybe slide down to his wrist, maybe hold his hands, but the moment his fingertips grazed Harry’s forearm, they both felt a kind of spark leap between them, warmth buzzing between their skin, and Harry jerked away with a cry.

“No! No, don’t you touch me, don’t you come near me! You’re going to hear me out, you fucker, if it’s the last thing I do, I’m going to make you listen to every word of what you did to me!” Agitatedly, Harry turned away and started pacing up and down the room, the hands that Louis ached to hold hands clenched into fists, knuckles white. That was maybe the saddest thing of all, because he looked like he wanted to punch Louis, but Louis knew he didn’t have it in him to hit someone.

“Imagine you’ve been alone all your life, with nobody to talk to, and even being near people completely leeches your energy – imagine that, just for a second! Imagine that you like it that way, that’s just how you are, and you don’t expect to ever find comfort in anything else, anyone else. Which is perfectly okay with you, you don’t mind that. And then you meet someone who’s interested in you, who wants to understand you and won’t give up when you push them away like you pushed away everyone else, who won’t let you push them away! And they look at you and talk to you like you’re the most amazing person they’ve ever seen.” His voice cracked a little, and he turned away, hiding his face from Louis. “Think about how that would feel. How much hope that would give you, how special you would feel, like the world ignored you and you ignored it but there was one person out there who thought you were too amazing to ignore?”

His eyes were like green mirrors, and Louis hated seeing himself reflected in them, because he felt like Harry had wrenched a huge chunk out of his chest with every broken word, and yet his own face just looked stunned, not horrified or agonized or desperately regretful, like he felt.

“I never realized I wanted somebody to love me until you came along, Louis. Until you taught me that I can get along with people, reminded me to enjoy company other than my own. So I’m sure you can understand why that meant a lot to me.” Harry closed his eyes and took a couple of slow, deep breaths. “Do you know why I struggled to trust you in the beginning? It’s because I’m that way with everyone! I find it hard to trust people, I hate exposing myself to people, that’s who I am. So I want you to know that I trusted you implicitly when I agreed to go to that hotel room with you. And everything we did…it means something to me. I thought it meant something to you, too. Apparently I was just fifty quid and a generous helping of sex to you. Do you realize how much it hurts, finding out that the only person you’ve ever really trusted was stabbing you in the back and laughing while he did it?”

“Laughing? You think that’s what I was doing?” Louis could have laughed right then; it was all so ridiculous. “Do you realize how it feels to have to live up to your mates’ expectations of you? I’ve been branded as a slut back home, and that’s how they expect me to be, even the people who know me best. All this was meant to be a stupid joke, it was supposed to be fifty quid and some sex, but the joke was on me, because I started caring! I’ve never felt this way about anyone –”

His hand flew out to touch Harry again, but once again Harry recoiled, and then he spat more furious words like an angry cat, hissing them right in Louis’ face.

“Neither have I – I’ve never hated anyone so much as you. All that I had, and it was yours…I gave it to you, and now…I had to listen to you and your mate laughing over what we did, when I thought it was special, when I thought it meant as much to you as it did to me! Why did you do it, Louis? What on earth makes you think it’s funny to toy with people like that? What kind of sick person are you, to lure someone in just for sex?”
“A cheap one!” Louis yelled, “a cheap, nasty whore, like everyone’s always said! I’ve been stuck in that rut for as long as I can remember, and you didn’t look at me like everyone else does, you never would. Even if you’d known, you never would have done that! And maybe I liked knowing that someone didn’t think I was only out for sex, maybe I liked finding out for myself that I wasn’t! Have you ever doubted yourself like that? Have you ever had people sling ing mud at you for so long that it stuck, and even when you washed it off and looked in the mirror you could still see it? Still feel it clinging to you?” He buried his face in his hands, and said in a muffled voice, “I’ve only found one thing that ever managed to wash that mud away, and now he’s picked up the mud and started throwing it at me as well.”

“I am not the enemy here. I didn’t start any of this. Why could you not have left me alone, hmm? Why did you have to make me fall in love with you? I won’t forget this. When I was seven, my best friend, the only real friend I’ve ever had, she moved away, and I haven’t seen her since. I don’t even know where she is right now. I’ve never found her on Facebook, never got her number, I can’t even remember where she told me she was going – but I never forgot about her. I still miss her. Sometimes I wake up in the morning and I still ache when I remember her, because when I get attached to people, I can’t let go. No matter how much they hate me. Or how much I hate them. You’re going to haunt me for the rest of my life; you’re going to be a splinter in my thumb that won’t come out and never stops stinging. Are you satisfied? Does that make your fifty quid worthwhile?” Pride forgotten, he was crying freely now, and a couple of tears flew wildly and hit the floor as he rummaged around in his wallet. Pulling out several notes, he hurled them into the air like giant rectangles of confetti. “There you go! Fifty quid! Seventy! One hundred! One hundred and fifty, two hundred, two hundred and fifty – go on, pick them up! Because if what I thought was our love was only worth a fifth of them, then you might as well have come up to me and asked for them instead. I’ve got plenty to spare, I wouldn’t even miss them. But you know what I will miss? I’ll miss you. And that’s possibly the worst thing of all, because I absolutely despise you and yet I don’t know how I’m going to carry on without you.”

He whirled around and continued stuffing things into his suitcase, scouring the room in search of his belongings and chucking them all onto the bed where some of them missed the open case, some didn’t. Louis watched him in miserable silence, his own cheeks wet by that time, and he longed to throw his arms around him but knew that Harry would only fight him off –

He didn’t care; he had to try. He reached out blindly, his hands slid down Harry’s arms, holding his elbows, he yanked Harry forwards and slammed him against his chest, and felt Harry smack him on the chest with the flat of his hands, slapping him over and over again as he sobbed wretchedly onto Louis’ shoulder, a constant stream of I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you over and over again… he even bit Louis’ collarbone at one point, a vicious nip that made Louis flinch and turned him on all at once, and Louis let him do it, holding him tightly in the fiercest hug he’d ever given.

Harry buried his face in Louis’ chest, and Louis could sense the conflict that had him struggling to decide whether to accept the comfort or to push him away. In the end, he hugged Louis hard before stepping away from him and angrily wiping his eyes as he hurled more of his belongings into the suitcase, flipped the lid shut and stood staring at the wall in silence.

“I don’t know why I just let you do that. I hate you. It’s so stupid, I absolutely despise you, you did this to me and yet you’re the only person who can –”

Louis said pleadingly, “Harry, please. Let me explain.”

“You’ve explained enough.” Harry hauled his suitcase off the bed and onto the floor with a thump, picked up his jacket and then stared at the floor. “I can’t stay here, not after this. I’ve told my mum I’m going home early. She can’t stop me.” His gaze flickered upwards onto Louis’ face, unflinching,
damp yet collected. “And neither can you.”

“But Harry –”

“But nothing!” Harry yelled. “We’re through!”

He stormed over to the door and hurled it open, and as if he couldn’t help himself, he spared one last glance for the boy he’d irrevocably fallen in love with, who he was determined he would never see again even though he knew he was going to see him every single day, tantalizingly hovering in the back of his mind.

Louis almost expected him to say something bitter yet predictable, like “have a nice life, Louis” or “you won’t see me again” or “enjoy your fifty quid”. Yet Harry didn’t even give him the relief of having some other words to hang onto rather than “we’re through” – he turned his back on Louis and walked straight out through the door, leaving Louis to sit stupidly on the floor and stare numbly after him, unable to believe that this was it. Harry was really walking out.

He just had walked out, and Louis was too stunned to even think about trying to stop him.
Chapter 18

Why did I let him go?

That was all Louis’ rather muddled brain was capable of thinking as he sprinted for the foyer of the hotel with an armful of roses that viciously pricked his tanned forearms. He’d already sent the florist who had the rest of the flowers around to the front entrance and ordered him to fill Harry’s taxi with them – not only was it an adorable romantic gesture, but it’d be a good preventative measure to stop Harry from getting into the taxi; nobody wants to share a backseat with a mound of thorny plants.

He’d spent that damned fifty quid on the fastest mass delivery of roses known to man, and he was glad to see it gone. It was a symbol of his own betrayal, and he couldn’t bear to have it in his wallet, pocket or anywhere on his person anymore. Seeing it vanish into the florist’s hand as he appeared in the doorway had been the greatest relief of Louis’ life, even if he was technically now broke again.

Sprinting outside, he could see the taxi waiting by the front of the hotel, and he could see crimson petals crammed up against the windows. The engine was running but the doors were closed, and Louis couldn’t help but admire the way Harry had clearly crammed himself into the taxi despite the imminent danger of being scratched to shreds by thorns. Despite himself, he found Harry’s stubborn obstinacy kind of cute, even if it was sort of making his job harder.

The taxi could leave any second, so without any regard for anyone who might have been in his way, Louis sprinted for the vehicle with the bouquet of roses in one hand and the other hand outstretched, and he grabbed the door-handle and yanked it open with a triumphant cry.

“HA –”

Empty.

“RRY”

About twenty roses fell onto his feet, but he could quite clearly see that Harry was not in that taxi, and he struggled to process that fact for several seconds. As soon as the horrible truth had sunk in, he found himself staggering to the front of the vehicle and tapping aggressively on the window; when the driver wound it down, he seemed almost as annoyed as Louis was distraught.

“Is this your idea of a joke, mate?” he demanded angrily. “Filling my cab with roses? You think this is funny? I’ve just had this cab cleaned; if you’re going to be filling it with stems and leaves and bits of petals, you can pay to have it cleaned!”

“Didn’t somebody order this cab?” Louis asked faintly. “Under the name of Harry Styles?”

“Wrong taxi,” sneered the driver, “Styles is being picked up on the other side of the forecourt; it came up on my radio but someone else got the shout. Now get these bloody roses out of my cab!”

Of course, Louis ignored him. He leapt away from the window, his head snapping up, and he saw the other taxi far too late as it began to pull away from the kerb on the other side of the hotel. In fact, he almost thought he saw a curly head pressed up against the window as the vehicle slowly headed out into the car park and towards the exit.

Louis gave chase.

Hollering and waving his arms, he ran after the taxi as fast as he could, faster than he ever
remembered running in his life, ignoring the instant stitch that flared sharply into life against his ribcage in response to the sudden burst of speed. His feet thudded on the pavement as he ran desperately after it, shouting “Stop! Wait, please, please, no, stop, stop! You’ve got to stop!” People were staring, but as always, Louis couldn’t have cared less about that. The taxi was gathering speed and paying no attention to him yelling and running desperately after it, and still Louis ran, struggling to speed up himself. His legs ached, his ribs ached, his stomach ached, he ached, and he leapt over flowerbeds, stumbled through a decoratively placed bush, trampled some begonias and ignored the cries of outrage as he ran straight through a family of five, nearly knocking one of the children right over.

If he could make himself heard, the taxi would stop, the boy would tumble out and fall straight into his arms, and they’d have a movie-typical reunion with a musical montage while they hugged each other hard enough to break bones and sobbed onto each other’s shoulders. Sucking in a breath, Louis summoned the last bit of air he had at his disposal, snatching it into his lungs, and let it loose with a long, aching cry of “HARRY!”

He was so determined not to give up, feet pounding frantically on the pavement in the espadrilles that were totally unsuited for running, that as he watched the taxi pull out of the car park, out of the hotel gates and then turn the corner and vanish from sight, his legs couldn’t seem to stop. In fact, he kept running, as if he could still catch it even though it would have reached speeds of around thirty miles an hour now and he only managed to stop when he reached the gate and had to hold onto it and steal the support that his now wobbling legs couldn’t give him; he hadn’t run that fast since high school, and he was decidedly unfit after all this time. Groaning, he bent almost double, choked another breath and then closed his eyes in helpless defeat as he struggled to take a deep enough breath to fill his lungs again, when it felt like they’d been punctured and he would never breath again.

“Harry…”

“Louis!”

His head jerked, but it wasn’t the curly-haired boy who was calling him. The disgruntled taxi-driver with his cab full of roses had drawn up to the pavement that he was standing on, and surrounded by scarlet blossoms overflowing around him, Stan had poked his head out of the window and was waving frantically at him. Louis stared.

“Stan? What the hell are you doing?”

“Get in, loser! We’re going on a wild goose chase!” Stan dramatically threw the door open, throwing roses all over the pavement while bystanders tutted in disapproval, and Louis staggered over to the vehicle and was hauled in, thrown down on the rose-covered back seat, and then the door slammed and Stan was commanding the driver, “follow that taxi! I botched things up for you and Harry in the first place,” he explained breathlessly to Louis, “I’ll be damned if I’ll let you lose him now. I’ve never seen you get all mushy over a guy like that before now, and I doubt it’ll ever happen again, so step on it, driver! We need to catch that cab!”

“You’ll be lucky,” came the slightly less irritable reply, “guy who owns it drives like a maniac.” But the taxi accelerated, and they started picking up speed as they whooshed down the road in pursuit, Louis grabbing Stan’s arm and squeezing it hard.

“We’ll catch him,” Stan promised, “even if we have to hijack that plane.”

Louis laughed semi-hysterically. “Let’s hope it won’t come to that.”
They arrived at the airport in remarkably good time, and the taxi which had brought Harry was still hovering by the entrance, having dropped him off. Louis could barely wait to hop out of their own taxi, and he bounced impatiently up and down on the balls of his feet while Stan shoved a twenty pound note into the driver’s hand.

“Thanks, mate. You were magnificent. Keep the change.”

Bearing in mind that the fare ought to have cost them a tenner at the most, the man’s eyes crinkled as he grinned. “No problem. Happy to help.” His gaze flickered to Louis. “I hope you find him,” he said seriously. “I really do.”

“If we stop hanging around talking that might be a start,” Stan said, and then he grabbed Louis by the wrist and started dragging him off towards the crowd.

They staggered through droves of people, craning their necks, calling out, and all the while Louis kept a sharp eye out for a mop of dark curly hair. Beside him, Stan was leaping manically up and down and pointing at strangers who didn’t even slightly resemble Harry, excitedly demanding “is that him? Is that? That? Is that him?”

Louis quickly realized that it would be a far better idea if he just completely ignored Stan; he didn’t even turn around when Stan pointed to the girl with the wavy pageboy bob and asked if that was Harry, he didn’t so much as blink when Stan tugged on his sleeve and pointed to a spotty curly-haired fourteen year old languidly blowing pink bubblegum bubbles by the perfume shop. But he scanned the crowd determinedly, knowing that it was all a question of knowing where to look.

Unfortunately, he didn’t have the faintest idea where he was supposed to look, so he was pretty much screwed.

He was standing on his tiptoes and trying to spot Harry amongst the line of people slowly trickling through the passport checks when someone bumped into him, jostling him slightly and whacking him in the elbow with their suitcase, and he made a small, outraged noise and turned with a frown to snap at them.

“O-oh, s-s-s–” stumbling over their words, the stranger backed away wide-eyed, and Louis’ heart leapt – who else did he know who struggled to string together a two-word sentence in the presence of strangers?

The girl with the waist-length honey-blonde hair seemed embarrassed by the intensity of his disappointed gaze. Blushing, she turned and started hurrying away, and Louis deflated visibly in defeat. He buried his face in his hands.

_I’ll never find him_, he thought hopelessly.

Meanwhile, Stan was bouncing excitedly up and down beside him. “Is that –

Louis’ head shot up; he’d lost his patience. “No, Stan,” he snapped, “that is not –”

It _was_ him.

Charcoal grey hoodie. Dark blue skinny jeans, dirty black Converse, and a black pull-along suitcase trailing along behind him. But it was the messy curls falling over his eyes and the familiar stooped
shoulders that really made Louis completely certain, and he leapt away from Stan and shoved past the group of babbling American tourists that stood between him and –

“Harry!”

He was startled; his head shot up in surprise and he gained a distinct rabbit-in-the-headlights look, as he started backing away like he thought he’d done something awful. Louis sprinted for him without sparing a moment’s thought for how crazed he must look, and Stan huffed and puffed behind him as he struggled to keep up, less adept at manoeuvring around people and nowhere near as motivated. As he crashed through the middle of families, fell over suitcases and slipped on the wet floor whilst struggling not to trip over ‘WET FLOOR’ and ‘TRIP HAZARD’ signs, Louis was fully aware that he looked like some kind of madman, and he couldn’t have cared less.

He reached Harry quite quickly bearing in mind all of the obstacles in his way. Before Harry could do anything other than stare at him open-mouthed, Louis hurled his arms around the younger boy and pulled him against his chest, hard enough to knock the breath out of them both. Taken aback, Harry hesitated for a moment or so and then he sank into the hug with a low sigh of relief. Louis traced careful circles onto the other boy’s back, through the soft material of the hoodie, then he pulled back to look him in the eye and pressed their foreheads together.

Moments later he was crushing Harry against his chest again and there they stood, fiercely hugging each other, while Stan looked on and everyone else stared with momentary interest before turning back to what they had been doing, which would be a great relief for Harry: if anyone started staring and, as he saw it, invading this private moment that he really wanted to keep to themselves, he would absolutely hate it.

“I’m an idiot,” Louis breathed against his shoulder. “I’m a complete and total idiot.”

“I already knew that,” teased Harry; “I looked it up in the dictionary and there was a picture of you as the definition.” He dared to kiss Louis on the forehead, and Louis’ breath quickened in response.

“I know I messed up, and I should have been truthful with you from the beginning. I’ve got an awful lot of explaining to do. But please, you can’t just leave. Not now. I love you. Please… hear me out. I want you to stay.”

Harry squeezed him, hard. “I don’t want to go anywhere without you. You hurt me, Louis. It’s going to take me an awful long time to get over that, I hope you realize that.”

“I can wait. I can wait forever. Just… don’t go home, Harry.”

“I can’t keep that promise, I’m afraid.”

Louis’ heart sunk.

Harry’s hand tightened in the folds of Louis’ shirt as he whispered softly in his ear, feathery brown hair tickling his lips, “I’m already there.”

Only a miracle kept Louis from melting into a slushy pile of romantic goo at the sheer cuteness of that statement.

“One chance is all I’m asking for. Just let me explain why. And then I’ll chain you to the bed while I
do it, because I can’t let you go. I can’t even think about seeing you leave, Harry.”

“You’ve got your chance. You’ve got as many chances as you want. I was about to turn around and go straight back anyway,” Harry admitted. “I’m in love with you, you know. I still hate you a little bit, but I love you.”

“I know that. I’m in love with you too.”
Chapter 19

Louis meant it when he said he had a lot of explaining to do.

They let themselves back into the Honeymoon suite and tumbled onto the bed, and Louis surprised the both of them by slapping Harry’s hands away when they started to wander towards the waistband of his trousers and went to unfasten the buttons. Surprised, Harry blinked and tilted his head back to look at him.

“I said I needed to explain,” Louis told him softly, “and I meant that. Once I’ve done that, I’ll do whatever you want, but I have to tell you…you deserve an explanation and I can’t live with myself knowing I haven’t given you one. I kind of botched up the last one, so…hear me out? Just one last time?”

Harry licked his lips, but then he nodded and sat up, leaning against the headboard with his hands folded in his lap. He got the feeling that he wasn’t going to like this much. Anxious, Louis stretched out a hand to touch him, hesitated, and then placed it back on the bed, deciding not to push him. Harry wished he’d carried on, laid a hand on his leg, moved it up to his hip, his shoulders, caressed his cheek –

“I won this holiday in a charity raffle,” Louis said, jolting Harry out of his reverie. The younger boy’s cheeks burned, and he swallowed hard, pretending he hadn’t been lost in daydreams and forcing himself to be attentive. “I don’t know if I already told you that. Anyway, Hannah, Stan, Zayn, Niall and I packed up and came here, and we brought an awful lot of booze with us, you know, like we do.” He chuckled darkly, then when Harry didn’t seem to get the joke, elaborated, “I’m planning on dragging the four of them to Alcoholics Anonymous when we get home. Niall drinks even more than I do.”

A snort from beside him told him that Harry sincerely doubted that. Louis couldn’t help but laugh a little bit as well, because it did sound a little bit unlikely, and he tilted his head back and giggled up at the ceiling, still a little giddy with relief, because Harry was back beside him, thank god.

“Anyway, Stan’s easily bored, and he wouldn’t shut up, so we were playing Dares. I know – at our age! We’re twelve years old at heart, I’m telling you. So I wasn’t paying attention, and Stan doesn’t like that, and I wasn’t listening because I’d spotted you wandering around on the beach. He looks up to see what I’m looking at, and quick as you like dares me to see how fast I can get in your pants. Which is a bit disgusting, but we’re kind of like that, Stan and me. Back home, we’ve got, ah…kind of a reputation that precedes us. As being a couple of slags. He likes to live down to it. I used to, but I dunno…that changed. Anyway, he staked fifty quid on it, as you know, and I’m a jobless bum bordering on a drink problem – I jump at any chance to get a bit of cash in my pocket. And…you’re hot.” He chanced a tentative grin, and Harry couldn’t help but return it in spite of himself. “So…I said yes.

“It was a totally stupid thing to do, I see that now. I think I always thought there was something wrong about it, not that that’s any sort of excuse. If I was any kind of a decent human being I’d have never agreed to it in the first place. But I figured I could grab you and do the deed, and then cash in hand, I’d swagger off into the sunset and play the big man. I’m not a very nice guy, you know. You should have run away from me as fast as you could at that airport. Anyway, you gave me a run for my money – or Stan’s, I suppose – because I thought I could make a pass at you and you’d just fall helplessly into my arms, boom, done. In the money.” Louis smiled wryly, a little sideways glance at Harry’s now blank expression turned that small smirk into a wistful sigh. “You were never going to be that easy, were you?”
At that, Harry fought not to blush, because he remembered all too well what had happened that first night, even if Louis had been too intoxicated to remember. His hot mouth on Harry’s had been too soft and fleeting to leave real marks, but Harry had been able to feel that warm, damp pressure on his skin for days afterwards – could still summon it to memory if he so wished. A shiver ran through him at the thought. A complete stranger, accosting him in that way, and he had been shocked at himself when they both ended up shirtless on the bed. He had just been lucky that after Harry had vanished into the bathroom to gather his wits about him and cool off before things got out of hand, Louis had fallen asleep.

Oh, if only Louis knew how close he had come to being that easy.

But he was especially glad now that he hadn’t – after all, Louis would have gone swanning off, then, job done, and none of this had ever happened. Harry wasn’t sure what would have hurt more; losing Louis after a confusing night of sex and not knowing him, and never knowing what kind of a person he’d given his body to for the first time ever, or beginning to fall in love with Louis and finding out that it had all originated from a cheap bet. The latter had hurt so, so badly… but at least this way he was getting an explanation.

“I hate giving up. I’m determined – or persistently annoying, whichever you prefer – and I’m kind of a sore loser, I don’t take well to being turned down. You know that, too. So the more times you turned me down, the more determined I was to get somewhere with you, and somewhere in the middle of that I stopped caring about the money and started caring about you. And my ego. Stan tried to call it off, did you know that? He told me I was getting a little bit weird about it – ‘obsessive’ was the word I think he used, actually – and that he was stopping the whole thing, but I said no. I was insistent that this was going to work… I wanted to understand you, wanted to be your friend, wanted to be more than that. When things finally started going my way, it was absolutely incredible, but a total shock. I got caught up in the whole thing, I started to take it far more seriously than I originally intended… when we kissed, I was ecstatic, and not just because I’d won. Because by then, I’d started caring, and it scared me, but it was so amazing… I wasn’t doing it for the money by that point. I was doing it for you.”

They lay in silence for a few minutes. Harry slid down onto his back, his curly head resting on the pillow that had been Louis’ side of the bed before, and stayed quietly staring up at the ceiling, his eyes roving across it as he considered every piece of information, every secret, every word that had come out of Louis’ mouth. Exhausted, Louis lay down beside him, closed his eyes and waited for the verdict, completely drained with the effort of having spilled out every frightening, jumbled, mixed up thought inside his extremely jumbled head.

Louis arms were by his side, and his hand lay next to Harry, somewhere near his hip, fingers limp. It came as a great surprise when Harry’s fingers closed tightly around his wrist, and Louis had a shameful moment of wondering whether Harry was gripping that tightly with the intention of hurting him – then he hated himself for the thought. Because Harry’s grip on him was not a nasty, reproachful gesture that had been calculated to cause him pain, even though his long fingers did have Louis in a hold that was a little too tight for comfort, it was out of a desire for comfort, not for pain.

For a while, they stayed silent, savouring the peace and each other’s company, and Harry’s grasp on Louis’ wrist never faltered. Eventually, the younger boy rolled over and rested his sharp chin on Louis’ chest, and fixed him with a steady gaze that would have made Louis uncomfortable had he had anything left to hide. He’d exposed himself to the boy before him both literally and figuratively, and the latter had been so much harder for him. The digging sensation of Harry’s pointed chin on his chest only reminded him that he deserved punishment for putting Harry through the pain of feeling like he’d been used and thrown away like the condoms they’d used the night before.
Harry’s face turned to the side, he rested his cheek on Louis’ chest, then wriggled downwards and curled up into a ball (it was amazing how small and compact his lithe body became when he curled up into a foetal position like that) until somehow he appeared to be resting on Louis’ tummy and appearing incredibly comfortable there. The feeling of a warm head and soft curls on his stomach made Louis feel cozy, almost sleepy as he reached down and entangled his fingers in those chocolate curls, expertly kneading Harry’s scalp. With a low rumbling sound that more resembled a purring kitten than anything else, Harry nuzzled more closely into him and then kissed his chest. Louis felt something inside his stomach tighten with guilt over betraying Harry and still being trusted so implicitly by him, and he draped his arm over Harry’s waist, stroking the small of his back with his free hand.

“I gave you everything,” Harry said, a little too tiredly to sound accusing. “And I thought it meant nothing to you. It hurt, you know…believing the one person I’ve really felt properly close to in my whole life didn’t care about me at all. It kind of changed my perspective on things.”

That made Louis’ heart sink, and he felt a little ill to think that because of him, someone who’d struggled so much to trust anyone in the first place would now be even more mistrustful. That he’d built up Harry’s confidence and ripped it down again in one swift movement, and even though it had been unintentional and some of Harry’s self-esteem and trust had recovered from the misunderstanding, he was now even more skittish than he already had been. “Harry –”

Releasing his wrist, Harry clamped a hand over his mouth. “Let me finish!” He took a deep breath, closed his eyes and dropped his hand back again, his long fingers closing over Louis’ and his head dropping back onto Louis’ chest. “It wouldn’t have hurt me so badly if there were more people I trusted. If I’d had someone close enough to talk to, then I could have got some of it off my chest and it wouldn’t have come so close to tearing me apart from the inside out. The worst thing about losing you and thinking you’d betrayed me like that was having to keep it all bottled up and having no one to tell. So…you’ve taught me it’s unhealthy to rely completely on one person. Thank you. I owe you for that…and I owe you for lots of other things as well…incredible sex being one of them.” That blazing grin was back, and it made Louis’ chest ache because it was brighter and more brilliant than it had ever been. It knocked him back a little, made him feel dizzy, like he’d tried to look directly into the sun. His vision seemed to blur.

His laugh was a little shaky. “I don’t deserve your gratitude, I deserve – I deserve you to punch me in the face and spit on me, and tell me I’m a disgusting pig and a heartless user and I should rot in hell. I deserve to have you walk all over me and bury me alive and dance on my grave.”

“I’m not sure you’d say that if you’d ever seen me on the dance-floor; I’m a terrible dancer,” Harry joked, but Louis was still carrying on, almost as if he wasn’t even listening. He was caught up in a torrent of self-loathing, and he seemed to be trying to drag Harry down with him.

“You should kick me and punch me and tell me you hate me. You should – you should smack me!” Bitterly, he lifted Harry’s hand and patted his own cheek with it as if to encourage him.

“Why, are you into that?” Another huge, dirty grin flashed across Harry’s face, and an infuriated Louis scowled darkly at him.

“This isn’t funny, Harry!”

“I know. I wasn’t laughing earlier. You hurt me, Louis; I most certainly wasn’t laughing. But that’s over now, what’s done is done, and there’s no point in dwelling on it. I love you…you love me?” It sounded far too much like a question, but Harry carried on before he could interrupt and make any kind of objection. “We might as well just enjoy the rest of the holiday, because the end will come before we know it.”
“Sooner than you could imagine,” Louis muttered, and then he raised his voice and said “Yeah, about that…I think I might cut my little excursion short. This place is really getting up my nose. I can’t stand all these posh people hanging around, it’s just doing my head in. I want my own bed back…” He met Harry’s confused gaze and said softly, “I want to go home.”

“Oh,” came his limp response. His heart did some unpleasant acrobatics in his chest, nosedived and the plummeted somewhere deep in the pit of his stomach and anchored itself to his ribcage.

“I’ve missed my family, and all that…you know what I’m saying? I’m just feeling a bit stifled. I think I’d rather be home than here, it’s an incredible place and amazing things have happened, but I just think I’d get a better night’s sleep in my own room than anywhere else. You understand, don’t you?” Louis’ expression was pleading, and all Harry’s defences were down.

“Oh,” he repeated. “Well…that’s okay. I mean, I can still call you, right? And we could, like, Skype and stuff…” The thought of not being this close to Louis, of losing him even if they still spoke every day, gave him an awful sense of foreboding, but he was determined to put a brave face on it.

“I don’t know about that.” Glancing apologetically over at him, Louis paused and let Harry’s stricken expression and sinking heart last for all of two seconds before he couldn’t stand to be cruel any longer and gave Harry a reassuring squeeze. “Skype seems a bit pointless when you’ll only be in the next room…”

“Lou?”

“Yes, Harry?”

“What are you saying?”

“What do you think I’m saying?”

“I don’t like to speculate.”

“Then perhaps I should elaborate…” Louis leaned in and whispered, “I want you to come home with me.”

Harry was so shocked he almost rolled right over and fell off the bed. “Come home with you?”

“What, am I that bad?” Louis asked, attempting to sound light but ending up coming off as being slightly hurt – which he was. He couldn’t help but look a little injured, and Harry instantly felt awful for his reaction.

“No! Of course you aren’t! But –”

“But what?”

“Don’t you still live with your mum?”

“I do.”

“In Doncaster?”

“Yep.”

“Wouldn’t she mind?”

“Listen, she’s been telling me I need a steady relationship for months, she’ll be thrilled. Especially
with someone as sweet and appealing as you, my love!” he teased, tapping Harry on the nose.
“You’ve got that innocent look that mums eat up. She’ll want to put on a checked apron and bake
you cookies, and proudly show cute photos of us to all her mumsy chums.”

“Uh…Lou, I don’t know about that. You know I’m not good with people. I wouldn’t cope well with
being shown off, I think you know…”

“Hey, I know that! I wouldn’t make you do anything you were uncomfortable with, Harry, give me
some credit. I just want to take you home and give you a little holiday, too – you come here every
year, it’s about time you went somewhere different. I wouldn’t make you go anywhere or meet
anyone, in fact, we could just stay in my room and not let anyone else in…I’d just love it if you’d
come home with me.” Louis’ smile was as gentle as his grip on Harry’s wrist.

“What are your family like?” Harry asked a little worriedly.

“Loud. But nice,” Louis assured him. “Annoying as hell, but aren’t all families like that? They’ll
keep out if I tell them to, don’t you worry. My mother has them in constant fear that I’ll move out if
they irritate me, so they’re all careful not to get on my nerves.”

“You’ve got siblings.”

“Sisters. Four.”

Harry looked worried and intrigued at the same time. “Tell me about them?”

“What do you want to know? Lottie and Fizzy are in their teens, their lives revolve around their
mates, they like pop music and they’re glued to their phones 24/7. Daisy and Phoebe are twins and
they like unicorns, dolls and TV. My mother is my best friend and I always talk to her when I’ve had
a bad day. My dad doesn’t live with us anymore, but I love him, too. That’s all there is to it, really.”

“They probably wouldn’t like me,” Harry thought aloud, and then realized he’d said it and blushed.

“Of course they would! They’d love you. They will love you. My mum’s told me so many times that
she’ll love anyone who makes me happy, and god, you certainly do that. Please, Harry. I want to
prove to her that I’m not just some shallow sex-obsessed drunk that half of Doncaster makes me out
to be. Please.”

After a split second’s hesitation, Harry said “…No. I’m sorry, Lou, I just can’t. No.”

Disappointment had Louis rolling onto his back and closing his eyes as he tried to fight the prickling
sensation in the corners of them. He knew it was selfish to ask someone as nervous and shy as Harry
to come and meet his rowdy family, especially when he wouldn’t be able to get away from them
very easily if he needed space, out of politeness and loyalty to Louis as well as because of
transportation issues. They were so comfortable together in their little world, slotted comfortably and
easily together like two pieces of a jigsaw, that Louis hadn’t really thought about the possibility of
Harry turning him down, and now that he had, it stung, not that he was about to admit that. He
struggled to smooth his expression over.

“No,” Harry said again. But he sounded far less reluctant. “No…”

Somehow, he sounded a lot less convinced than he had before. Louis resisted the urge to hold his
breath and his grip on Harry’s wrist loosened as he trailed careful fingers down the younger boy’s
bare arm, watching goosebumps pop up on the skin wherever he touched. Harry’s next breath was
unsteady and he closed his eyes, leaning into Louis’ touch and breathing sharply out.
“No…”

Victory tasted like Harry’s lips, and Louis allowed himself to fleetingly sample it by rolling over, curling into the younger boy’s side and kissing him right on the corner of his mouth. Eyes flying open, Harry made a weak little noise and collapsed into Louis’ embrace – meaning that the older boy took the opportunity to rain more little kisses onto his neck, collarbones, lifting the fabric of his shirt to kiss the tops of his shoulders.

Harry groaned. “Oh, God, no.” It was sounding more like ‘yes’ by the minute, and Louis was confident that one more little push would do it. His hand slid down and cupped around Harry’s thigh, and he gave him a firm squeeze.

“Oh g-god – oh, no, oh…oh, god,” and then Harry gave up the battle he’d already lost with a resigned “Fine!”

Louis couldn’t help but celebrate his win by teasing, “Sorry, what was that?”

“Ugh, I can’t say no to you. I’ll come. But please, Lou, we have to take things slow, you know that, don’t you? I can’t meet a large group of people at a time, I need a lot of down time…I can’t be with people all the time, even you. I have to be on my own to recharge sometimes.”

He tugged him a little closer. “Hey. I know that. We have a spare room, you can take that for whenever you get sick of me. Or I’ll take it, if you’d be more comfortable in my bed. How about we make it a three-day visit to start off with, and then we can extend it if you feel you’re comfortable with it?”

Harry’s green eyes lit up, but rather than saying yes or no, he answered by kissing Louis long and slow on the lips. It swiftly evolved into something more than that, a slowly growing heat in the pit of their stomachs that heated them both right down to the tips of their toes. At first Harry was a little shy again, but he quickly grew in confidence due to the familiarity of the situation, and before all too long he was lying on Louis’ chest and kissing him with an expertise that made Louis feel a little wobbly. To think that these quite frankly ridiculously kissable lips had never exchanged kisses with a mouth other than his own and yet were able to deliver them with such finesse made his head spin.

“So is that a definite yes?” he asked weakly when his lips were momentarily free.

“Most definitely,” Harry murmured. He kissed the underside of Louis’ jaw. “Now stop being considerate because it’s not the time for sweetness – now is the time for you to be rough with me.” He was fumbling with the buttons on his jeans, then kicking them off, then his hands were sliding underneath Louis’ shirt and tracing careful lines down his stomach –

Yeah, Louis was completely okay with being rough with him…not that he ever thought he’d get the chance. Harry wasn’t in the sort of mood that could really be dominated over.
Chapter 20

Hannah was wearing a white swimsuit with little embroidered daisies on it. Niall was doing his utmost to focus on the daisies rather than her body, but as a teenage boy, he was finding this no easy feat. Luckily, she had her back to him and had no idea that his blue eyes were roving hungrily over her still body, but he still didn’t want anyone else to catch him ogling – there was also the risk that she might turn around and spot him staring, and probably slap him, which he was also quite keen to avoid. Experience (and getting extremely drunk at the employees’ Christmas party at the shop where they both worked last year) had taught him that she had one hell of a right hook. It had also taught him that drinking a large amount of tequila and then falling off the top of the boss’s shiny new car after an attempt at dancing on top of it was not the most effective way of maintaining employment, but that was an entirely different story.

Her golden hair was hanging loosely right down to the small of her back; he’d never really appreciated how long it was before. It kind of made him want to touch it, to hold it out and examine all the ways the sun reflected off it, all the highlights and shimmering colours lost within the gold that came out in the sunlight. Still, he didn’t think she’d take too kindly to him pulling her hair, either, so he ignored the urge.

A clear laugh burst into the air, travelling across the pool, and Niall realized that it had come from Hannah. He followed her line of sight and realized with a clench of his jaw that she was gazing across the pool, meeting the gaze of one of the lifeguards she’d been making eyes at since they’d arrive, as well as several of his hooting, catcalling friends. One of them shouted out an obscene comment and Hannah giggled and twirled around in a circle on their command (Niall twitched in frustration; why wasn’t she giving them the finger and a mouthful of abuse like she would have back home to anyone who had tried to treat her like some token blonde bimbo?) and as she twirled, she caught sight of Niall, rooted to the spot and staring darkly at her. She faltered for a moment mid-spin, and then watched in surprise his gaze darted back to the small group of twenty-year-olds, whose eyes were all glued on her and thoroughly enjoying the rear view.

Her mouth tightened into a small smirk, like a challenge. Turning back to the guys, she placed one hand on her hip and tossed her hair in the way that everyone knew made Niall weak at the knees, and that, that was the final straw.

His first step was hesitant, but after that, he decided there was no going back. She should have expected him to pop up behind her, they’d stared right at each other after all, but no – she was unsuspecting, too busy giggling and waving. It was aggravating, so much so that he almost wondered if she was deliberately exaggerating the whole scenario to the point of ridiculousness. He knew Hannah. She didn’t do all the giggly, wiggly eyelash fluttering stuff (she preferred to bash you over the head and affectionately call you a wanker and then make her move, if her past relationship with Louis was anything to go by) so he couldn’t understand why she was acting in this way. He figured he’d put an end to it.

His hands landed on her shoulders, the feel of warm, smooth skin underneath his fingertips sending sparks dancing right up to his knuckles. He felt her breathe sharply in underneath him, flinching in shock, and before she could properly steady herself Niall was jerking her forward, as if he was going to throw her straight into the pool. He had a firm hold on her as he yanked her towards the water; she wasn’t going to slip, but Hannah gave a little squeak of surprise and grabbed his leg, the fingers of her left hand grabbing a handful of fabric as she seized him by the leg of his Chinos and held on for dear life, biting down so hard on her lower lip to keep herself from squealing that all the blood was fading from it, leaving it pearly white. Niall’s hands slid carefully down her shoulders
to her waist, pulling her safely back from the edge – her hair flicked over her right shoulder like a
curtain, and he carefully pushed it back out of his way as he leaned over to murmur against the
curved shell of her ear, “Saved your life.”

She turned to look at him reproachfully, silently berating him for scaring her. Her eyes were pale
blue in contrast to his own deep cerulean irises, which more resembled the colour of the pool in front
of them, but they seemed far more intense, and it took Niall’s breath away. Since her mouth had
become a pout and her forehead was creased, he was already sensing the danger signs, and when she
raised a delicate hand as if to slap him on the arm, he decided to stop her in her tracks; he yanked her
against him with an arm looped around her waist and kissed her abruptly on the mouth, and the hand
which had been about to hit him rested gently on his arm, her fingers sculpting around his bicep as
she held him, surprised but pleased.

Niall could feel the stares of the guys on the other side of the pool burning into his side, and he
wasn’t sure what he was enjoying more; their envy or the feel of Hannah’s lips on his. A few loose
strands of her golden hair were tickling his neck, and with one hand he pushed them away, smiling
in spite of himself at the sensation of locks of long hair sliding through his fingers. Her mouth was
small and warm and seemed to fit against his perfectly, her hand (ridiculously small in comparison to
his) was perfectly moulded around his bicep.

It all ended far too quickly for his liking, although any longer and he’d have been struggling to
breathe. It still didn’t feel like long enough. Pulling away, he sifted through the blonde hair tumbling
across her shoulders, pushed a few locks behind her ear, and then looked at her, examining her and
taking in her softened expression, trying to judge her reaction. She stroked a hand down his arm,
grabbed his waist, and then all of a sudden she was pushing forwards and he was staggering a few
steps back, the ground vanished from underneath his Supra-clad feet and he only realized that she
had pushed him into the pool when he was hitting the water with a splash and sinking like a stone,
fully-clothed with his peach-coloured shirt billowing in the water and his camel-coloured Chinos
filling with water as he sank.

It was disorientating, sinking in that way, especially because once he’d hit the freezing cold surface
of the water and gone straight through it, the bitter chill of it slicing through him so that it felt like
he’d landed flat on his back on top of a glass table and it had shattered, sending spikes of shocking
coldness shooting through his shoulder blades and slicing right through his vertebrae. His eyes had
closed and when he opened them all he could see was the deep ultramarine blue of the walls and
floor of the pool, reflecting through the water so that everything around him looked to be the same
colour. He groped wildly in the water for a moment or so, grabbing at nothing, and then his fingers
burst through the surface and he clawed at the air, kicking upwards with the frantic human survival
instinct even though he could probably have quite easily touched the bottom and then swam back up
again in twice the amount of time he took and still had plenty of breath left.

His head broke the surface of the water and although he hadn’t thought it was possible, the air above
the water felt even colder than the water itself. Spluttering with both indignation and the intention of
choking up all the water he’d inhaled, he grabbed the poolside with both hands and hoisted himself
up a little so that he could glare at Hannah, who had her hands on her hips and was smirking down at
him.

He had to flip a few sopping wet strands of hair off his forehead and spit some more water out before
he let out an indignant, “Hey!”

“Hay is for horses,” Hannah said infuriatingly, grinning all over her face. “You’re a bit wet, aren’t
you?” she said innocently.
Niall growled at her. “Funny! What the hell was that for?”

Hannah dropped to her knees and leaned over so that she could look down on him from a closer vantage point, close enough that she could say “Never dump a girl in freezing water, or even threaten to, if you value your life. But that wasn’t why I did it. If you wanted to kiss me, why didn’t you just ask, idiot? I’ve been waiting long enough.”

After a pause, where they both waited for her words to sink in, Niall’s jaw dropped so far that it hit the water with a splash, his chin sending droplets of water flying back up to hit him in the face. “I – you – we – you mean –” For a few more seconds, he struggled to process the announcement, then came the incredulous, “you’re not telling me you wanted me to do it? Like… you don’t fancy me too.”

She snorted and dropped a hand into the water to splash him playfully. “Trust me, matey; if you’d planted one on me and I didn’t fancy you too, we’d be going on our first date to A&E after a lovely dinner consisting of a knuckle sandwich.” Leaning back a little, she said, “of course I fancy you. Isn’t it obvious?”

“Wh – no!” Niall cried, “no it is not obvious! For God’s sake, why didn’t you say something? You know I’ve had a crush on you since Louis first introduced you, everybody does!”

“I wasn’t going to ask you out! I’m a girl! I absolutely refuse to do the asking. God, why do you think I make an idiot of myself every time there’s another guy around, did you think I did it for kicks? I knew it was the only way to get you to make a move, now shut up and kiss me, you idiot!” She leaned even further over the side in an incredibly precarious position, and that was when Niall seized the opportunity – and her wrists – and instantly yanked her in after him so that she crashed into the water with a shriek and a splash.

He caught her firmly by the waist as she tumbled in, so that she wasn’t even fully submerged in the water before she’d steadied herself (using his grip on her as an aid) and was expertly treading water, doing her best to look displeased but grinning in spite of herself. Niall pressed his forehead against hers and looked into her eyes until their close proximity meant that her blue irises blurred into one unsightly blob and his vision started to go fuzzy, making his eyes hurt, then he kissed her again, fiercely and unhesitant, pausing only to mutter, “You are so going to regret making me wait, Hannah Walker.”

“Oh,” Hannah said, raising her eyebrows and grinning wickedly at him, “I know.”

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“Have you got everything?” Louis asked as he lifted his third and final suitcase into the boot of the car, then reached absentmindedly out to curl an arm around Harry’s waist – but when no reassuring warm, slender body fit itself into the curve of his arm, he looked up to find that Harry was stood hugging his mum again. Tactfully, Louis dropped his gaze, feeling horribly intrusive. He’d only briefly been introduced to Harry’s mum, in fact, he was surprised she was consenting to allow her son to go on holiday with someone she’d only spoken to once or twice, but perhaps she’d seen them hanging around each other all holiday and knew that Harry would never go near someone he didn’t know he could trust implicitly. Maybe she was just relieved that he was finally being brave enough to go somewhere and do something by himself. Well. Not completely by himself.

Harry gave her a gentlemanly kiss on the cheek, which made Louis feel ever so slightly wobbly (not because he was thinking of being on the receiving end of it; because he was a little bit caught off-guard by just how sweet Harry was to his mother) and then ambled over to the car to join Louis. He
surreptitiously brushed the back of his hand against Louis’ fingers and made a point of thoroughly examining the contents of the boot. Anxiously, his mother watched him with her arms wrapped protectively around her stomach, probably a motion reminiscent of her pregnancy; she still longed to protect Harry even though he wasn’t inside her any more. Even though he could, to some degree, now protect himself.

“Is she gonna be all right?” Louis asked quietly, pretending to check the fastenings on his suitcase. “She looks kind of freaked…have you ever actually gone anywhere without her before?”

Harry shrugged, looking a bit embarrassed. “A couple of school trips, the odd overnight stay with my grandparents, that kind of thing. She won’t kick up a fuss, don’t worry. She’s so pleased that I have a friend now that she’s one step short of dancing on the street.” He rolled his eyes.

“What about, ah…” Louis lowered his head, tugged at his collar. Now it was his turn to be embarrassed. “Does she know about…us?”

“One step at a time,” Harry said softly, “although I broke the news to her that I think I might be bisexual last night and she seemed to take it pretty well. She was very surprised, actually; I think that due to my previous lack of interest expressed towards anyone of any gender whatsoever she expected me to say I was asexual, to be honest, but she didn’t seem to object. She’ll put the rest of the puzzle together for herself, I think. Her son suddenly admits he’s bisexual and then disappears out of the blue on a mysterious holiday with a really hot guy he’s only known for a few weeks? I don’t think it’s too hard to fill in the blanks.”

In spite of himself, Louis couldn’t help but be flattered by the compliment, but he still sneaked Anne a somewhat anxious glance as he sidled slightly closer to Harry and whispered, breathtickling Harry’s ear, “Do you think she needs a hint?” His little finger slipped through Harry’s beltloop and tugged him a tiny bit closer; flustered and surprised, Harry’s face lit up and he leaned in, doing his best to block Louis’ movements from his mother.

“Well, I –”

“Perhaps I ought to rephrase that. What I meant to say was, do I have your permission to give her a hint?” He stood on his toes so he could reach Harry a little better, and his lips brushed against Harry’s ear as he whispered, “call me selfish, but I kind of want everyone to know that you’re mine.”

Grinning, Harry allowed him one slow, languid kiss, and he wondered as they kissed lazily exactly how much his mum was freaking out right now – after all, he was so shy about publicly displaying affection that he could hardly bear to hug her in public, and he hadn’t held her hand since he was about six – and whether it would be mean to leave her standing by the side of the road having a meltdown over the fact that her son was kissing someone who was, to her, a complete stranger, in full view of anyone who cared to ogle. Feeling a bit bad, he pulled away, only to find that Louis came with him, leaning forwards, trying not to let their mouths break apart.

“Stop,” Harry giggled when Louis insistently started kissing at his neck as well; he shoved him playfully, and Louis let out a long, drawn-out sigh and the returned his concentration to the deep purple mark he was making on the younger boy’s pale neck. “Lou, my mum’s staring!”

“Let her look,” Louis murmured, and then he did pause and ask, “do you honestly want me to stop, or are you just saying that?” His expression was serious; if Harry had looked him in the eyes and told him to cut it out, he would have done just that.

“Of course I don’t want you to stop,” Harry said softly, sliding his arms around Louis’ waist and rubbing slow circles on his back, “but I think you probably should. The taxi’s going to start charging,
you know, if we hang about much longer. These people are vultures. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’d set the meter running already.”

With a groan, Louis rested his forehead on Harry’s shoulder. “Damn you for being so sensible,” he said quietly, and then his hand shot out and landed a playful smack on Harry’s backside. With a squawk, Harry went to return it, laughing all the while, but the mischievous Louis had already darted around to the side of the car, way out of reach. Shaking his head, Harry followed, the grin on his face so wide he was astonished he could maintain it, and he watched as Louis laid his hand on the handle of the car door.

“Your carriage, milady,” Louis said with a flaming grin, and then he flamboyantly jerked the car door open and an enormous pile of roses cascaded out of the taxi in a waterfall of blazing scarlet and fell all over the pavement in a pile so tall that it came above his knee.

For a few moments, Louis stared stupidly at the pile of blooms on the pavement, and then he distractedly swiped a stray piece of hair out of his eyes. “Oh.”

Harry gave a little snort of laughter and flattened it behind his hand. “Smooth, Lou.”

“It would have been romantic if it had happened yesterday!” objected Louis, and then he poked his head through the car window and said to the driver, “I don’t understand, what are all these roses still doing here?”

“What, did you expect me to clear ‘em all out for you, Romeo? No chance. If you want to start running a florists in my cab, then you can bloody well move the goods yourself. I deliberately came on this shout just so I could watch you clear every last flower petal out of my upholstery afterwards.” The driver smirked.

Helplessly, Louis turned to Harry and shrugged. “It would have been romantic! But you got in the wrong taxi yesterday, and now we have to drive to the airport with a taxi full of roses…I’m sorry!” He buried his face in his hands.

Rather than getting annoyed, Harry burst out laughing. He grabbed Louis and hauled him into an enormous hug. “This is a sign, isn’t it?” he whispered against Louis’ neck. “With you, things are never going to be normal again, are they?”

Louis’ grip tightened on his waist and he pulled Harry a little closer, standing on his toes so he could more easily reach. “Nope,” he whispered.

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