Tangerine

by hostage

Summary

"Louis and Scarlet are kind of a thing... but then there's Harry."
When vintage rock singer Scarlet Ryder and her band are offered to travel on a world tour as the opening act for the biggest boyband in the world, they can only laugh. What Scarlet doesn't know, however, is that one drunken kiss can change everything.

The thing is, boybanders Louis and Harry happen to be the closest best friends that Scarlet has ever met. So much so, that Scarlet soon becomes tempted... seduced by someone she can't help but want, and charmed by someone she doesn't realise how much she needs.

Maybe there are three sides to a love triangle for a reason.

Currently re-writing for your reading pleasure!
(Updated Chapters: 23/100)
Look forward to "Tangerine 2" coming soon!

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Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

[The Guess Who - Star Baby (1974)]

[Read this chapter on Wattpad]

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Two weeks ago, I would have cringed at the mention of One Direction. Now I've been offered a chance to open for them on tour and I'm halfway through writing a ballad—a ballad!—about one fifth of the boyband.

What the fuck has happened?

Six jugs of beer into the night and I've already been recognised twice. I figured I would have been swept under the rug, since I arrived with the main focus of the pub. However, one girl suggested that I looked familiar and another actually knew who I was and wanted a photo. I mean, that's it... but it's something.

Aside from the distraction of onlookers, it's been a rather... interesting night. This is the third time I've met the boys of One Direction and the second time we've shared drinks together—the first time was during a casual meeting with our management teams and we each only had a pint or two—so I have yet to see the lot of them as their true drunk selves.

Something which is coming out for sure tonight.

"Unleash your inner flower child, Scarlet," Pete chuckled, flicking the edge of his guitar pick between his teeth. "Dig up some Lennon-McCartney gold."

"I'm not used to doing what I'm told!" I rhymed, singing in the tune we'd been working on.

It was a cloudy November afternoon when it all began. I was working at my manager's flat in central London with Pete, my live bassist. We were assigned to write a ballad and it simply wasn't working out. We had all of our notebooks spread out in front of us, not to mention the thickest rhyming dictionary we could find, while our manager was away at a meeting. After a solid two hours on the same squishy leather couch, no inspiration whatsoever, we were still strumming circles around the ballad that just didn't want to be written.

"Forget whatever Mitch said," Pete randomly strummed his acoustic guitar a few times, ridding our heads so we could move onto something new. "Just feel it. You're gonna come up with something good sooner or later."

I shrugged, completely drained of any creativity and feeling it.

"Maybe you've just got something against ballads," Pete suggested, almost like a punch line.

"I haven't got anything against ballads, you dick," I laughed. I could have hit him with something light within my reach, like a couch pillow or notebook, but I don't remember. "I'm just used to writing more upbeat, driven songs, you know? It's all about the rock and roll, baby! I'm just not soft or vulnerable. I don't-"

"What?" Pete grinned, egging me on.

"I don't have anyone to sing about, anyway. There, I said it," I shrugged off the matter, like it didn't mean much. In a way, I wasn't entirely sure if it did.

For the past few years, I'd been a professional singer-songwriter. It's a rather curious fact to admit,
because all I've ever wanted was to support myself with music, and now it's all I ever do. However, despite being a professional who – even at the time – was used to doing this sort of thing every day, nothing could change the mind-numbing curse of writer's block.

Pete chuckled deeply, a little too giddy for my masked shame, "What about that bloke-?"

"No," I dismissed, just knowing.

"The one with the plaid vests and hand tattoos," Pete went on, oblivious, "Eddie."

"Let's just say it's a big no for everyone at this point, alright, mate?" I shook my head, then shook it again. "I might as well do a ballad about Mick Jagger – at least I'd mean it."

"What rhymes with big lips?" Pete smirked.

"Swollen kiss," I said as a joke, but ended up liking it enough to jot down.

By hour three, Pete and I had rolled a thin joint from yesterday's leftover bud, turned the radio on, and smoked our makeshift spliff on Mitch's patio to the smooth flowings of the seventies. "Love Hurts" by Nazareth. *Scottish band*, I thought to myself, *most famous for their cover of this old Everly Brothers song.*

By then, I reckoned we should suck it up and cover a ballad if we couldn't bloody write one.

Pete and I spent the next short while waiting, in limbo, for what our manager promised he would return with: either great news or no news at all. Which was... something to look forward to. I guess. I'm not usually one to expect much, so any news at all would have been a bonus.

Thinking back, I still wouldn't have had a clue... but my manager was about to let us in on an offer. The largest of offers, if we're going to be dramatic about it.

The small sound of a key turning the lock in the door got my stomach rippling.

I press my lips together in a slow smile, feeling them numb. Looking around in my growing haze, I watch as Zayn is having a very active debate with Liam, whatever about, as Louis spiritedly adds in with an overdramatic fist-smash on the table, causing Harry and Niall to grab hold of their teetering pints.

I chuckle silently to myself. I've finally gone from *yeah-I'm-a-little-tipsy* to *okay-I'm-a-little-drunk*. I take another sip of my beer and set it down, feeling wonderfully lighter than I did when we first came in.

Entering the London pub was a strange event. Many people wanted a glimpse at their new celebrity company, while echoes of hushed whispers spread around the bar stools. I thought everyone would have shrugged it off and moved on after a little while, but even now, a bloody *hour* into our stay, a round of grown men have decided to erupt on the other side of the tavern – drunk, of course – singing that one famous One Direction song, *loud*, and completely taking the piss out of it.

"Fuck, does it have to be that same fuckin' song?" Zayn scoffs, nose ring glinting as he involuntarily snarls. Some of his many tattoos flinch as his thin fingers grip around his pint.
"You'd think they'd come up with a better hit list by now!" Louis pipes up loudly, Yorkshire accent strong for a small lad with such delicate features. His mousy fringe somehow intensifies the icy flicker in his eyes. "Didn't think anyone was thick enough to find the same joke funny eighty years later, but I guess I was fuckin' wrong!"

"Eighty years," Liam chuckles to himself, cheeks glowing under his stubble in his tipsy state. "Boys, imagine what we'd look like, all wrinkly, after eighty years as a boyband!"

"I'm not drunk enough for that joke yet, Liam, but thanks a lot, man," Louis slings his arm around his bandmate's shoulders, pursing his lips. They stay like that, with their arms around each other, for the next couple of moments, until Liam pinches Louis' nipple through his shirt. Louis, rowdy as ever and ready to pounce, gets Liam back with a boyish jab to his ribs.

I feel bad. I'm pretty sure the song we're dealing with was One Direction's first hit, however many years ago. Everyone knows it. Even I know it and I'm hardly ever aware of the Top 40. The song has been all over the media, stapled as a pop anthem, for a handful of years. It still continues to plague the radio to this very day and- shit, did I say plague? Now I feel really bad.

"Does this song, like- haunt you?" I take another sip of beer as all five pairs of eyes flick to mine at once.

A couple of the lads open their mouths to respond, but the blonde Irishman heads them off. "Don't answer that, don't answer that," Niall waves the others off from speaking. He gives me a knowing nod, as if to keep things quiet. "I tink ye know the answer." An understanding glint shines in his eyes.

My eyebrows raise subconsciously. "Would for me," I murmur, swallowing another deep sip from my pint. "Sorry, lads... I dunno what I'm apologising for, but..." I set my pint back onto its beer mat, "all that attention must be kinda shit..."

Harry chuckles, giving his head a dismissive tilt. *Harry Styles: A-list celebrity and frontman of One Direction*, who also shares my hometown of Cheshire, England, coincidentally enough. He speaks slowly; voice coming out in a deep rasp, albeit being the youngest member of the group.

"It's different," Harry tells me considerately, "because it's not, like, any certain type of attention. It's just... attention — in general, not good or bad. Not iffy or unsure or all for it or really don't care. Just... all of it." He talks with his hands, long brown hair loosely curling past his shoulders. "Every sort of feeling is... there... all at once, whether we're aware of it or not. We just try to focus on the positives."

My lips softly part and I nod along, letting the lad's words sink in. "That's deep, can you say that again?" I comment, genuinely meaning it, but it comes out sounding bitchy.

"Shit!" Louis barks out laughing, muffling his reaction into his pint glass.

"Sorry," Harry chuckles, dimples forming by either side of his charming grin, "I'm feeling rather existential tonight. Why don't we just enjoy the pub? Let's... drink. Let's have a cheers!" He raises his glass to mine, and then all six of us are clinking our pints together and I'm finishing my beer before I realise it.

Louis, pleasantly smirking next to me, is kind enough to give me a refill without my having to ask.

I smile at the oldest lad in thanks, allowing my eyes to paint down his sharp cheekbones, taking in the light shadow of scruff along his jawline. Then, before he notices I'm even looking, I clear my
throat and bury my face in my fresh beer. I can only hope no one caught that, because that smile was too fucking weird. I don't smile like that. Especially not at a bloke in a bloody boyband.

*Yeah, right.* I scoff to myself.

My life has changed so drastically within these past two weeks. Let's not even mention my new ballad, please... and it really doesn't help that I'm three pints in.

It's getting harder to fool myself by the minute.

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Mitch sat down with us as soon as he returned. I remember the warm look on his face, his hidden grin bursting to be known. He drew it out, like he often enjoys doing, and my anticipation nearly got the better of me. Mitch had much to say – he really did – although the anxious expectancy itching at my insides was causing me to focus more on my addictively-ill stomach.

Long story short: I was presented with the opportunity to perform as an opening act at the renowned Wembley Stadium. I was in immediate shock from the mere idea of performing my own music on a stage for up to ninety-thousand people, but like any life-changing opportunity, there had to be a catch.

Or two.

"First of all," Mitch began, raising his eyebrows apologetically, "you need a ballad. Your set list... needs a ballad."

"*My life needs a ballad,*" I murmured to myself, earning a hidden shove in the knee from Pete.

"That much is important," Mitch went on, either hearing me or not. "Second-" Mitch almost chuckled then, cutting himself off to strategically fold his hands in a more formal manner. "Second, Scarlet..." he turned to me, and myself alone, here. "I've secured you a spot on the list to open for one of the biggest bands on the planet. It has yet to be set in stone... but their team likes your-vibe, as they said, and you are one of the first choices as the opening act for this show."

"One of the biggest bands on the planet...?" Pete repeated, already blown away.

Mitch simply nodded, determination alive behind his crinkled eyes.

"*Holy shit...*" All I could do was breathe and blink.

Mitch then cleared his throat, setting us up for the kicker. "Now, you have to understand... there is a world full of people who would jump at the chance to even receive this bare offer. This type of exposure only comes once in a lifetime, so I need you to really, really consider this-unbelievable opportunity."

"Okay..." I voiced, biting my lower lip. "I- yeah... This sounds really good, Mitch. Like, *insanely* good. But you're holding back from telling me who the main act is, and I think there's a reason why."

"He's holding back because he likes to drag it out," Pete smirked, nudging me again.

"And I'm dragging it out," Mitch raised an eyebrow and took a deep breath, "because it's One
Direction, Scarlet."

Of course, an instinctive no slipped from my lips at the mere mention of One Direction. I think I even laughed out loud. Sure, I could have seen myself performing with a group that I didn't really care for, or even an artist that was a step or two below my personal par, but I never once imagined I would ever be working with a ***boyband***.

Where was the music in that?

Then, it sunk in that ***this was real life***... that I actually had the chance to perform on ***that stage*** and get ***that exposure***. Usually, I wouldn't stand to have such a Top 40 image brought upon myself, but Mitch was right: I could never in a million years pass up on an opportunity as life-changing as ***that***.

It wasn't final by any means – I still hadn't said yes to anything, and I was still only one among many other popular choices – but it was the first real punch that set everything in motion.

"I can't believe you called them a band," I chuckled, lightening up a bit towards the end of our discussion.

"Well..." Mitch reasoned slowly, straightening his suit, "they are a band... of boys..."

"A boyband, Mitch. Seriously," I gave my head a shake, but even I couldn't help but grin.

"Have another, why don't you?!" Liam lifts his jug to refill Harry's empty pint.

"Another?!!" Louis smirks, visibly entertained. "What's he had, three beers? And he's already under the table."

"I'm clearly not under the table..." Harry chuckles, palms spread open over the tabletop.

"Under the table," Zayn snickers, pausing for a second to silence the crass hip hop tune that suddenly blasts from his mobile phone. "Soon you'll be under Madonna."

"Zayn," Harry's large nostrils flare. His cheeks even turn a light shade of pink. "Stop that. I don't have a thing for older women."

"That's not what the papers said about ye last night!" Niall winks, and I'm guessing this is all supposed to belong to some long-running joke.

I chuckle along with the boys, because what else can I do? They're all laughing, and tonight has been... ***massively different***, yet surprisingly entertaining so far. But, the thing is, I've just gone through three pints of my own, and my hands are getting a little tingly and I can't feel my lips.

I remind myself to avoid thinking about the embarrassing fact that a boyband is probably outdrinking me tonight, but... fuck it, I'm thinking about it.

It's funny, because I've been here before. I've come here a few times, in fact, to this pub – the last time resulting in having a glass of brandy too many and falling asleep on the very tabletop to my left. And when I say ***too many***, I don't mean as much as you might imagine. It doesn't take a lot for me to get wasted. I almost want to roll my eyes, because I'm no stranger to alcohol, let alone plain old ***beer***. But it's true, I've always been a lightweight.
It's somewhat of a surprise to find out that the famous Harry Styles is quite the same.

"I'm not a womaniser! I can tell you that!" Harry stifles a smirk, claiming the opposite of said tabloids. "I'm a woman-admirer. I love women. And men. Men are great. I love people."

"Alright, Harold," Louis grins fondly at the handsome lad, before turning straight to me. "He's just saying that to get in ya pants."

Jesus.

"Did you see that?" Harry frowns in disbelief, quite comically. "All that, then he shuts me down in a sentence!"

"Yeah, I saw it. I believe you, Harry," I chuckle warmly, feeling the beer tingling the pit of my stomach. And then: Am I gonna? Yeah, I'm gonna. I turn to Louis. My gaze flits between his hooded blue eyes, watching how he watches me back. "I don't believe you."

"You don't believe me?" Louis smirks, continuing to look directly at me. Smug. It's that look underwear models give the camera, like Zoolander's Blue Steel, except completely out of nowhere. Then, as if he didn't just alter my view on life or anything, Louis raises his pint glass in the air. Without a word, he commands the attention of his bandmates, like the audacious leader he is. "Let's see them, lads! You too, blondie. Here's to a failed attempt... after a long history of failed attempts!"

Six pints crack together, a mutual overflow of beer sloshing between all of our drinks.

Tonight was supposed to be a get-to-know-you sort of night, and shit, we've been putting it to good use. These lads aren't as stuck up as I thought, for one. They're kind of funny, and they're also great with beer banter – something that's right up my alley.

We toss back our pints, slamming them onto the table, one after another. And when all six of our beers finally come down, I feel something touch my leg and I think, maybe I've dropped a serviette, but when I look down, I see that it's Louis' hand.

Louis' hand is on my leg and I'm suddenly aware of everything.

Here's the thing about Louis Tomlinson: I know nothing about him.

I know his name, because I did my research. I know that he's attractive, because his looks stunned me into working on something I had been stuck on for weeks: a ballad.

Don't say it, I know. After two meetings, I've already written half a ballad about a famous stranger whom I know nothing about, purely based off looks. How shallow, how embarrassing. I know.

But at least I'm finally writing a decent ballad.

I wonder if Janis Joplin ever got starry-eyed over the preppy guy at the bowling alley.
Niall, Liam, Zayn, Harry, Louis.

It's reached the point where I've memorised them well enough to put a name to a face.

We've each had at least four pints from the jugs and we're all visibly on a similar level of drunk. It's really no shock that Harry, the charming frontman, turns into even more of a flirt when he's tipsy, but it's a huge shock that Louis is the same.

Louis' hand has been resting on my leg for the past five minutes, making me incredibly aware of my actions and surroundings. I feel claimed, at-a-glance-taken, but my heart is betraying me by happily beating out of my chest, so I let him.

I mean, come on, I'm right in the middle of writing a song about this guy and he likes me? He likes me enough to make a move on me in front of his friends? His world-renowned, equally as internationally famous friends?

Fuck, this is a trip.

Is this real life?

Zayn is the first to clue into our under-the-table action. He seems like the laid back type, the type to take a second to sit back and be the first notice that sort of thing... and the first to tell Liam?

Zayn whispers into Liam's ear, subtly motioning towards Louis and me. Liam notices I'm watching them, so he raises his eyebrows, sending me a sly grin similar to Zayn's.

Louis is not aware of any of this.

I very much am.

The lads' smiles are a little infectious, I hate to admit it, but I casually clear my throat and pretend like my heart is beating at a natural pulse... because it really fucking isn't.

"We should just get battered tonight!" Liam suggests cheekily. I can tell he's mocking me. His crafty wink at me gives it all away. "It's our day off tomorrow, anyway!"

"I agree," Zayn plays along, smooth as ever. "It feels like the right night."

"Not gonna argue there!" Louis removes his hand from my leg to top off his pint with the remaining beer left in the final jug. "We'll have three more," he calls to the waitress passing by.

I see what they did there.

Half an hour later, Louis' hand is back on my leg, a little further up my thigh this time. I feel a little ill, mostly from the nerves swirling through my stomach and chest, but I'm starting to like the fact that Zayn and Liam have their own little thing brewing across the table. They're currently sharing opinions about designer watches — something which is practically Greek to me — while Niall is cracking Harry up with traditional jokes about old Irish men.

"You doing alright there, mate?" Louis asks a rather dizzy-looking Harry.
"I'm... drunk," Harry states in a pleasant daze. Really, I didn't think his speech could get any slower.

"Same," I smile hazily across at the younger lad, "can't feel my hands."

"Can you feel your tits?" Harry asks me seriously, earning a cheeky slap on the knee from Louis.

I look down and place both hands over my shirt, then look up and give Harry a nod, trying to stifle a laugh.

Harry nods back, plump lips pressed together. His face is completely straight. "Good. That's all that counts."

"You two serious?" Niall quirks an eyebrow, unsure whether to laugh or not.

Meanwhile, Louis is the loudest thing ever, doubled over in hysteric. He falls onto Harry's shoulder, muttering something cheeky to his bandmate, judging from the glazed glint in his eyes. Louis nearly bloody slips behind the younger lad in laughter, but he pulls himself up, laughs again, and gives Harry a proud pat on the back.

Both Harry and I end up chuckling along, caught between a flood of drunken embarrassment and an obvious urge to laugh our cheeks off. We share a momentary glance.

Then Zayn gets up and says, "Alright, I'm out for a smoke."

"Let's go," Louis pats my leg. His laugh is still alive in his eyes as he motions his head in Zayn's direction.

"Yeah?" my smile is nearly a grin, whether I like it or not.

"Yeah," Louis' pink lips curl into a smirk.

Louis leads me away from our group's corner booth, both of our coats in hand. We pass by one of his security guards as we head towards the rear of our private section. A moment before we reach the pub's back exit, Louis stops us by the wood of the bar.

"Hey, mate," Louis calls out to the man behind the counter. "Two shots of rum, please, for myself and my dame."

"I'm his dame? How lovely.

"Cheers," says the man as Louis tips him. He fills the two shot glasses in front of us.

We gladly take them between our fingertips.

"Bottoms up, love," Louis smiles at me with a tilt of his head.

"Cheers!" I smile, feeling my heart flutter.

We down our shots and head out the back door, Louis' hand fitting right into mine.
To my surprise, Zayn is the only one out back. It's probably not so busy of a night, considering it's a Tuesday. It's perfectly dark. The side streets are glistening from the early evening rain and the streetlights reflect right off the pavement.

I can feel the bitter warmth of the rum in my stomach as we approach Zayn. He casually takes a pull from his cigarette before he turns to see us. And when he does, his eyes go immediately to our joined hands.

"Well, look at that. Tommo's got himself a rock star," Zayn smirks, intentionally boosting my ego.

"He bribed me with alcohol," I smirk back, giving a squeeze to Louis' hand, silently hoping he gets my sarcasm. I turn to look at him fondly, but as it turns out, he's already steadily looking at me.

"What any pop star would do," Louis voices in my same tone, twisting his smirking lips.

"Alright," says Zayn bluntly, stepping out his smoke with his foot. "Let's see it then."

"See what?" Louis asks aloud, his gaze never leaving mine.

"The kiss," Zayn chuckles, looking between us both. "Let's see it."

I stall for a moment. "What-? We've never-"

"Then it's about time, yeah?" Zayn shrugs, as if it's that easy.

...Is it that easy?

Zayn and I share a look. There's no use in arguing with the lad. Plus, the booze has given me that extra kick of confidence. So I shrug the matter off, place my hands on Louis' shoulders, and give him a slow, sweet kiss on his cheek.

I pull back, smiling.

Louis gazes straight into my eyes, his blue ones slightly glazed over from the alcohol. "He'll probably want a little more of a show, yeah...?" he says to me in a tone so raspy yet gentle, only I can hear him. Then he proceeds to lean towards me again.

I almost hesitate, but I don't. My nerves packed their bags for the back of my mind after my third beer. Judging from Louis' demeanour, I'd bet his confidence is as high as mine.

Our faces grow closer, and the gap between us is closed before I know it. I blink, and suddenly, Louis' warm lips are pressed against mine. I close my eyes and just as suddenly, I'm kissing him back, and all I can think about is how good this feels, and how electric our chemistry is. That, and the fact that this is actually happening.

This is actually fucking happening.

A small part of me wonders where the cameras are — I'm almost waiting for a television host with a microphone to jump out and laugh at me: You fell for it! A hot dude in a boyband flirted with you and you fell for it! — but we only hear some cars skim over the slick streets in the distance.

I deepen our kiss, moving my lips in a slow, pulsating rhythm that Louis follows with ease. He
presses his body against mine, hands firm on my hips as he exhales deeply, tongue playing along with mine. I drape my arms around Louis' neck and dare to suck gently at his bottom lip, teasing him a little. The action seems to set him on fire as he presses even closer, widening our kiss even further.

I am so entranced by our snogging session that I am deaf to the sound of the pub door opening.

The remaining lads of One Direction audibly filter out into the back alley. At first, there is a dull pause of shock – the sight of their oldest bandmate snogging the new chick is probably the first thing they see – until their boyish pride kicks in, and they begin teasing us in a cheeky, suggestive manner.

Louis and I pull away from each other, laughing softly at the boys' reactions... and the fact that we just made out.

"Glad I asked," Zayn gives us a knowing wink.

"Look at you two," Liam smiles at us, impressed. He pats Louis' back on his way to their designated vehicles. They definitely share that brotherly love that comes along with being in a band. They all do.

"Did I miss something?" Harry saunters over to Louis and me, pigeon-toed in his heeled boots. "Did you get her pregnant?"

"Oh my god..." I chuckle through my blush. Harry is such a cheerful drunk, it's endearing.

"Pregnant, married..." Louis lists off, pulling me in by his side, "we've already sent the kids to college, you've missed it all, mate."

Harry laughs happily at Louis' wit, handing me over my black leather satchel. "Here's your bag, Scarlet."

"Thank you, Harry," I smile, accepting it from him.

Harry is a sweetheart to have brought my bag for me, but I can't help imagining what onlookers must have thought of the famous Harry Styles carrying a woman's tote through a pub. Nothing the world hasn't seen before, likely.

"We're goin' to drink back at the hotel," Niall tells us, grinning. He's always thrilled to drink. What a character. "Comin'?"

"Guess so!" I shrug, following Louis to the parked vehicles.

The lot of us separate into two of the boys' black vans. A couple of security guards join us in each, and we all ride back to One Direction's hotel along the narrow streets of London. They're apparently staying quite close by the pub, so we don't have very far to go.

The short distance doesn't stop Louis from taking my hand once more.

He's a romantic, I can tell.

We're led by security through the hotel lobby. We receive some looks, but we calmly manage to avoid any random interactions. Aside from a few travellers, there aren't many people here.
Supposedly, not many people are aware that the boys are in town.

Once we pile into the lift, I can sense just how drunk I'm becoming. I lean on Louis for a little support, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Zayn and a large bald man.

Louis softly embraces me. I catch a glimpse of his smug grin in our reflection.

I release a small laugh, resting my weight against him for the rest of the ride.

As soon as I step into the foyer of Louis and Harry's suite, I already know it's bigger than my entire flat. Niall shows me into the kitchen as the others set themselves up in the living room. And just to prove my point, the kitchen alone is a dream – the kind I've only seen in magazines.

The blonde lad opens the freezer. He pulls out a frosted bottle of whiskey, looking it over.

"That's convenient," I comment, mildly smirking.

"Barely opened!" Niall chuckles, as if he wasn't expecting to find anything at all. "Want a shot?"

"Yeah, I do," I bite my lip, opening a couple of kitchen cupboards, then closing them again. When I get to the third cupboard, I find a tray of shot glasses with the hotel's label on each one. "Sweet, check this out." I tell Niall, then immediately internally cringe, because this dude is a millionaire and he's probably seen everything and here I am getting excited over a set of hotel fucking shot glasses.

"Great!" Niall grins welcomey, despite my chagrin. "Bring that out to the lads, yeah?"

"Sure," I grab the tray and head out to the living room.

The whiskey bottle is passed around and poured in no time as Niall and I rejoin the others around the living room couches. But as the boys are distracted with the booze, I'm distracted by Louis.

Louis has since changed into his pyjama bottoms during my time in the kitchen. He's the cutest thing ever, scuffing around in his bare feet, waiting for his shot glass to be filled. I know it's entirely taboo, but I can't stop myself from fantasising about how much I want to touch his bum.

And with that thought:

"What's on your mind, love?" Louis slowly warms up to me before I even have a chance to sit down.

"Kinda wanna touch your bum." It just sort of slipped out.

"Lads!" Louis turns away from me, commanding the attention of his bandmates. "I'm going to need you all to get the fuck out."

Zayn scoffs, grabbing a shot glass of his own, "Yeah, that's not happening."

My cheeks flush in embarrassment.

"Come on, have a heart!" Louis slides his hand around my waist, pulling me in from behind.

And- okay, this isn't entirely terrible.
"You talking about shagging, Lou?" Harry sits with the others, also having changed into his own flannel bottoms. "There are other rooms, you know." He stares fixedly at us with that look, the one where his eyes cut right through you and make you weak. I wonder if someone made him practice that look.

"Come on, we're just playing around," I smile modestly, separating from Louis to go for a shot of my own.

"Yeah, what kind of pervert are you, mate?" Louis smirks sarcastically.

"Come off it," Harry chuckles, clearly amused. "Love the shirt, by the way, Scarlet."

"Thanks," I smile, smoothing my hands down my faded Rolling Stones shirt. I grab a shot and toss it back in a single fluid motion, swallowing and slamming it down.

"Stones are always top," Harry slurs, puffing his chest out as he stretches comfortably.

"Stop flirtin' with the man's girl, Harry!" Niall shouts, clearly a bit more intoxicated than when we first came in.

"They're not married, Niall," Harry frowns as he tries to balance a very full shot glass in his large grip, though he still can't help but chuckle as he puts on a goofy voice and sings: "Or are youuu...?"

"We're just having fun," I smile at Louis, who winks right back at me with an affirming nod.

"Yeah, calm your bollocks, Niall," Louis chimes, smirking as he walks over to Harry. Louis steals the full shot from Harry's grasp and tosses it back for his own pleasure instead. "And that's enough for you, curly."

Louis and I have claimed the loveseat next to the couches and since made ourselves comfortable. Harry and Niall have migrated to the kitchen, looking for food, while Liam is currently stretched out on the larger couch with his legs spread over Zayn's thighs.

It seems like the lads are naturally like this – genuine, tactile and trusting. It puts me at ease, simply being around such a welcome, open environment. And, god, I barely sound like myself anymore. Maybe I'm more drunk than I thought.

Louis pours me a mixed drink. It's the last one I'll be having for the night. I won't be getting too blitzed.

I sip from the glass, deeply considering how Harry's trademark flirty demeanour has been amplified with the booze, and how Niall's echoing laugh, even all the way from the kitchen, is almost making me fall into yet another round of giggles, myself.

"So, how's the song coming along, Scar?" Louis interrupts my thoughts as Liam and Zayn are caught up in their own conversation. I see we're onto nicknames now.

"What song?" a lump nearly gets caught in my throat. I distract myself by touching my fingertips to a drop that spilled on my lip.
"Last meeting, your manager said you were writing a new song, a slow one," Louis smiles, completely relaxed. *He can't know it's about him...*

"Yeah, it's... wonderful..." I utter, hardly knowing what else to say.

"Do rock stars do ballads?" Louis jokes softly. I can't believe we kissed. "Is that a thing?"

"I dunno... it's different," I voice carefully, slipping in that vague reference to both my song and my attraction towards the lad right in front of me.

"Different can be good," Louis settles closer to me. Our gazes lock. *He knows.*

"Not always..." I say, weighing each word like the weight of the world, "but in this case... potentially."

Louis chuckles, squeezing my knee sweetly. "I don't think you could write a bad song."

A smile paints over my lips, cheeks flushing as pink as roses, yet my stomach turns. I can only hope that he doesn't have a clue.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

[The Monkees - Pleasant Valley Sunday (1967)]

[Read this chapter on Wattpad]
I didn't plan on going anywhere other than the bar last night. I didn't plan on enjoying myself at the bar last night, but I did, and I even snogged a cute guy.

The thing is, I really wasn't expecting to find out how interesting and damn likeable those boyband lads are. Although we might not share a similar taste in music or lifestyle, there's no doubting our shared friendliness and natural chemistry.

After a long night of drinking and bonding, I've since learned that the boys are not their images – imagine that.

Allow me to sum it up real quick: Niall Horan, the cute blond one, is actually a talkative Irish guitarist who drinks a lot of beer and laughs at dirty jokes. Liam Payne, the smart and sensible one, is actually an all around great guy who loves a good laugh and is just so humble and grateful for what he does that it radiates from him the moment you begin chatting. Zayn Malik, the dark and mysterious one, is actually dark and mysterious, yes, but he's also quite artsy and comical and thoughtful, too. Harry Styles, the ladies man, is actually a weirdly charming lad from my small hometown who is just the sweetest, kindest, cleverest thing and gets drunk off three beers. And then there's Louis Tomlinson, the funny one, who is entirely his cheeky persona, but he's also sweet and kind and loud and spontaneous and unbelievably gorgeous. And I'm completely, entirely fucked, because my guts turn to mush around him and even when he's not working up to a laugh riot, he makes me and everyone else around him smile like an idiot.

I still find it incredible: months and months of no romantic interests, then a sudden slam of intriguing lads.

What the fuck.
"Calling them 'the lads' already, are we?" Mitch chuckles, somewhat distantly. I can almost see him getting ready for his early noon errands: quirky eyebrows raised as he fixes his mousy hair in the mirror. Finding some greys, plucking them out.

"Um, no," I clarify, unamused. "They're nice enough, I guess." And- why did I say that? What does that even mean? Nice enough for what?

Mitch chuckles. "Well, that's good to hear, because that's the reason I called..." he tells me, as if he's leading up to something important. With my experiences, he may or may not be. He doesn't say a word yet. He's waiting for me to comment.

I take a sip of my tea. "Go on..."

"Right. So, we've been talking about you opening the Wembley show for just under a month now," Mitch begins, and my stomach does a flip. "From what I've gathered, you and the boys get along fine, so I want you to hang out with them again... and possibly be seen this time."

A loud laugh leaves my lungs before I can stop it. It's not them, it's their clean image and their pop music. I doubt my fans would take me as seriously if this became a regular thing. I might sound like a picky asshole, but 'Scarlet Ryder and One Direction' sounds just as good as mixing oil and water.

"Don't tell me you've got the jitters this far in!" Mitch assumes, and I can even hear his disappointed frown. "That's somewhat unlike you."

"It's not the jitters, it's guilt!" I sigh, resting my head in my hands. "Me with a boyband? It's ridiculous." Maybe I should scrap that ballad after all.

"I said they're- erm..."

"Nice enough."

"Yeah..." And I happened to write a song about the oldest one. I might have also snogged him. Oops.

"Scar, I know how fixed you are about your image," Mitch continues gently, "but why do I have a feeling this isn't just about the Wembley show?"

I pause. Shit. "Well it kind of is," I utter honestly. I don't want to admit that I'm second-guessing Louis – or any of the lads, for that matter – because, truly, I don't know if I really am. Hangovers can make anything seem like the end of the world. Kind of.

"Kind of but not entirely?" Mitch assumes knowingly. "Look, you have another full month until the performance. That should be enough time to figure things out. Just remember: this is a crucial stage, here. Spending time with 'the lads' now will up your chances of getting close with them in the future. I'm sure they've already taken a liking to you, but we want to set that in stone. We want that pull from the inside, because, in turn, it could give you a much greater chance to be chosen as their opener."

"Hmm..." I press my lips together, mulling over my manager's rather clever thought process. "You know what...? I'm still undecided, but... I can't argue with that plan."

"I do know what I'm doing," Mitch chuckles warmly. "So, continue to run with the boys and see how you feel when it's time to make the final decision, alright? There's no harm in trying."
I hold back a groan, almost wanting to laugh about the matter. "How are you always so bloody convincing?"

"It's my job," Mitch states wittingly. "Just... make friends, Scarlet. Be nice."

"Oh, thanks," I voice sarcastically.

"Friends," Mitch insists.

"Fucking friends!" I laugh, for real this time.

And just like that, out of pure instinct, I knew exactly where to begin.

A breakfast and a shower can work wonders.

After my conversation with Mitch, I lost my headache and really felt my mind open up. I hadn't realised how legitimate this gig was until everything started happening so quickly.

I was also given Harry Styles' phone number. My manager has been making more connections than I realised.

**Me:** *Harry, it's Scarlet. How's the hangover?*

I surprisingly don't feel that expected flutter of guilt as I set my phone aside and wait for Harry's reply. Either Mitch wants me to make friendly with the frontman, or he actually knows me as well as I thought.

Of all the lads, Harry and I happen to be the most alike. He's the most like a rock star, to be blunt. If I were to be publicly associated with anyone in a boyband, I *would* prefer it to be with someone with a touch of a hippie vibe about him, at least. None of the One Direction lads have that factor, other than Harry. Not even Louis, embarrassingly enough.

My phone chimes within minutes.

**Harry:** *Lovely. How are your hands?*

Well, then.

It takes a moment, but I get it.

**Me:** *Lol. I can feel them.*

**Harry:** *Good. How busy are you right now?*

It's not long before I arrive at my destination, a short walk away from Harry's home in North London, as he instructed. Upon parking my car, I step out next to a group of teenage girls lingering
outside a rather stately property.

My car door slams and their heads turn to me, mobile phones hovering mid-scroll.

"Are you here for Harry?" one of the girls voices.

"Do you mean Debbie Harry...?" I cover smoothly. No one gets it.

"Harry Styles, from One Direction?" another says, as if it's obvious.

"Wind Direction?" I feign confusion, shrugging with a smile. "Sorry, never heard of them." I turn to leave.

The first girl scoffs. "How have you never heard of One Direction? Do you even know music?" She then begins listing off a bunch of autotuned divas and brainless poster boys and I want to cringe because music is so much better when it's made by people, not computers.

I want to say something more, point them towards some real tunes, but on a day like today, I need to save face, so I keep it light. Once the girls resume chatting aimlessly amongst themselves, I walk down the street and round the corner unseen.

I don't mention they've got the wrong address.

It must have slipped my mind.

Harry is waiting for me outside of his own flat, a short distance down the neighbouring road. He stands up off his regal front steps once he sees me coming.

"Scarlet Ryder," Harry voices suggestively. "Look who's sober."

"Oh, god," I laugh. "I should say the same for you."

"You're right on that one," he chuckles slowly.

We greet each other with a hug once we near, then Harry leads me up his front steps and into his home.

If I was gobsmacked by the luxury of his hotel suite last night, I couldn't even say what I am now. The expanse of marble flooring shines like it has recently been polished. The combination of modern design and antique furniture is like something out of a television feature. And my gaze can only travel upwards, higher, towards the peaked ceilings where a massive chandelier hangs far above the top of the staircase. For a flat, it's been bloody done right.

"Do you own this place?" I question, gazing around.

"No, just renting at the moment," Harry tells me.

"It's gorgeous."

Harry takes my coat for me. "Would you like anything? Water?"
"I'm alright, thanks, Harry," I express.

"No worries," he smiles handsomely, sliding open the foyer closet. "So, did you come here to hang out with me, or did you just come to see Lou?"

"Oh, right, you two live together," I recall. I'd almost completely forgotten.

"Nice cover," Harry smirks. He hangs up my coat and slides the closet door closed.

"There's no cover," I state plainly. "I came for you."

"Right, then," Harry comments, turning around to face me. "Let's get to it. The bedroom's upstairs."

"Nice try, sleaze," I find myself smirking at the lad's wit. "I didn't come here for a shag. This isn't one of those types of visits."

"That's no fun," Harry smirks back, giving me that look. I hate that look.

I roll my eyes, yet I can still feel a hint of a smile. "I just came here to hang out with you and get to know you better. That's all."

"Sober?"

"Yes, sober."

"There's a catch," Harry eyes me suspiciously. He somehow manages to see right through me.

"My manager said I should," I shrug lightly.

"There she is!" Harry grins. He draws an arm around my shoulders and leads me into his living room.

I go with him, continuing to take in my new surroundings. "So, Louis' not here, then?"

"No, his mum's come down for a visit," Harry says. "Took him out to London for the day."

"That's sweet."

"Bit of bonding," Harry smirks, separating from me to sit on his couch. "You sure you didn't come for him?"

I laugh again. "Let's just put it this way... of all the lads in your band, I think you and I have the most in common. So... let's go out like regular friends do!"

"That sounded a little strained," Harry chuckles.

"I'm sober, and sort of have an image to maintain," I admit honestly. Then I realise how rudely that must have come out. "Sorry, I didn't mean-"

"It's okay, I get it," Harry smiles, brushing it off kindly. "Let's go out. I'm not too hungry, but I'm sure we can find something light."
It's a cool, cloudy day, but it's a touch less chilly than it has been all week.

Harry and I sit at a table outside a wonderfully original little café right around the corner from the British Museum. We decided to share a salad, since neither of us were too hungry. The two of us pick at the leafy greens as we chat away and get to know one another.

"So," I remark casually, "it's your day off today."

"It is!" a calm smile spreads across Harry's face.

"Do you get many of those?" I ask, taking a sip of water.

Harry shakes his head. "It's pretty rare. We don't get very many days off at all... which you might soon find out."

"-If I get the gig?" I assume.

Harry nods. "You're a challenger."

I smile, definitely not blushing at that. "Think so?"

"For sure." Harry states amiably. "Singer in a rock band..."

I chuckle. "It's nothing much. I've been singing for as long as I can remember."

"As long as you can remember sounds like a very long time," Harry gives a cheeky raise to his eyebrows. A smirk tugs at the corner of his lips.

"Are you calling me old, Harry Styles?" I voice, sitting up a little straighter to match his gaze.

"You're older than me," he comments, "by two years."

"Am I?" Interesting, I didn't think the gap was that wide. "What about the others? I thought Louis was a year older than me."

"He is. The others are all a year younger than you," Harry explains pleasantly. "I'm just the baby."

"Ah, that makes a lot of sense," I tease him in jest. "So how about you, lovechild? When did you start singing?"

"Same as you, pretty much," Harry tells me, smiling. "But I never took it seriously until I was a teen. Mum was my only fan for years!"

"Was she the type of mum who had to say you were good?" I grin, leaning back in my seat.

"Yes! And I was a right show-off about it!" Harry's eyes shine and we laugh together. Then I feel him graze my hand with his.

"What was that?" I ask.

"You had a fly on you," he says.

"Thanks, mate," I swallow uncomfortably.

"So, are you actually gonna open the Wembley show for us, if they want you to?" Harry asks, grabbing a forkful of the shared salad between us. "I heard you're still undecided."
I peer at the lad sat in front of me. "I literally had that conversation this morning."

Harry shrugs. "Big news travels fast," he says behind a mouthful of greens.

I hum in thought, opting for another forkful of salad, myself. "Well, I dunno... It's really not my scene – I'm sorry – but it would give me some incredible exposure and experience... and you lot are very lovely..." I sigh. "Really, I just... don't know yet."

"You don't know yet? Or you don't wanna talk about it?" Harry cocks his head and smirks at me expectantly. "You know... like Crazy Horse?"

"Crazy Horse, with Neil Young?" I furrow my brow in a smile, pleasantly surprised that someone like Harry would be familiar with something like that. "And Rod Stewart did a cover of that song later, didn't he?" I clarify, laughing, and Harry enthusiastically agrees. "Shit, you're kinda cool."

"I'll take that!" Harry chuckles, dimples deep.

The pair of us continue to chat and laugh for the next half hour or so.

It's really easy getting along with Harry. We have many similar interests and he's quite the charming, down-to-earth guy. In a way, he's sort of a rock star himself.

But that's the catch.

Hanging out with Harry Styles is one thing, because, as I've learned, many celebrities can say they've done the same. Even those in rock bands.

On the other hand, as far as Louis and the other boys go, I'm still unsure as to how far I'm willing to take our relationship publicly. Or in daylight. Or sober. They're still labelled as boybanders to the bone, which- could be a little problematic. It would be like Joan Jett making friendly with The Jackson 5. Oil and water.

Regardless, I'm sticking to it. I'll continue to follow Mitch's advice, and then we'll see where we all end up.

Only fate can lead us from here.

The next morning, after a yawn and a stretch in the sunlight, I unlock my mobile phone.

I have a few unread messages, but the first one that catches my eye is from my manager. His text consists of a simple, "Well done," followed by a few links to separate social media pages.

I open the first link.

And then I see it.
A photograph of myself and Harry is displayed on the small screen before me. It's from our outing yesterday and it was definitely taken by a fan or someone who knew who we were. Or, more likely, someone who recognised Harry.

Below the image, the user simply wrote: *Cute!*

At least it's positive.

Then, with great hesitation, I search my name online.

Tons of new images and opinions come up — some good, most absolutely nowhere near. The majority of the photos are repeats of the few from yesterday's outing. The remainder are pictures of myself paired with pictures of Harry. I guess to test if we're a suitable match or something.

We've even got a couple name: *Scarry*. How flattering.

I guess the camera caught us at just the right moment. And now the entire internet has falsified Harry swatting a fly as a romantic gesture between the two of us.

And now I am almost famous.

"I'm still unsure as to why the lovebirds aren't sat together," Liam winks.

"Yeah, if you're already holding hands in public, I'd reckon you'd be doing way more with all this privacy," Louis sarcasms with a single eyebrow raised. It's hard to tell whether he's jealous or amused.

"There was a fly!" Harry insists comically.

"That's what they all say!" Niall jokes casually.

We're currently at Niall's temporary flat, a short drive away from central London. His flat is completely different than the one that Louis and Harry are renting, yet it's equally as luxurious. The entire place is like a modern work of art, extended into a massive, gorgeous living space.

The three lads of my band are here with us. It's been a few days since Harry and I went out, and with all of the new *Scarry* rumours, One Direction's management team has suggested that we kick it up a notch. So today, we're stripping it down. With two acoustic guitars, an electric bass and a drum box between us nine singers, we've spent the past couple of hours sharing many of the tunes we've written and getting to know each other musically.

Rather than a typical jam session, however, this get-together has turned into a regular joke-fest. The lads are poking fun at Harry and me at any turn possible, and as much as I could hate it, I can't help but join in.

"Harry and I could be getting on *just fine*, Louis," a smirk plays on my lips as I turn to face the lad next to me, "but you're the one who had to go ahead and kiss me! Boy, did that turn the tables!"

Louis laughs out loud, visibly surprised at my bluntness. "Pulling that card, are we?"

"*Wait, wait, wait,*" my drummer, Elijah, waves his hands in front of his figure before turning to Louis
and me. "Just a minute... You two kissed?!"

"Yes! They did!" Harry widens his eyes in a laugh. "So can we kindly move our attention to the Loulet couple over here? I've had enough fly jokes for the day."

Pete looks up from tuning his bass guitar. "What's a Loulet?"

"Louis and Scarlet..." Harry pauses for a moment, "combined," he voices in a cheeky manner. Bugger.

"Oh, no, Harry," I stare at him. "Don't you start that ship shit."

"Too late, I think he's already done it," Liam chuckles.

"Wouldn't be the first time..." Zayn raises his eyebrows, sharing a smirky glance with Liam.

"What are you on about...?" Harry's eyes narrow intriguingly.

Zayn scoffs a laugh. "You're the one who made up Larry Stylinson, mate."

"Larry who?" Keith, my guitarist, asks aloud as he returns from the toilet.

"Well, our fandom comes up with these- ship names for us... bromances, or whatever, right?" Louis casually tells Keith. "So, Larry Stylinson is a mix of Harry's name with mine. Harry made it up years ago, because we're best friends... and we get on really well."

Apparently, whatever Louis said must be hilarious, because just then, Niall begins laughing to kill himself, holding onto his stomach as his eyes squeeze closed in a massive round of laughter.

"Right, well..." Harry shrugs, blushing amid a soft chuckle, "now I've made up Loulet, too, so... you're welcome."

"I don't know whether to thank you, or punch you in the nose," I smirk with a shake of my head, and the lads get a right kick out of that.

"Why didn't you tell us, Scar?" Elijah frowns, sat atop his drum box with his arms rested over his knees. The two of us are usually the type to share that sort of information, so we'll tend to mention blokes we're interested in every now and then. This time with Louis, however, I didn't even imply a word. But, why?"

"I... don't know," I voice lamely.

"Because I'm a boybander," Louis answers for me. Ouch. He looks me over, blue eyes flushed wide with pretty black pupils, then he turns to Elijah once more. "But she doesn't know I have tattoos."

With that, Louis pushes up the right sleeve of his woolen jumper, and all that covers his smooth forearm is ink and more ink.

My expression blanches, my eyes dull, and my lips part in shock.

A knotted rope wraps around Louis' right wrist. A large sparrow-type bird is perched above it, etched in darkly and stretching even longer than the length of his hand. There is a large, red and black tic-tac-toe game drawn below his elbow, a few scribbled words here and there that seem random but probably aren't, a beautifully detailed compass, a bomb, yellow and red Pac-Man characters, a small doodle of a cup of tea, a stick man riding a skateboard... and fucking more.

"That's, um... holy shit," I begin laughing softly. I can feel the heat of my cheeks as I bury my face in
my hands.

"There's more where that came from..." Louis smirks, edging in closer.

I bite my lip as the air leaves my lungs, flustered. I open my mouth to speak, but Keith, the eldest member of my band, heads me off.

"You two gonna get a room?" the older Irish lad looks at us implicitly. He's a hard one to read sometimes, Keith, but I can tell that he's amused. He can be a little rough around the edges, sure, but he's a great guitarist and a damn good person... as much as he's suggesting I should hook up with a boybander at another boybander's place, that is.

"Nope, don't think so," Niall raises his eyebrows defensively. "Not in my flat."

"We all know you, of all people, wouldn't care, Niall," Louis licks his lips, that glowing glint still lingering in his eyes.

Niall makes a mocking face at Louis, but he ends up shrugging nonchalantly. "He's right, y' know." Niall clears his throat, glancing between the lot of us. "Erm, are we gonna... play some more music, or...?"

"...Or are we gonna keep talking about Louis' dick?" Zayn mumbles smugly, tongue in cheek.

"Hey, listen- this isn't just about Louis' dick, okay?" I sit up, lightly tensing my brow at Zayn. "I have as much say in this as he does!"


"But you're the one who caused this in the first place, you know?" I add pointedly.

Zayn chuckles lazily. "Yeah, well..."

"Well..." Liam ponders aloud, "me too, in a way."

"Me too, in a way," Louis repeats thoughtfully.

I give a shove to the cheeky bugger next to me. "Shut up," I break out laughing.

"So, are we gonna, like-...?" Niall's voice fades once more.

Elijah gives a few edgy raps to his drum box. "Whatever, let's just play some tunes."

"Right!" Niall barks out, turning specifically to my band. "D' you lads know The Eagles?"

"'Course," Keith winks, a big fan of old rock bands.

"Yeah, yeah, they're a pretty cool band," Pete slides his fingers down his bass strings.

Elijah nods along, starting a steady beat.

"Okay!" Harry turns to the rest of us, completely disregarding our new jam session. He's entirely wrapped up in our kiss-and-tell. "So, I get this one," Harry dismisses Louis with a wave of his long fingers, "but how did you two get them together?" Harry leans towards Liam and Zayn, perched on the edge of the couch cushion. He's almost too wrapped up in it.

Liam chuckles. "I suggested they drink more."
Zayn nods. "And I suggested they kiss."

"Did you!" Harry's eyes widen as the biggest smile spreads across his face. He shares a look with the dark haired singer across from him, and he ends up shaking his head, smirking. "Zayn, mate..."

"It was more than a suggestion," I lightly defend myself.

"You were already drunk and joined at the hand," Zayn smirks at me: let's be real. "There wasn't much work left to do."

I press my lips together, feeling my face redden, and Louis nudges me once more. We share a glance.

And there it is: that feeling that Louis causes. It's a warmth deep in the pit of my stomach that spreads slowly throughout, grazing the edge of my heart as it passes over. And although labels shouldn't be that important to me, I can't deny the tinge of guilt that goes along with it all.

I'm a shit person if I'm having trouble accepting these wonderful young men simply because they're in a boyband, aren't I?

But with that said, that 'simply' isn't so simple, is it?

I sigh, swallowing thickly. "Harry..." I stall, mulling over my words. "What do you usually do about... you know... the release of these kinds of pictures? Are your managers involved with what's said, or...?"

"Publicists, yeah," Harry shrugs. "Usually, we don't say too much."

"Young Harry's pictured with girls all the time, so it's no big deal, really," Louis drawls in his high, raspy tone. He makes me shiver. Every last aspect of his voice is like a caress. The damage is already marrow deep.

"I won't say anything," I shrug it off.

"Nah, say what you wanna say, if you wanna say something," Liam tells me with a nonchalant pout. "Don't say anything if you don't wanna say it."

"That... really helps, thanks!" I chuckle sarcastically, fondly shaking my head at Liam. "I'm gonna go start spreading some rumours now..."

"Hey, you, be careful with that," Louis looks down at me, touching a finger to my nose. "People will believe anything these days."

I gaze up at Louis, deep down enjoying the hell out of our chaste cuddling, despite his bandmates' gaze. "It's okay. I don't need to say anything. It was just lunch." I look around at the lads, satisfied as they nod in agreement. "At this rate, I'll likely be spotted with another one of you soon enough, anyway. Then they'll realise we're all friends."

"Right, it's only been a few days," Zayn assures me with calming, heavy lids. "Just let it play out for a bit."

"Right..." I breathe, my chest suddenly feeling rather numb.

It's not what any of the lads said that irked me. It's what I said. Soon, the world will discover that I'm friends with all of the members of One Direction, not just Harry Styles, himself. The gears have
already been set in motion. My rock star reputation and raw image are soon to be altered regardless, whether I play the Wembley show or not.

This is real.

This is happening.

"Alright, Scar...?" Louis asks me quietly. He softly rubs his hand along my leg, as if we're the only ones here.

I stare out blankly to the floor in front of me before I say it.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, voting and all of your lovely comments :)

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"I think I'm all in..." I finally voice, nearly in a daze.

"What?" Louis' eyes soften.

"I think I'm gonna do it..." I utter, a bit louder this time.

The small group looks at me in surprise. Even the lads of my band stall mid-jam with Niall.

"Yeah, I'm all in," I decide on the spot, shaken by the sudden silence. "I wanna do the Wembley show, if you guys do." I gaze directly at my band, observing their awed, yet considering reactions.

Slowly but surely, all three of them say yes.

Happy congratulations fill the room. Words like "Amazing!" and "Brilliant!" spill from the lungs of the five young men around me. My cheeks are flushed and the mood is bright before Zayn eventually clarifies: "For real?"

"Come on, you didn't see it coming?" I laugh softly. "What else could I have said?"

"No?" Harry chuckles, looking at me like I just told him dragons exist.

"Well... it's a yes," I smile, taking a deep breath. "I think..." I pause. "Yeah, fuck it. It's a yes."

"This is so great," Louis grins from beside me. "How'd you figure that one out?"
"My brain sort of did it for me," I shrug with a shake of my head. "Or, I dunno. It's just happening, alright?"

"We are definitely okay with that," Louis beams beautifully, gripping my thigh tight.

"Definitely," Harry echoes, visibly enthused.

"So, are we on the list?" Pete asks, looking around at the boyband. "How does it work from here?"

"You're on the list," Niall nods.

"There aren't many on the list," Louis adds in.

"No, there aren't," Niall chuckles, clearly knowing everything we don't.

"So, what happens now?" Elijah wonders aloud.

"Well," Liam turns to Elijah, "I don't know any specifics, but I can tell you that our coordinators are probably sorting things out as we speak. You should tell your manager," he says to me specifically. "Let him know you're one hundred percent sooner rather than later."

"I will, for sure," I nod, though I doubt I will just yet. Opening for a boyband at a stadium is a huge commitment to agree to. I might need a few extra days away from them just to know I'm certain.

Nonetheless, the lads continue to fill us with congratulations.

"Welcome to the show!" Liam beams around at the lot of us. "Or-well, closer to it," he chuckles.

"Shit, that reminds me," Niall rises from his couch. He walks over to his own acoustic guitar in its stand. "Lads, I completely forgot. We've gotta fix the harmonies in One Thing."

The lads voice their few mumbles of sluggish agreement.

"Isn't that an older song of yours?" I ask, vaguely recalling the single's title from years ago.

"It is," Liam tells me, "but the last couple of shows have sounded a bit off in parts."

Harry agrees with a nod. "Our vocal coaches recommended we go through it on our own time, just to fix the knots."

"A refresher is good every now and then..." Louis smirks endearingly, "as much as it bloody pains us."

Niall gives off his deep, hearty laugh, sitting back down on the ottoman with his guitar in his lap. He quickly paces over the chord progressions of the song as a reminder, then he looks up at the group once he's ready. "Okay, we're solid."

"Alright," Liam straightens his back, keeping charge of his bandmates. "Niall, lead us in, then we'll start."

The other four lads make their sounds of acknowledgement, preparing themselves by shifting in their seats and clearing their throats. I mask my impulsive smile by tucking in my lips.

Until today, I had never heard One Direction sing or perform live, in person. The most I had ever heard of any of their songs was from the occasional play in supermarkets, from teenage passers-by, or unexpectedly on the radio, before I would hastily switch it off.
I didn't know what to expect when we first sat down — maybe they would be a tad better or worse than their studio recordings — but I didn't expect them to be so naturally talented.

"Let's run through the whole thing, then we'll see what needs patchin' up," Niall suggests to his bandmates.

Everyone seems to be for that plan, so with a nod, Niall starts them off with the intro.

Niall is the only one of his band who plays guitar, but he's quite good at it and he kind of helps strip away that typical-boyband image from the group. That, and they can't dance. They can all sing very well, but none of them dress the same, and they can't dance, so they don't.

Thank god.

Minutes pass as the five lads sing through their entire song. My band and I watch them perform, and all the while, I find myself thinking about what Louis said earlier: "Treat every rehearsal like a show."

If One Direction's concerts are half as good as their acoustic rehearsal right now, I'm more than interested. I could possibly even be sold. Maybe I am. I wouldn't have said yes any other way.

And their voices, just wow. Although Liam and Zayn's soulful tones are more suited for R&B, their clean accuracy is matched with Harry and Niall's classic rock edge, and Louis' heart-melting kick of pop rock just ties it all together and makes it all work.

Fuck me if I ever thought they were autotuned trash.

As the song ends, my band and I give the boys a cheering round of applause.

So, it's one thing to hear One Direction's songs on the radio and everywhere else, but it's something entirely new and magically rare to have them sing for us, indulging in their own harmonies without any microphones for me and my band alone.

It's a whole new world we've stumbled upon: a world run by talented, gorgeous lads. We've been doing this all day and I'm still blown away. Every moment spent with them only makes me all the more curious.

Louis smiles as he notices my intrigued reaction. "What'd you think?"

I scoff, struck in pleased disbelief. "Well, I want you all in bed right now, so there's that."

All of the lads break out laughing — some smug and proud, some regarding my quip as simply a joke — aside from Harry, on the other hand, who has never reacted so seriously to anything I've said before. His eyes burn into mine, and I can't tell if his gaze is dull or driven. Maybe a bit of both.

Then I feel Louis shift beside me.
I draw my gaze up to the older lad, who winks as soon as our glances meet.

_Oh, wow._

He bites the edge of his lower lip and smirks, checking me out.

_Holy shit, if sex was ever personified..._

"Alright, lads!" Liam voices briskly. "Let's get on with that song-mending!"

---

It's only a few days until a small radio station picks up my story and invites me down for an interview. I travel with Mitch to the underground broadcasting station West of London to meet with a sweet-faced girl named Emilie, my interviewer for the day.

Our interview is to be recorded now, then edited for its release the day after tomorrow. Once we've popped on our headphones, tested our connections and become comfortable in our positions, Emilie gives the sound guys the okay, and we begin recording.

"We've heard you're the next popular thing," Emilie starts us off with a smile.

"Did you?" I chuckle modestly.

"Scarlet Ryder is definitely a name we've been hearing more of lately," Emilie fiddles with her pen, leaning back in her swivel chair. "You've had a few tracks come our way. You've got some killer songs."

"Thank you very much," I beam.

"What can you tell us about your music, for those who haven't heard your first EP?" she asks.

"I can tell you it's loud," I laugh. "It's not too lyrical, yet not too plain and simple. Classic rock and psychedelic pop from the sixties and seventies is what we're aiming for."

"You're very much a rock star, especially from the pictures I've seen of your live shows," Emilie commends me and I warmly thank her once more. "So, I have to ask: How did a rock singer like you get to this point of possibly opening for the biggest boyband in the world? Where did you come from? What's your life story?"

"I have no idea how we got to this," I chuckle, still feeling like I'm living a dream, "but as a professional singer-songwriter, I'd become almost used to playing a steady stream of live gigs for a while. With my three-piece rock band, of course: my favourite lads, Keith, Pete and Elijah."

_The three amigos._

"How did you know our fans call them that?"

"The internet is a wonderful tool," Emilie sings, motioning a hand in my direction. "Please, indulge us."

"Amazing," I chuckle lightly. "So, the gigs went on for a few years, and eventually, it got to the point where we weren't just limited to pubs and parties anymore. Soon, we were performing at larger
venues, outdoor venues, alongside much more talented musicians and much bigger names. It's like something, I dunno, clicked. We were barely even controlling anything and our opportunities just kept getting better and better. I think we're still starry-eyed," I joke. "And now we're here."

"And now you're here," Emilie smiles kindly, looking down at the papers in front of her. "You write your own songs, if I'm correct?"

"Yeah, I write most of my own songs," I nod, adjusting my bulky headphones. "The rest are co-written with my bassist, Pete."

"How do you get your inspiration?"

"I dunno if I can say that on the radio."

"Alright, let's move on to something a bit more listener-friendly. Or not, depending on how you put it," Emilie jests lightly. "We've seen you out with Harry Styles recently. Someone a bit out of your scene, if I'm not wrong. What's it like spending time with One Direction?"

I laugh out loud, feeling a burn in my belly, despite my strapped-on smile. "I mean, I buy my clothes from local second-hand shops. I wasn't really prepared to be hanging out with people who wear Gucci and Prada as casual-wear, you know? But, uh, they're actually quite humble lads. Cool guys, the lot of them, once you get to know them."

Emilie nods in enthusiastic agreement. "I've heard Harry's one of the nicest celebrities out there."

"He really is," I smile to myself, thinking of Harry and his bandmates. Louis, in particular. "They all share that quality," I make sure to mention.

"Something you definitely share as well," Emilie voices generously. "It's no wonder you get along."

"Aw, thanks so much," I can't help but continue to grin. The girl's heart matches her pretty face.

"Anytime!" Emilie muses endearingly, looking over her papers once more. "Now for some fun ones: Preferred mode of transportation?"

"I like walking, but driving makes me feel free."

"Fruits or vegetables?"

"Fruits."

"Sex or love?"

"Right now, the first option."

---

*I could have just asked Niall to borrow his bedroom, I reckon openly. He did say he wouldn't care.*

I chuckle to myself, shaking my head at my own thoughts.

I'm actually the worst -- I'm the mainstream of all mainstreams. It's been almost a week and I still can't get over the look that Louis gave me at Niall's flat. Even with all of our bandmates there, the
chemistry between us was undeniable. I'm actually aching.

My mobile vibrates on the counter as I'm folding my laundry. The screen lights up, displaying that I've got a new text message from an unknown number. *Exactly what I need.*

I set my socks aside to read what they have to say.

**Unknown:** *Harry's out.*

My stomach lurches with teasing nerves.

I'm a bit confused. Maybe the message was a mistake and they weren't finished composing it. Perhaps they hoped I would understand something by it. I give the number a ring to find out.

"Hey, Scar," a warm, breathy voice answers after the second ring.

"*Louis,*" I breathe, nearly choking on my own tongue. "Hey, what's up?"

"Figured you could come over," he says lowly, sounding as kind and smooth as ever. "Harry's out for a bit."

"Where's that?" I ask.

"He's at some pre-fashion show to a fashion show," Louis emits a soft chuckle. God, does his voice sound fabulous over the phone. I could listen to his delicate yet raspy tone for days. "He'll be there for a few hours."

My heart halts and I swallow thickly. *Is this what I think it is? Is Louis calling me over for a shag? No fucking way.*

"When do you want me over?" I hear myself say. My fist clenches tight around my phone to my ear. There is a pause on Louis' end, but I can tell that he's smiling. "Right this second would be lovely."

---

I park my car a short distance from Louis and Harry's flat, in a different location than last time, just to be safe. As I near the address on foot, I spot Louis leaning on the railing of the steps out front, waiting for me.

The sight eerily mirrors the first time I came here. Except that time, it was to get to know Harry. This time, I have much different intentions with a wonderfully different guy.

"Hey there, rock star," Louis pulls me into a warm hug before leading me up the steps and through the front door.

It's a bit less neat than it was before, I notice as I slip off my boots. The shoes aren't aligned properly like they were previously, and I notice that Louis' jacket has been thrown over the chair in the foyer.

"Let me guess, Harry's the neat freak of you two?" I mask a grin, looking around the spacious place.

"Spot on," Louis smirks.
I wander into the living room, glancing over some small, white statues atop the fireplace mantle.

"Would you like a beer?" Louis asks from the archway.

"Of course," I smile, watching him round away to the kitchen. And, yeah. Alcohol would definitely help ease my nerves in a situation like this.

Louis returns shortly with two bottles of Stella Artois in hand, both already cracked open.

"You're not trying to drug me, are you, Tomlinson?" I smirk, walking around the glass coffee table to sit on the couch.

Louis grins, blue eyes sparkling as he settles down right next to me. "How else could I get you to agree with what I have planned?"

"What do you have planned?" I look up at him and my breath hitches. He is so incredibly close.

"Oh, just the usual..." Louis smirks, sliding a lean, muscular arm around my shoulders. "I'll take you to the back shed... tie you up..."

"Sounds kinky," I roll my eyes, grinning. Really, I can scoff at Louis' obvious advances all I want, but I still can't help but blush at the fact that his arm remains around my shoulders.

"Mmm," Louis continues to smirk, letting our eyes roam over each other's faces a moment longer than expected. "Are you ready?"

I stall, imagining all of the dirty intentions possible. "Ready for what?"

"Down to the middle of the label on three," he points at his beer bottle.

I eye him playfully. "You're on!"

Louis counts us off and we raise the bottles to our lips on three, chugging the liquid as quickly as we can. I watch him from the corner of my eye and notice that he's dangerously close to beating me. I reach over, gripping Louis' thigh, trying to distract him. It totally works, as he pulls back in shock and I determinedly drink my own beer down to its halfway point.

Louis looks at me with wide eyes, mouth comically gaping. "You cheated!"

"Loser has to down their bottle," I smirk.

"Oh, really?" Louis challenges with a cheeky glint in his eyes. "Is this your way of getting me drunk, Miss Scarlet?"

I laugh dismissively. "Not at all."

"Together, then," Louis raises his bottle.

"Fine," I utter, biting my lip. How could I resist a face like that?

I grab hold of my beer once more, then Louis and I clink our bottles together before finishing them down to the last drop.
Louis goes off to his kitchen to fetch us more beer, leaving me to glance around his elegant living room. It's beautifully put together. I wonder if he and Harry had designers come in and sort out the decor for them, or if they're actually this tasteful.

My eyes land on a small picture frame placed neatly on the end table to my left. It holds a photograph of the five boys of One Direction in a tropical-looking area, all looking significantly younger than they do now. I pick it up in my hands to get a better look at it.

"This is the most adorable photo," I tell Louis as he re-enters the living room.

Louis sets our second beers on the glass table and sits next to me, draping an arm over my shoulders like before. He smiles down at the frame in my hands. "Ah," he notes fondly, "that was when we were barely a pop band. This was at the judges' house with Simon."

"Oh, your- uh..."

"X Factor," Louis nods.

"Right, that talent show." I realise, vaguely aware of how One Direction made their beginnings. "That's where you lot came from, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Louis reminisces, tapping a finger to his metal picture frame. "This was when we were just pulled from the solo contestants and put together as a group for the first time. We were so young! We had no idea what was in store for us. Look at our scared little faces!"

"Funny, I don't think that ever changed," I smirk endearingly at Louis, motioning to his face. "You should consider getting that fixed."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah, really."

"You devil," Louis smirks back, our gazes locking.

My heart thuds, resonating in my ears. My eyes flick to Louis' lips, mere inches away from mine.

*What am I doing?* I'm getting in too deep.

Our faces are unbelievably close, so much that the distance pains me. I'm close enough to regard the light splash of freckles scattered across the bridge of his nose. Closer when looking into his beautifully wide-set blue eyes.

My stomach twists: a sick sensation.

We've already kissed and there is a familiarity to Louis' lips that I just can't deny. But if I'm actually going to be chosen for this gig, should I really be fooling around behind the scenes? Would it fuck up my merit if anyone found out? What about my professionalism?

A smile tugs at the corners of Louis' mouth.

I begin to lose sense of my surroundings as I watch his moist lips nearing...
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"Wait," I stall hesitantly.

"Wait?" Louis pulls back to look at me. He looks so calm. So real.

I allow my face to blanche as I take in his beautiful features. "Are you going to kiss me?" I manage to breathe.

Louis smirks, a warm huff of a laugh. "I'd like to."

"What about...?" I cut myself off. I don't want to hurt Louis' feelings by saying anything about his image or that we probably shouldn't do this. I won't mention his career or professional boundaries, because I'm sure those thoughts already burden him before any decision he ever makes, no matter how small. And I can't claim that he's not my style or that I don't want to kiss him, because look at me: I'm gaga over this guy and I can't take my eyes off his lips.

Louis studies me curiously. Magically. "Do you know something I didn't know you knew...?"

"I don't think I do..." I respond, more confused than anything, because he can't be thinking of the same things that I am. He was the one who decided to invite me here in the first place.
"Good," Louis smiles as he leans in, whispering thinly, "neither do I."

Our lips rest softly against one another's before we press them together.

And there's that electric feel.

I place the picture frame on the couch beside me, determined to think of nothing else but Louis here and now and his warmth. His lips. I lean into him and he pulls me closer. We're both at ease. We both want it just as much as the other.

Louis' tongue flits over my lips. I part them slightly and kiss him deeper, anticipating the moment when our tongues will meet. And when they do, a shock is sent straight to my core. I moan softly into Louis' mouth. I just want more.

There is something so intimate in kissing him while we're sat on his couch together, rather than stood on dewy cobblestones far past midnight. It's a feeling just as electric as the alley. Just as intoxicating.

Adjusting myself in my seat, I reach up to Louis' face, caressing his cheek. The light stubble etched along his jawline draws me in. His moist lips meld perfectly with mine. The silky glide of our tongues only sets us both off.

Wordlessly, Louis' hands go to my waist. He strokes his way down my torso, outlining my smooth figure, until his palms settle over my hips. A single hand moves lower, and he finds a patch of my waist not covered by my shirt. His fingers trace light circles over my exposed skin, causing goose pimples to rise and make me shiver.

I brush my hands upwards, entwining my fingers into Louis' soft, feathered hair, gripping him as I press even further into our kiss.

That apparently does it for him, as he pulls away, chest rising. His darkened blue eyes stare into the depths of mine. "Would you like a grand tour?"

Not entirely the question I was expecting, but okay.

"Are you gonna be my tour guide?" I flirt cheekily. Louis' lips tighten, smug in a smirk. "Yeah, I'll show you some things..."

He'll show me some things? I'll show him some things.

Louis stands up, intriguingly waiting before me. "Coming along?"

I press my lips together, considering every reason not to agree, but my head nods before my mind has a chance to form words.

Louis exhales with a grin, his eyes still on fire. He kisses me quickly once more, before taking my hand and playfully guiding me to the staircase.

"This is our staircase," Louis says, taking the lead, "it has stairs," he climbs ahead of me as I follow close behind, "Harry and I generally use it every time we're here."

"Fascinating," I drawl with a soft chuckle. I briefly look back to the living room from this height, then my face suddenly falls as I glance straight ahead.

I always knew that Louis had a nice bum, but to have it paraded right in my sight like this just proves how much it needs to be squeezed. For a petite lad, he's got one beautifully curvy ass. Something I
had no idea I was into until now.

"This is the banister leading upstairs... stainless steel..." Louis' hand trails across the handrail, as if he's putting on a show, "and this is the upstairs hallway." He pauses, waiting for me to near him. Once I do, he tangles his fingers through mine, voice coming out just above a whisper. "Now would you like to see the bedroom?"

I have never in my life heard such a ballsy question asked so politely. I should say, though, his tone of voice was deeper and sexier than I've ever heard it yet.

I peer through the doorway over his shoulder. The room is spacious and decorated modernly, flowing handsomely with the rest of the flat. "Is this your bedroom?"

Louis nods, smirking at me.

"Are you gonna give me a tour of that, too?" I sarcasm, walking around him. "This one went on a little long."

"What d'you mean a little long?" Louis laughs, showing off his gorgeous pointy teeth.

"Well, I mean, we had nearly two beers. Then your grand tour was all of a minute. No pamphlets or buttons... No detours along the way, just the staircase and the fucking bedroom." I break out laughing before I can finish my sentence.

Louis beams, eyes crinkling from the reality of it all. "Yeah, well... maybe I didn't wanna wait," he voices with a chuckle, features softening as he guides me through the doorway. "Maybe you didn't either."

We pause.

There is something in me that so badly needs to be released. I can feel the pull between us. It's nothing short of magnetic.

I moisten my lips, breathing steadily. "Fuck waiting."

We begin kissing again, just like that, although I reckon neither of us expected to. Our bodies are pressing together and our hands are roaming over our physiques, and when Louis draws us apart and saunters over to his large, fluffy bed, he lays down on it with his back against the headboard, outstretching his arms behind his head to show off his toned bicep muscles, and he is putting on a show.

What nerve.

My mind races through visions of climbing on top of him and doing unspeakable things. I near him slowly, feeling the corners of my mouth tug upwards as I blatantly check him out. My eyes immediately go to the noticeable bulge in his jeans, causing my vision to shoot back up into his knowing gaze. I bite my lip to stop myself from grinning like mad.

"I'm not even gonna try to hide that," Louis chuckles, somewhere between confidence and embarrassment.

I smirk playfully, crawling onto his bed with him. "What are you so excited about?"

"The birds and the bees..." Louis gazes away, pretending to wander off in a daydream.
I chuckle, blushing as I press up next to him. "How did you get to be so adorable?"

"I ate a lot of sprouts growing up," Louis answers right away. Bugger.

"Yeah, right, I refuse to believe that," I flirt, eyeing him up and down.

"Caught me," he voices sexily.

"I want you," I respond in the same tone.

Louis gently strokes my lower lip with his thumb before pulling me in for another kiss.

In a matter of moments, I'm deepening our kiss and climbing on top of him like I'd pictured myself doing before. We sigh heatedly as I straddle him, his face in my hands. I tilt my head with his, allowing for our kiss to widen further. I can't get enough of his silky taste.

Our tongues tangle together, causing Louis to emit a soft grunt into my mouth. He thrusts upwards, almost as an impulse, pressing his restrained bulge against me. "There is way too much fabric separating us right now," he murmurs.

The mere thought is unbearable and gets me grinding my hips into his, stimulating both of us at the same time. "You're really fucking hard," I tell him.

"You don't know the half of it," Louis breathes, lips gliding over mine. He shifts us lower, laying us down and rolling us over until he's on top. He takes care not to rest his full weight on me, but the weight that is on me makes me feel safe, protected and sexually intrigued all at once. Especially when his firm chest is pressed so tightly against my breasts.

Louis' hand grazes over my ribcage as he strokes around my torso. He will casually reach up and feel the bottom of my breast every now and then, always coming dangerously close, yet every time end up not touching me where I want it most. It's so tantalising, the build up, I almost want to laugh. It's like he thinks I want to take it slow.

"Just do it," I whisper, smiling into his lips.

Louis releases a laughing sigh. I can feel him return my smile.

With another soft peck and a gentle lick to my lips, Louis' hand is on my left breast, softly massaging me over my shirt. In no time, his hardness is pressing into my thigh and I'm tingling there and kissing him back like I'm hungry for it.

If we've gone this far, I need to know. I can't stop now and leave myself trapped in the dark forever. I need to know what it's like. What he's like. I sigh into our kiss and slide up my shirt, exposing my stomach to let him know he has access to more.

Louis takes my silent offer quicker than I imagined he would. He slides my shirt over my arms and head, and onto the floor it lands. He breaks away from my lips and kisses down my jaw and throat, pausing to suck at one side of my neck.

I groan, tilting my head back at the sweet pleasure. Blindly, I tug at the fabric of his shirt, trying to pull it off.

Louis understands my intention and swiftly pulls his shirt off himself, throwing it wherever before kissing my lips once more. "That's better, yeah...?"
I lick over Louis' tongue as a response, feeling around his bare torso. I map his every inch, feel out every curve. His body is thin yet toned, delicate yet strong. He is small, but so am I, and it intrigues me.

I roll us over without any further wait, returning the favour of kissing and sucking on his neck — something he seems to be very much into — before I sit up and rest my weight over his hips. Smiling down at Louis from above, I take my time to undo the top button of his jeans. Then, with a quick tug, I zip down his fly.

I take a deep breath. "You know I'm not gonna get these skinny jeans off," I joke lightly.

"You wanna get me naked?" Louis teases, his eyes lighting up.

"I wanna get naked with you," I clarify, smirking.

Louis shakes his head, grinning at me. "Fuck, you're a charm."

I laugh, tugging at the hips of Louis' jeans. "Maybe I'd be more of a charm if you'd help me out, you tease..."

Louis chuckles, slipping his jeans off underneath me by himself, until he's down to his knickers. "This what you want...?"

I nod, feeling a ripple of intrigue course through my body.

Louis grips my waist, rolling us onto our sides so we're facing each other. "Well," he muses, making his naturally high voice seem lower, "match up."

There's something about Louis' smirk that drives me mad. I return his fiery expression, amused at his unyielding smugness, then I slip off my own jeans in one go. "Fair?" I sarcasm cheekily.

"Yeah, babe..." Louis slowly examines me in my black lace bra and panties.

Babe.

Babe, babe.

I take the extended moment as an opportunity to look down at Louis and his own body. His skin is wonderfully sun-kissed and his bare chest is inked with even more tattoos than I was imagining. His lean pectorals are sparkled with a light patch of chest hair, unexpected for a man with such delicate, feminine features, but it's sexy, and only makes me want to touch him more.

Then I gaze down to his groin.

His hardness is fully outlined in his navy blue boxer-briefs. I can easily see its shape and everything, restricted above his tanned, muscular thighs.

My mouth instinctively waters.

I can't help but reach forward to palm his bulge.

Louis releases a moan from his parted lips once I touch him there. It's as if he was waiting for that for hours. "Yeah, that's good..." He leans forward, soft breaths caressing my mouth. His hands tickle up my back, gliding under the straps of my bra, unhooking it. "Wanna show me what's under there?" Louis husks, lips touching lips.
Without a word, I let my bra fall into my lap as I continue to massage his fleshy length, feeling him grow harder.

Louis looks down at my exposure before pressing his lips against mine for real, letting his hands slide over my tingling skin just to tease. He feels his way around my bare chest, heatedly mouthing down my neck before taking a closer peek at what he's working with.

Louis smirks upon glancing at me. He rolls me onto my back, gazing down at me in my essence.

My heart pounds in my neck. I suddenly feel very naked, chest rising with each breath. I'm spread out underneath this gorgeous, charismatic, famous guy who is probably used to fucking models and I don't know how we got to this point with so little wait. Lying on my back doesn't help me feel any better about my already small chest. In front of someone like Louis, I feel almost like a boy with nice nipples.

But then something happens.

Despite all my apprehension, Louis smirks arousingly, suggestively, licking his lips. "I can work with this," he moans, spinning my guts into mush.

His eyes have never been so blue.

Louis smooths his hands over my chest, giving my breasts a firm squeeze before lowering his head to kiss at them. He takes one of my nipples in his mouth, sucking on it as he plays with the other one between his fingertips.

The effect he's causing releases a whimper from my throat. I arch my back in the ecstasy of the moment.

Louis' bulge tenses against my thigh as a reaction. He slides a single hand down my body, fingertips grazing over my panties, as his mouth stays teasing and sucking on my nipple.

"God, I want you," I utter, forehead pressing against his. I tuck my legs up, removing my panties in a single motion, wanting to get rid of everything that restricts us from feeling good.

"Want me, huh...?" Louis urges, making his voice sound playful and sexy all at once. He licks his fingers and begins feeling up my sensitive slit.

"Fuck," I exhale over his lips. I relish in my pleasure for a solid moment, until my urge sends me to roll over and straddle his hips once more – a little lower down his thighs this time, so I can tease him over his boxers-briefs.

Resting my bum just above Louis' knees, I slide my hands over the thinly stretched fabric, up his thick outline, then slowly down, making him moan anxiously, awaitingly, before I give him a gentle squeeze. Grazing over his hips, I delicately tuck my fingertips underneath his elastic waistband.

"Not rushing things, are we?" Louis asks. There is a twinkle in his eye like he just knows.

I chuckle. "You know neither of us give a shit."

Louis breaks out squealing giddily to himself. "You're a fucking charm!" he shakes his head at me, beaming his face off.

I laugh along, because Louis just has this thing that draws me to him like nothing else. "You're really good with compliments, aren't you?"
"Mmm," Louis agrees with a smirk, watching my fingers trail over his waistband in wait, "especially when you're so good at teasing me like that."

Slowly, biting the edge of my lip, I decide this _has_ to be it. I pull the garment down to Louis' knees, revealing his flushed erection laying over his abdomen. _What a sight._ It's an incredibly good-looking endowment, smooth and solid, really well-sized. Not to mention tastefully thick, which I really hadn't imagined before.

"Wow." My eyes glass over as I look at him.

Louis kicks off his briefs, rendering himself fully nude beneath me.

I spit in my palm. Taking his hard length in my hand, I slowly begin to close my fist around his shaft, but I immediately lose contact with him as he slides my hips up his torso, pulling me closer, within reach.

Louis teasingly rubs my wetness, warming me up, before he slips a finger into my heat and slowly begins to move it in and out.

"God, Louis-" I grip onto his stiffness behind me, tugging him at a steady rhythm, as he slips in another finger, sending ripples of ecstasy to tickle throughout my entire body. "You have a condom?" I ask breathlessly, because he's just too tempting. Too irresistible.

"Yeah," Louis grunts. He leans over to his bedside table and pulls open his top drawer, rifling through it briefly.

And _holy shit_, this is a dream.

In a few moments, I will be having sex with him. The guy who I couldn't help but want for weeks, despite our more-than-vast differences. The guy who kissed me in an alley and made me rethink any decision I've ever been sure of. The guy who inspired a _ballad._

_It's just a fuck_, the voice in my head steadily reminds me. _With someone like him, it's a no strings attached, hell of a good time, simple fuck._

And sure, I'm okay with that, because before today, I hardly expected anything more to happen at all.

I wet my lips, grazing my fingertips over the large '78' inked into Louis' left pectoral. _Look at us now._

Louis soon finds what he's looking for. Using both hands, he opens the small package and rolls the condom on himself, pinching the tip. The pads of his fingers strategically glide over my wetness as I position myself above his fleshy head. Carefully, he guides himself into me, his tanned fist lightly gripping his base, until he's fully inside.

A rush of lightheadedness washes over me as I sit flush with his bare hips. _This is what I want._ I slide up his length with ragged breaths, only to come all the way down again.

It already feels fucking _good._ _He_ feels fucking good. Judging from the stony expression on Louis' visage, I doubt either of us will last very long.

I begin moving up and down his shaft, rotating my hips at a steady rhythm. "Getting me off already," I praise Louis darkly. "So fit..." I grind into him, every last bit of his length filling me from the inside, as I stabilise myself with my hands on his chest.

"Fuck," Louis curses, gripping my hips to stop me from moving. "God, you feel good..." Louis takes
a moment for himself before he pulls out and flips me over onto my back. He rises to his knees, bum resting on his ankles.

I moan out loud, taking in the sight of Louis and his naked body. He is godly. Uniquely perfect. His tight, tanned abdomen is a streamline leading straight down to his manhood, standing stiff and proud between his muscular thighs.

I welcomingly open my legs for him.

Half an hour goes by – touching, kissing, tasting, exploring – but time is the last thing on my mind as I'm messing up the sheets with the sexiest guy I've ever shagged.

Louis grabs my waist from behind and shifts me up to his pelvis. I raise my hips for him, chest pressed against the mattress, and he skillfully re-enters me, immediately hitting that one spot inside of me before continuing to thrust determinedly.

"Oh, fuck," I groan, gripping onto the sheets below me.

"That good, babe?" Louis husks. I can hear in his voice how desperately he's managing to stay in control of himself, especially by now.

"Right there," I pant, all too aware of how he's at the perfect angle, repeatedly hitting the perfect spot. "Mmm, shit..."

I can feel it coming on, getting all built up inside of me. I look back at Louis and his body, his gorgeous face, the way he is recklessly pounding at me, and that's it.

"Fuck, I'm coming, babe," I whimper, letting out a loud moan, followed by a few more profanities.

" Fucking hell, Scar," Louis continues to thrust into me, this time moving much quicker and stronger. He's really pounding himself into me.

"God, you're fucking sexy," I moan into the mattress, pushing my ass back against him.

As if that was all he needed, Louis emits a deep, guttural groan and slows down immensely. I can feel him flexing inside me as he soaks in his orgasm. He thrusts in and out one last time before pulling out for good.

I roll over, beaming at Louis, breathless and well spent. "I've always heard that flattery is the way to a man's heart. Also cock, apparently."

Louis laughs out loud as he groggily tosses his condom in his bin. "You've got that right, sweet thing," he winks, then he lays right up next to me and places a sweet, slow kiss to my lips.

We lie there, resting over the covers for a good number of minutes, all hot and relieved. My chest rises slower with every breath, as does Louis'. We remain by each other's sides, listening to the sound
of our sighs in the otherwise empty room.

*Did we really just do that?* my mind wanders, hormones swirling. *Will I have the luxury of doing it again?*

The two of us soon decide with a laugh that we should go back downstairs to retrieve our abandoned beers. We get up off the bed and start gathering our clothes.

"Sorry for the lack of foreplay," I chuckle, slipping my jeans back on.

"It's okay," Louis smirks, buttoning up his fly. "We both knew what we wanted." He grabs his shirt, then stops moving for a moment to furrow his brow. "What's that?"

"What?" I ask, stalling to listen closer.

"The door... but how-?" Louis huffs curiously. He throws on his shirt, then heads downstairs to go check things out.

I toss on the rest of my own clothes, briefly checking my reflection in the mirror to make sure I don't look like I walked straight out of a sex bucket, before following Louis downstairs. You never know who might happen to show up at a celebrity's place.

"Harry!" Louis chimes from the lowest step.

"Someone's hair looks beautifully tousled!" I can hear Harry's voice smiling, the charmer. He gradually comes into view as I take my last few steps down the staircase – shiny black shoes, ridiculously tight black jeans, a handsome black blazer, that cheeky, grinning face. He raises his head to me from where he's stood in the doorway once he sees me nearing. "Scarlet! Hi!" he grins, pleasantly surprised.

"Hi," I press my lips together, trying not to beam so much in a way that says: *I just shagged your best friend.*

"You're home early," Louis comments casually.

"I only had to make an appearance," Harry tells him, kneeling down to untie his shoes. "I stayed long enough."

"Not so interesting, then?" Louis assumes with a chuckle.

"What can you do?" Harry shrugs, dimples showing.

"Ah," Louis smirks, licking his lips, "maybe because it was a pre-fashion show."

"Fucker," Harry gazes up at the lad, eyes twinkling as he turns to me. "So, what brings you over, Scar?"

The situation is so obvious. He knows. I know that he knows. Even Louis knows that he knows.

"We were planting a garden," I suggest sarcastically.

"Upstairs?" Harry asks cheekily, his eyes still twinkling.

"Yeah, mate..." Louis presses smugly.

"Shit, did I interrupt anything...?" Harry questions cautiously, taking note of Louis' rustled hair once
again.

"Nah, not at all," Louis smirks, running both of his hands back through his feathered hair. "You missed it, more like."

"No! Already?" Harry laughs out loud, turning to me as he stands up. "What, did he last thirty seconds?"

"More or less," I grin at Harry, giving Louis a playful nudge to show him I'm only joking.

Louis snickers aloud, not doing much to hide his smugness. "And you thought she was gonna shag you first."

"I still had that hope," Harry tilts his head with a dimpled chuckle.

And- what?

In a matter of seconds, the two lads are getting spontaneously wrapped up in a brawl, laughing and play-fighting with each other. Louis is tucking himself under Harry's waist, trying to floor him like a wrestler. Harry is standing his ground, trying to lock his arms around Louis' shoulders, just before Louis manages to whip the younger lad around in a headlock.

As I watch the two, I can't help but consider all the things Harry must have done to Louis before I ever got a chance to, and vice versa. What, with all of the touching and teasing they do on a daily basis, squeezing and hitting each other in the most random places, and my god, imagine the kissing. They've basically claimed each other's cheeks, even if it is always just for a laugh. If they're that comfortable with each other on any old day, imagine what has possibly happened with alcohol involved.

Harry manages to escape Louis' headlock, laughing as he steps away. "I'm gone an hour and you've already got the place a mess," he shakes his head endearingly. "Typical."

"It's not that bad!" Louis defends himself cheerfully.

"The shoes, Lou," Harry points out, eyebrows raised.

Louis turns to me and gives me a knowing wink. "What did I tell you?"

"You know, Harry," I voice calmly, looking from Louis to the younger lad, "they say cleaning urges are for the sexually repressed..."

Harry's lips part as he looks at me. "Come on, Scar!"

"I already did," I tell him.

"Already did, what?" Harry asks, confused.

"Come," I smirk.

At that, the two lads break out in roaring laughter. I doubt I've ever made them laugh so hard until now.

"I'm so impressed," Louis howls through his tears, "so satisfied!"

"You would be," Harry jabs Louis' shoulder with a closed fist, and as the younger lad's green eyes meet mine, a wink is enough to let me know that he approves.
Or, at least, that's what I thought.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, voting and all of your lovely comments :)  

Read "Tangerine" on Wattpad for quicker updates!

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"You are brilliant," he says, "magnificent, the star of all-
"
"Thanks, I think I understand," I chuckle calmly. I don't feel like I need much praise for what I just agreed to, but I'm taking it.

"Why the sudden change?" the well-dressed man leans forward in his tall, leather chair. "Should I even ask?"
I open my mouth then close it again. I gaze around my manager's modern office, my mind immediately flashing back to the acoustic session that my band shared with One Direction last week. They were all so surprisingly talented and humble. Strangely enough, they were even enjoyable to watch. We all just clicked so well.

"I think they just grew on me," I reckon out loud, to sum it all up. *And Louis is a really good lay.* I mask my coy smile. "Besides, the world already knows I'm mates with Harry, right?"

"I'd say the world thinks more than that!" Mitch suggests, laugh lines glowing around his eyes and mouth. He is completely enthralled that my name has lately been linked with the media's favourite celebrity, Harry Styles. Even more so, now that I've agreed to take part in the Wembley show. "The internet is still going off the charts about you and Harry."

"So I've seen," I admit sheepishly.

"I hate to ask, but-"

"No you don't," I give him a look, already knowing exactly where he's going with his statement.

"You're right, I love gossip," Mitch grins, studying my expression. "So Harry...? Is anything brewing there...?" He fixes his cuffs as he watches me, ready to hang on to my every word.

"Oh... yeah... definitely," I nod slowly, responding to the matter very seriously. "Harry Styles, bloody hell..." I maintain my concentrated nod as he watches me, ready to hang on to my every word. **"True love."**

"Do any of them fancy you, then?" Mitch sits back, huffing a curious laugh. "Wasn't the one with the nose ring eyeing you in that first meeting...?"

I throw my head back in a massive chuckle. "Zayn?! You're hilarious. We're all just mates."

"Ah, they must be more than mates..." Mitch implies, eyebrow still pompously raised. There is a silence between us that fills the room, where I simply stare at the man in disbelief, until he finally spits it out: "God, Harry must have kissed you!"

I break out laughing at my manager's persistence and tireless effort. I understand that he's one for sharing love life updates, but this time, he's trying to get something out of me that hasn't even happened. **What a comedian.** "Listen, Harry's jokes might sometimes be a bit... smutty," I admit honestly, "flirty, even... but that's just how he is. That's just Harry. He's a charming guy."

"So, holding your hand in public is... charming," Mitch assumes, and I know he's being sarcastic.

"He wasn't holding my hand, he was swatting it, he said there was a fly."

"What else did he do?"

*Thought I'd shag him first...* I scoff to myself.

"Shag?!" Mitch sits up for a moment. "Scarlet, don't tell me you-"

"Of course not! I already said-" I begin to explain, but Mitch's reaction catches me off guard. "Wait,
what? Just a second ago you were hinting that I should go for it, and now you're saying I shouldn't have?!

"So you did?" Mitch assumes, blinking in astonishment. "That was fast."

Heat pools in my chest, frustration making my mind swirl. "No, Harry and I haven't done anything."

"But there was a kiss..." he still somewhat reads me.

I stare at the man before me, choosing to ignore his statement. I don't need Mitch to make another remark about how quickly I jumped into anything else with anyone else. No, thank you."I'm going to the loo. I'll be back."

"Tell Lou I say hi," Mitch teases, making a pun on the word.

"Oh, I will," I stand up, grabbing my jacket.

"Funny, I didn't know he was your type," Mitch murmurs, barely audible.

I pause, moments from leaving. "What?"

"Nothing, only... I just didn't think you would be attracted to Louis, of all people." He says it like he's rationalising something.

"I'm not- attracted to Louis..."

"You don't kiss people you're not attracted to."

"I'm not- not attracted to Lou- wait..."

Success dawns upon Mitch's visage, eyes bright with a grin the size of the moon.

"Shit," I exhale, unable to hold it in any longer. My gaze trails to the window as I shake my head to myself. "How do you do that? Every time."

"Word play is a gift, darling," Mitch prides, looking rather satisfied with himself.

"More like conning is an art," I utter dryly, resisting the urge to roll my eyes.

"So, Louis Tomlinson..." Mitch voices suggestively. "Good lad, good lad..."

I unwillingly groan. "Alright, you've had your laugh."

"He any good?" Mitch goes on, purposely continuing to tease me. "Does he have a talent?"

"Oh my god. We are not talking about this," I press a couple of fingers between my eyes, not even caring to look at the man before me.

"Guess I should ask Harry Styles, then," Mitch concludes decidedly, knowing that will get my attention.

And it does.

"What do you mean...?" I ask, distractedly narrowing my eyes. "Are you implying... Louis and Harry...?"

"Well, sure," Mitch muses freely. "They have that whole bromance thing going on. Two young
lads..."

"You can't be serious."

"Go to the loo, I'm not being serious!" Mitch laughs out loud, waving me away. He chuckles as he watches me open his office door, calling to me once more as I step out into the corridor. "They are a fun topic, though, you have to admit!"

"I guess they are..." I can't help but utter to myself as the door shuts behind me, feeling a pang deep in my gut as I picture the two as silhouettes in the doorway to their home, laughing with each other, then smiling at me.

*And you thought she was gonna shag you first.*

*I still had that hope.*

---

Our first rehearsal together was scheduled out of nowhere.

Before I even had a chance to process whatever happened with Louis, I found myself soundchecking in the early morning in a large warehouse studio, of all places, barren except for some instruments and amplifiers and endless floor tape. Not for dancing, *of course not for dancing*, but for One Direction's blocking and movements. Apparently, sorting how five rowdy boys utilise their space on stage comes with its own art form.

"I didn't think this would be so professional," Pete voices to me as we're taking our final break by the catering table. "I did, but I didn't, you know?"

"I know," I agree, drifting in my own similar thoughts.

Pete sighs, looking over the food. "We should have solidified more of a set list."

"We're fine either way, we know our shit," I try to rationalise.

"'Course, I just thought we'd be *rehearsing*... not going through song after song," Pete frowns lightly. "The opener's supposed to get three at Wembley. How many have we done now? Our ten best?"

"Yeah, I really didn't expect that. Maybe that's how they do it," I consider, looking over at the five celebrity lads, scattered amongst the few people who are working with us today. Louis and Liam have been kicking a football around the open area for the past little while, shouting at each other as they do so. I get a chuckle over that. "They're the biggest pop band in the world. Maybe they're looking for something different. They must be filtering through our best for a reason."

Pete shrugs. He grabs a chocolate chip cookie, talking through his first bite. "Feels like we're playing an actual show."

"That's because it is," a warm Irish tone smirks from behind us.

"*Mister Keith,*" Pete greets before we even turn around.

Keith nods at us both, leaning in wittingly. "*It's an audition,*" he whispers aloud.
"Well, yeah," I shrug. "We are being auditioned."

"Right, but I'd reckon it's for something else," Keith suggests, a knowing glint in his eyes. "Something bigger."

"Listen, mate," Pete voices realistically. "As the oldest member of our band, you kind of have the right to be a smartass... but," he scoffs, amused, "dream on, man."

I laugh along. "Bigger than opening at Wembley? I think Pete's right," I chuckle heartily. I look around, giving the warehouse a quick scan for our missing drummer, but I come up dry. "Where's Elijah?"

"He's being friendly," Keith motions to the opposite corner of the room.

And there's the lad, having a chat with Liam near the double exit doors.

I glance around at the five singers, considering their thoughts after our first plugged in set. I wonder if they liked it. I wonder if we will see them after today. Louis and I might have hooked up once, but this could all end in a heartbeat and I know it.

"How many more songs are we doing?" I ask aloud, internally hoping it's a fun-loving, go-out-with-a-bang type of jam to steer my mind away from anything deeper.

"One more," Keith says.

"Which one?"

"The ballad."

"Shit."

Conveniently, the last song we work on is the one that I feel the least confident about.

For some reason, as I'm announcing the ballad to One Direction and their team, I feel the need to mention that slow songs aren't usually my forte, and that this one in particular is fairly new -- new enough to still be a little rough around the edges.

As soon as the words leave my lips, I feel like a primary student showing up to school with a last minute class presentation.

Once Elijah starts us off with the slow beat, I'm gripping my microphone ten times harder than I should, I'm making some intense eye contact with practically everyone in front of me, and I'm shitting my ass, because I have to sing this raw, sappy, piece of work in front of Louis and his entire band and everyone bloody else who decided to show up to work today.

I take a deep breath and start singing the first verse.
Packing up instruments, stowing gear, that good old post-set calm.

Some things can feel familiar, no matter the situation. In this case, we're not having a chat with the greying hippies who appreciate classic rock at the bar, or playing a single song for an underground radio show that a few hundred people might hear. This time, we've just performed for real producers and real executives for a group that is actually number one on the popular music charts and has been riding the billboards for years, to this date. *For real.*

It's amazing how so many realities at once can make everything else seem so out of this world.

"Great set," a calming Bradford drawl comments from our sides, as I'm handing Keith his unused pack of guitar strings. "I liked that song with the bass breakdown. Sounded sick."

"Hey, thanks, Zayn," I smile as I see the lad. "For pop, you guys sounded really good. Plugged in and all." *And you look like honest-to-god male models, I don't mention.*

"Yeah, you guys have got a great band of musicians behind ya," Keith chimes, voice warm like a pat on the back. "Good lads, too."

"Thanks, man," Zayn nods his head in appreciation, turning to the rest of us. "I think it's great you decided to do the show. Just came over to say that. I personally hope you're chosen. You'd help give us a more mature image, on top of a great sound. I prefer it raw. Real."

Pete and Keith shake hands with Zayn, voicing their words of thanks, before continuing on with packing away their gear. With not much left to do myself but report back to Mitch, I step over an empty guitar case, moving towards the lanky singer.

The tattooed lad gives me a half smile as he watches me nearing. "I know why you were hesitant at first," he tells me, speaking in a quieter, more hushed tone.

"Do you?" I ask respectfully.

Zayn nods. "I'm quite fixed about my image, too. I know how you must've felt."

I exhale, shrugging. "It did take some getting used to... accepting the fact that I might be opening for a boyband."

Zayn smiles mildly, lowering his long eyelashes. He gives a scratch to his lengthy stubble, hidden fondness sparkling with a twitch from the corner of his mouth. "When I auditioned for The X Factor, I planned on being a solo artist. Took me some getting used to, being put in a group."

"Wow," I utter, stunned. "I could imagine that."

"Thanks."

"They're lucky to have you," I say, just because I can't not say it.

"We're lucky to have you," Zayn counters seriously. He warmly touches my arm before heading back to the others.

---

I follow Zayn over towards his bandmates, bumping hips with my drummer as a greeting before I
reach the rest of them. "Hey."

"Hey!" Elijah beams, bumping me back.

"Keith said you were making friends," I hint, looking ahead at Liam among the others.

"I am," Elijah says, following my gaze. "They're, uh- really nice lads."

"Attractive?" I correct with a smirk, catching Elijah's eye and humouredly holding our glance.

"I mean like, gentlemen," the sweet lad covers poorly, his smile setting a glow to the apples of his cheeks.

"Ah, attractive gentlemen," I nod slowly, smirking.

"You're nearly as bad as Mitch," he chuckles.

"Don't give me that bad karma, 'Lij," my eyes widen, practically on their own. "I can't afford that right now."

"Hey, you're the one coming over here, telling me how gorgeous these blokes are," Elijah reminds me, hushing his voice to make sure he's not being overheard. "What am I supposed to do about it? I don't even know if they're gay."

"Who cares?" I brush off the matter. "Follow your heart... and all that sentimental nonsense..."

Elijah simply blinks at me, as if I have something to do with it.

"Straight or not, I'm still not sure they're entirely my type," I reason with him.

"Speak for yourself..." Elijah raises his eyebrows, signalling that someone is behind me, then he begins mulling over a sarcastic little tune. "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound..."

"Hey, that was a really strong ballad," Harry approaches me from behind, smiling away at Elijah's sudden entertainment.

"Really? Thanks," I exhale, relieving my tension. "I wasn't too sure about it."

Harry nods, calm as ever. "Next time, do it naked," he tells me in an undertone, as if that will ease my doubts.

Elijah chokes out a laugh in place of my response, then he really puts the emphasis on his singing: "Was blind, but now I see!"

"He's your type."

"He's not my type."

"He's your type."

"He's your type."

"He's not my type."
After a short yet enjoyable conversation with Harry, he kindly invited my band to come and mingle with his. On our way over to the group, Elijah and I become wrapped up in a hissing match, swatting at each other behind each other's backs while trying to keep our faces straight no matter what the cost.

Elijah swats my waist. "Face it, Harry's your bloody type."

I swat him back. "He's not my bloody type, now shut your face before Mitch."

"Hey, rock stars," Louis warms up to us once he sees us nearing.

A pleasant smile washes over my face. "Hey."

"Amazing set, though I'm sure you've heard that once or twice..." Louis charms, standing before me and the rest of my band. "Loved your songs... your energy... and you've definitely got the look." He makes sure he has my gaze on lock, and then he winks.

"I was tellin' Zayn earlier, your musicians are a talented lot," Keith commends kindly, though I can hardly hear him mind Louis' lips. "You've got good harmonies, too. Nice voices."

"Hey, thank you, man," Louis gives Keith's arm a pat and the older guitarist smiles. I think it's sweet: the two eldest members of our two entirely different bands, bonding. "Just the two of you sing back-up, right?" Louis looks between Keith and Pete.

"Yeah, they sing," Elijah tells Louis. "I just drum."

"He's a very skilled drummer," I smile up at Elijah, subconsciously flirting with Louis.

"As we heard," Louis compliments, subconsciously catching on. He looks at me. His tight skin is stretched, flushed and tanned, over his sharp cheek bones. His delicate features are accented with each syllable he speaks, daring the liveliness from his wide-set blue eyes to dance across his thin, pink lips. And he smiles. "So, you write the songs."

I nod. "Yes. I write them with-"

"With..." Louis raises his finger, scanning the other three lads of my band.

"-Pete," I finish.

"Ah, right," Louis points at Pete, wagging his finger as he does so. "You're in trouble, Pete."

"Uh-?" Pete stalls, caught off guard. "Is this about the buffet? Because-"

"Nah, I'm kidding, mate. They just wanna talk to you, songwriter number two," Louis grins, gripping onto Pete's shoulder. As he leads him away, I can faintly hear Louis saying something along the lines of: "Now, the thing about the buffet is- you wear trousers with large pockets... right...? Line them with plastic just in case things get a little saucy..." before his voice fades off.

"He's in a good mood," Keith comments as he watches Louis walk with Pete.

"He's a spirited guy," I smile fondly after him.

"He's always ready to share his opinion on something," Elijah agrees, and I can tell that he meant it in a good way and I like that. I like that a lot, actually.

"You know what," I sigh out a laugh before I can continue with the thought, "I don't think I want
this to end here. I wanna do the show, lads. I know I said yes, but I think I really want it now. We can't be shot down this far, right?"

"It's either a yes or no from here on," Keith reasons, resulting in a shrug.

"I hope it's a yes," Elijah doesn't bother to hide his bashful smile. "I definitely wanna work with these guys again."

"So do I," I chuckle, hardly believing it myself. I turn around, about to head over to the rest of the boys, though I end up bumping into a tall, lean figure out of pure haste. "Sorry, Harry!"

The younger lad holds both of my arms in his grip. "Scarlet! Don't worry, I was just coming back to you."

"Oh, yeah?" I look up at him and his rather large mouth.

"I wanted to invite you somewhere," Harry tells me, eyes following Elijah as he leads Keith around us, the pair heading towards Liam, Niall and Zayn. "We're, uh- we have some time off, the day after tomorrow, in the evening. Louis and I are gonna have a few drinks with Niall and maybe a few others."

"And... you're inviting me to... clean up the morning after?" I joke, giving him a cheeky smile.

"Yeah, actually, I just wanted to be a bit formal about asking you first," Harry talks with his large hands, playing along seriously. He reaches out, rubbing my shoulder warmly. "Thanks so much."

We pause, grinning like idiots, then the two of us burst out laughing. It's amazing to have found a friend in the most unexpected place of all places. There is just this natural flow between us that makes the weight of life seem as light as a feather.

"It sounds fun, Harry," I tell him honestly, smiling. "Day after tomorrow?"

"Yeah, it's just a hotel suite thing," Harry says, as if hotel suites are a casual venue. "No paps this time, I can promise you!"

"Wouldn't wanna get caught holding my hand again," I smirk up at him.

"Nah, that'd be too tame," Louis husks as he walks by, and holy shit.

For best friends, they really are like two socks in a pair.

In no time, our two bands come together as a single group. We spend the next little while talking about music and life and everything in between. We've melded, sharing the adrenaline from being on stage, rehearsal or not.

Mitch comes over to us as I'm bantering with Louis and Zayn about weird album art. "Guys," he greets the boyband. "Harry, Liam, Zayn, Niall... Louis..." he barely masks a smirk at that last one.

Louis' eyebrows raise in amusement. "Did you tell him?" he asks me, clearly holding back a laugh.

"I never once verified anything," I state, pressing my lips together, but it's so much harder to hold
back my laughter while I'm watching Louis struggle to keep his own self in check. "Verified what?" Liam asks us.

"You don't wanna know," I assure him.

"I think the man wants to know," Harry smirks, eyes steady and teasing. *Cheeky bugger.*

"Mitch here suspects that Louis and I may have kissed," I tell Liam plainly.

The lads release a round of chuckles, all of them already very much aware of my alleyway snogging session with Louis. Harry is the one to wail the loudest, though, being the only one of the lot to know the *whole* truth.

"Aright, I won't ask!" Mitch chuckles along with us. "Anyway, great stage presence, lads. You're all very talented singers and performers. We'll talk soon. One minute, though, Scar." He points a finger at his watch.

"Oh, yeah," I recall, looking around at the lads.

"Where you off to?" Louis asks me.

"I've got another interview," I smile, zipping up my leather jacket.

"Climbing your way up," Harry remarks kindly.

"Hope so!" I laugh.

"Don't forget about us when you're famous," Harry pulls me into a hug. "Remember, two days."

"I'll be there," I verify against his muscular chest, stepping away with a smile.

"*Right,*" Louis hums, looking me over as he nears me. "*Drinks.* I'll text you later, kay?" He wraps his toned arms around my shoulders, and as I cuddle into his lean waist, my nose brushes against his neck and I sigh. His scent surrounds me. There is this physical comfort between us now that we've slept together and it takes a moment for me to pull away.

I pull away.

I say goodbye to the boys, thanking them and sharing warm hugs with each of the others. And when I head out of the warehouse with my band, a bittersweet smile kisses my cheeks. If that was the last time I'll ever see half of the boyband, what a great time it was.

Yet I still feel like I could have said so much more.

---

We arrive at the hotel and the receptionist informs us of the suite number with a bored stare. We step onto the lift and sooner than I know it, we're on the fourteenth floor and Mitch is knocking on my supposed interviewer's door.

"Play up the friendship, alright? Deny any romance," Mitch reminds me, clearing his throat and puffing his chest as we hear some shuffles behind the door. "You're a single artist who just so
happens to be close with One Direction. That's the hook we're going for."

"Whatever happened to 'be yourself'?

"Be the best version of yourself," he says, and he doesn't have to remind me that the possibility of Scarry questions is running high. It's all we talked about on our drive over.

"Thanks so much," I utter dryly.

A tall, well-built man opens the suite door and lets us into the spacious foyer. He guides us to a pair of white couches in a suite surrounded by wide windows, where a smaller, more fashionable man greets me and Mitch.

"Timothy Lipnenski, OK! Magazine," he smiles with all of his teeth, shaking my hand.

"Scarlet Ryder, rock star," I mimic his lavish introduction.

Timothy laughs. "I guess we'll get right to it!" He looks at Mitch. "Do you have the list?"

"Which one?" Mitch asks calmly.

"Of what we can and cannot ask," Timothy clarifies.

"Ah," Mitch smiles, giving the man a wink. "It's in the making. We're not quite at that level yet."

"Fantastic," Timothy nods. "Fantastic."

I look at Mitch. He gives me a smile, as to remind me to stay calm.

We all take a seat.

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, voting and all of your lovely comments :)

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"So, I guess we can start off with the basics, Scarlet," Timothy leads us in, setting his tape recorder on the table. "Do you have a favourite colour?"

"OK! Magazine and I'm getting such deep questions already," I tease lightly, getting comfortable on the white couch. "I'd probably say, black... and black."

"Interesting variety," Timothy jokes. "How about a favourite band?"

I grin, as if my unexpected taste in vintage music is something to be proud of. It really is. "The holy trinity," I say, to name my top three. "The Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin."

"Lovely," Timothy nods, clearing his throat. "So, to play a game of choose, who is your celebrity crush?"

_Louis Tomlinson_, my own voice immediately echoes in my mind.

And wow, no, I definitely cannot say that. So, I stall. "That's a hard one, let me think..."

_Louis Tomlinson_.

Bloody hell, look at me: a supposed rock star in the middle of an interview, unable to think of a single attractive celebrity other than one in a boyband. _How embarrassing._

"Oh, right," I chuckle, finally thinking of a good one. "Ringo. Definitely Ringo Starr."
Timothy smirks. "Not Harry Styles?"

*Here we go: Deny, deny, deny and insist that Harry and I are just friends. Which we are.*

I laugh at the name. "He's a sweet guy, but I prefer rock stars," I tell the interviewer plainly. At least it's the truth.

"Let's talk about that," Timothy sees his opportunity and takes it, ignoring my denial. "You two were seen recently on a date in London. How did it go?"

"It wasn't a date," I claim clearly. "Just an outing with a friend."

"A friend," Timothy repeats, and something about his tone just settles me wrong. "You're close with Harry, then? How about his bandmates?"

"We all get along," I smile politely. "They're not my usual type of crowd," I make sure to add in, "but they're fun lads."

"I must ask," Timothy continues, clearly only interested in this single topic and nothing else. "Aside from Harry Styles, are there any other possible romances between Scarlet Ryder and One Direction?"

"They're great guys, but I'm single."

*Deny, deny, deny.*

"It's a game," says Louis.

"Is that what we're doing?" I chuckle.

A smile tugs at Louis' lips as he takes a sip of wine. He nods once. "I'm interviewing you now."

"Okay." My stomach flutters.

"We've each had a glass, so why not?" he goes on.

"Why not," I echo, laughing this time. I'm much too focused on how his leg is rested heavily against mine.

"So..." Louis starts us off, facing me among the lavish suite. "Boyfriend?"

"That's your first question?" I stare at him.

"Roll with it."

"No boyfriend."

"Good," Louis nods, getting comfortable. "Okay, that's all I needed to know."

I slap his arm. "Louis!"

"What?" he cracks up laughing, features radiant like the sun.
"That's it?!" My eyebrows impossibly raise.

"I reckoned you'd be all interviewed out," Louis insists, chuckling. "Yours was alright?"

"It was alright."

"Not your first time around the block," Louis gathers.

"No," I consider, "but before the other day, I'd only done interviews for simple things like local radio stations and online columns and anything small, really. Never any major magazines. Not like OK! is incredibly major or anything," I laugh.

"It's out there," Louis smiles, giving me the benefit of the doubt. "I wouldn't imagine you're doing it for the fame, though, are you?"

"That's not me," I return his expression, shaking my head. "I'm doing it for the music... and the red wine that boybanders share with me."

"Right, of course," Louis plays along, his delicate eyelashes fanning over his cheekbones as he swirls the maroon glass in his hands. "And good wine it is."

"It is," I gaze down at my drink, then straight ahead at the pretty lad. This really might be the last time I see him, now. There's something bittersweet about the moment. "Cheers, Louis."

"Cheers." He clinks his glass against mine, leg pressing heavier into mine.

We down the rest of our drinks, setting the glasses in front of us once empty.

As we lean back, I gaze over to Harry and Niall, opposite us on the other couch. Harry's long legs are stretched over Niall's slender lap as he's reading a book, and Niall's arms are resting comfortably over Harry's thighs as he's texting on his phone.

I nod at the pair. "They look rather comfy."

"Hm," Louis seems to disagree. "Not if I have anything to say about it. Wanna see something funny?"

"Yeah."

Louis naturally smirks, pulling out his phone. With a few simple taps, a cheery ringtone begins playing from what sounds like his own back pocket. "Harry hates missing calls," Louis informs me in an undertone, a split second before the younger lad pops his head up off the couch and locks eyes with the source of the sound.

Harry swings his legs off of Niall, setting his book on the table between us. He briefly jogs over to Louis and me, his eyes darting around us. "Where is it?"

"Where's what?" Louis smirks.

"Where is it, Louis?" Harry presses.

"D'you hear something?" Louis feigns distraction, looking around and pretending to listen. "I think the wine's going to me head."

Harry holds out his hand, his constant ringtone increasing his impatience. "Give me my phone, please." And before Louis can come back with another sarcastic remark, Harry is diving towards the
older lad and feeling around his hips for his ringing mobile with little luck.

"Back pocket," I whisper loud enough for Harry to hear, unable to watch the poor lad struggle any longer.

"Thanks a lot," Louis drawls enticingly. He folds his arms over his chest, letting Harry do all the work.

"Thanks, Scar," Harry finally slips his hand into Louis' tight back pocket, managing to retrieve his phone with only a few unnecessary gropes. His voice cracks as he quickly raises it to his ear. "Hello? Shit. Missed it." He looks at his screen, then he frowns.

"Dammit, sent me to voicemail," Louis tisks, holding his own mobile to his ear.

"Hey-!" Harry gapes, looking to Louis in shock.

Louis practically glows, because he just won, apparently. "Now we're even," he tells Harry, though I don't have any idea what for.

"You arsehole," Harry blushes, daring not to chuckle. And even as the long-haired lad scrunches his face and jabs a rather smug-looking Louis' chest, I can tell he hardly even means it.

The mail slot rattles shortly after the four of us have started on our second bottle of wine.

Niall is the one to get up and retrieve the post. "This must be it..." he calls to us as he reaches the suite door. "Yeah, look at this. It's here!" He rounds back with a magazine in his hands that he throws on the table for us to see. It's the latest issue of OK! with my interview in it.

"Well done, love!" Louis wraps an arm around me, giving my shoulder a squeeze.

I pause, staring down at the cover. To my surprise, I actually spot my name right away. It's there, advertised in small print, just below the headlines of some reality TV stars and a few other famed celebrities.

Harry sits down next to me, folding his large hands in his lap. "Let's see what they have to say about us."

The four of us huddle around the living room table, myself in the middle. Niall opens the magazine for us, flipping to the section containing my interview with Timothy. Two full pages of text and photos adorn the professional spread. The pages are glossy and inviting, and I don't even mind that my picture with Harry at the café is featured alongside all of my other promotional pictures.

The title of the article is what makes me roll my eyes.

Harry Styles: Scarlet Ryder's Kryptonite!

"Oh my god," I breathe, suddenly feeling ill. "What is that?"

"Wow," is all Louis can come up with.

"No, this is embarrassing," I look around at the lads. "That title- I didn't say that."
"Oh, shit," Niall chuckles beneath his breath.

I skim my eyes over the article in a rush of sickening haste, quickly realising that the editor cut out most of my actual interview, leaving only my few mentions of One Direction and their frontman, Harry Styles. I read a few selections of the article out loud, words flowing like venom from my tongue:

"Scarlet refused to spill any juicy secrets about her café date with Harry, but a simple hint at the memories gave her the bright eyes of a schoolgirl! You're a charmer, Styles!"

"Well, we all know that's a hundred percent real," Louis decides, just for the hell of it. "Young Harold does have that effect on people."

A hint of a smile traces Harry's lips. "Watch your tone, Louis."

"In the mean time, we'll just have to wait and see what the future holds for these two lovebirds. With another world tour on the horizon for Harry and a debut album to look forward to from Scarlet, the young singers have got us on our toes. Will they be able to find any smooch time in-between One Direction's busy schedule? Distance hasn't held back the young casanova before! Besides, we all know how Harry loves his fair share of older blondes!"

"That's so degrading." I toss the magazine back on the table; a queasy expression reveals how I feel in summary. "I'm sorry, Harry. They twisted my answers entirely."

"It's okay," Harry hums deeply. "We've been through this routine once or twice."

"More like every time..." Louis scoffs to himself, bitterly humoured.

"The guy probably hated my guts," I watch as Niall grabs the article, trying to find any mention of Timothy's actual questions. "I didn't give him much information towards you lot."

"That's fine, play it aloof," Harry advises calmly. "They'll get a kick that you acknowledged the rumour at all, let alone confirmed anything."

I sigh, not having much choice but to agree. "I just wish they didn't have to scrape so low. They could've come up with a much better article without being so shady."

"What did you expect? It is a gossip magazine, after all," Louis says. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he's slightly put off by this mess. A fraction jealous, even.

"Did you really 'blush at the mention of Harry Styles'?' Niall cracks up laughing, quoting directly from the article. "What a riot."

"No!" I laugh, shaking my head at such ridiculousness. "They've honestly played up everything I said. They made up shit I didn't even do." I huff, yet still manage to shrug it off. "Whatever, it's okay."

Harry smiles, a bit humoured. I'm only glad that he's taking this so light-heartedly. He's used to it. "Just wait 'til they start throwing in quotes from 'sources'," he quotes with his fingers.

"Oh my god, yes," Louis drawls, taking pleasure in rolling his eyes over the matter. "They're never real. They will literally just bullshit anything they please to get a reaction. And people love it. They eat it up."

"Twisted..." Harry voices, nodding while fixedly staring between me and Louis. That fucking look.
"I'm gonna say something," I ultimately decide, unable to stay idle like this any longer. "I can't have my fans believing any of this crap. No offence, Harry."

Harry holds up his hands in calm protest. "None taken."

I clear my throat, pulling out my mobile. *So apparently I'm a fangirl now?* I silently type out the message on my screen. *Where's the part of my interview where I said Ringo from The Beatles was my celebrity crush?*

"Yes!" Louis snickers, reading over my shoulder. "Tag them."

I smirk to myself, adding a blunt – *Well done, OK! Magazine* – at the end. "Good?"

"Fantastic," Louis praises, husky tones resonating in his chest from how close he is. "Say it right to their face. Make them taste it."

I smirk as I press send. "You're distracting as hell, you know?" I turn to look at the scruffy lad. And wow, his face is so much closer than I was expecting.

Niall chuckles, entertained as he sees my newly updated status on his own phone. "Who's this Ringo lad, Scar? You cheatin' on Harry now?" the Irish lad jokes mockingly.

"Oh, get off on yourself," I laugh out loud.

"Well, *that's* colourful!" Louis remarks, smiling away in an everlasting beam.

"Shush, you," I smirk at him.

"Perhaps later," he smirks back, and wow, he really knows how to work me. I could banter with Louis all day and it would never get old. Verbally or physically.

"Anyway, I'm sorry about the tabloid, Scarlet," Harry voices kindly, to sum things up. "Don't take those things personally."

"Yeah, it's just part of the job," Louis assures me. I watch his eyelashes blink once, twice, the motion slightly blurring. I'm tipsy.

"What say we have a celebratory party, then?" Niall flings the magazine to the opposite couch, and he's my new favourite person for doing so.

"Little party animal, are you?" Louis comments, a twinkle in his eye.

"You know me, Tommo," Niall grins.

"We should, though," Harry smiles around at us, unintentionally showing his dimples. "It can be like, a *Congratulations Scarlet Party*. For a... *terrible* first major article, I'm sorry, love. You can blame it on me, if you like."

"Yes, Harry," Louis stands up. "Let's party. I'll go fetch the condoms."

"And I'll fetch up my dinner," Niall nearly chokes, that laugh of his.

Then, instead of basking in his joke for a moment longer, as I would expect him to, Louis actually turns his back on us and walks right out of the suite, shutting the door behind himself.

I look back to the other two lads, stunned. "Really, where's he off to?"
"Honestly?" Harry chuckles. "Off to our suite, most likely. He'll be back."

And he is, sooner than expected. However, instead of a package of condoms, Louis walks into the living room carrying a wooden crate filled with a large bottle of vodka, two bottles of something vividly green, and a six pack of pre-mixed rum and cola.

"Now that's a party," Harry laughs, happily captivated.

"Be my boyfriend," Niall gets on one knee in front of Louis, then he snatches one of the pre-mixed cans at the last second. I can hear his laughter as he runs off to the kitchen.

"Wanker," Louis laughs to himself. He carries the crate towards the living room table.

Harry chuckles endearingly, getting up to help ease Louis' heavy load. "Might need a bit more than this," he says, helping to split the remaining cans between the few of us. "Liam and Zayn and some others might be coming in a bit."

Louis halts. "Now we need more than more."

Harry laughs, not quite expecting that. "Why?"

"Well, it's a party now. You know who else is a given," Louis drawls, sounding sarcastic, though he means well, earning only a baffled look from Harry. "Wow, love. You've a lot to learn."

And with that, Louis follows Niall into the kitchen, leaving me and Harry completely flustered in the living room of the suite.

What a card.

Louis has had this cheeky attitude about him all night. As it turns out, the others that he was referring to inviting were the three lads of my band. "A party is a party," he reasoned with a smile.

After a few texts and phone calls, the once spacious suite slowly fills with more people, my band included. By midnight, we're all drinking and conversing and a bunch of Louis' mates are surrounding him as he blathers on about nothing, unlit cigarette tucked behind his ear. He's just about the funniest thing in the world right now. And he's just so handsome.

"Louis, get over here," I smile at him from across the living room.

"Louis' gettin' laiiid!" one of Louis' mates jokes and a few of the others laugh.

Louis beams at me, ignoring them. "What is it?"

I raise an eyebrow, playful with a purpose. "Get over here and you'll find out."

Louis smirks, silently taking my offer over the lads' loud jeers and the chatter of the party. He slowly saunters over to me, that expectant smirk plastered all over his face, before he smoothly comes to a halt with barely a foot between us. "So, love...?" he speaks in a low, sexy tone. It's the same voice he used when he called me over for our first shag.

I'm so entranced, I almost forget my aim in our conversation. To be more accurate, I forget to speak
at all.

"What is it?" Louis asks again, chuckling softly.

"I... would quite enjoy a shot," I conclude, slowly smirking. No harm in leading him on a bit.

The thin corners of Louis' mouth curl arousingly. "All of that," he exhales, humoured, "for some booze."

Niall cracks up laughing behind us. He's sat around the living room couches with Keith, Pete and Harry. "Yeah, but mate," the blond voices enthusiastically, "just imagine what she'll do when she actually wants t' shag ya!"

Louis' gaze meets mine and there is something hilariously familiar about the look in his eyes. We both try to hold back our massive grins as we stare at each other. The others still don't know we've gone all the way.

"Wait," Niall hesitates.

"No way," Pete gapes.

Now they do.

Just like that, Harry bursts into a fit, barely able to contain himself. He's literally in tucks. Something about his giddy chuckle makes me snicker, which in turn causes Louis to bubble up with laughter himself.

"You outed us, you mutt!" Louis grins, shaking his head at Harry.

"He called me a mutt!" Harry wails. Tears are actually forming in his eyes.

"You deserve it," Louis chuckles, calm as ever.

Harry's eyes sparkle as he straps on a goofy grin. "Are you calling me a dog?"

Louis winks at the younger lad. "The dirtiest of the lot."

"Louis, you were very obvious, mate," Niall positively beams as he watches the two.

"Yeah, you can't make me your scapegoat, Lou," Harry drawls with a smile.

"I'll make you whatever I wanna make you," Louis teases, cheekily wagging his brows.

"Look at you two, flirting the hell out of each other," I laugh heartily, as do Keith and Pete.

"It's just the regular," Niall cracks. He raises one of the vibrant green bottles to me. "Here's the shot you were lookin' for."

"Oh, yeah! Sorry, Scar!" Louis laughs huskily, clearly entertained. "I did come over to give you some, didn't I?" He cuts past me, grabbing the bottle from Niall before leading us over to the dining table.

Pete goes off to find Elijah as Louis lines up a round of empty shot glasses on the dining table, pouring enough for his band and mine.

"I'll send those around..." Harry murmurs, managing to pick up five full shots at once and balance
them between his ring-covered fingers. As Pete rejoins us with Elijah, Harry carefully hands the shots out to me and my band, keeping the last one for himself. "I know Zayn and Liam aren't here yet, but... are we doing a cheers or just a shot?" Harry asks me, as a few onlookers crowd around. "Your article just came out today and we're celebrating-"

"Let's just drink," I politely stop him there. "What I'd really love is for you all to get a good buzz on." Anything to erase that article from my brain.

"No need for persuasion there, darlin'!" Niall grabs a shot from the table and finishes it in one go, slamming it down with a sour expression.

Harry agrees, doing the same. "Wow."

Without another moment to waste, I grip my own glass and shoot back the liquid in spite. From the moment it hits my tongue, I'm already certain that the word sour wouldn't do this crap justice. It's not even an alcoholic sort of burn, though it's definitely spiked; it's just bloody sour. Once I manage to swallow, I turn to Louis next to me with a 'top that' sort of expression, but by the time I do, his glass already lies empty on the table.

Louis smiles at me, amused. Then he's sweetly leaning towards me and I'm not doing anything to stop him.

Our faces inch closer.

Our lips seal into a kiss.

Louis' warm lips press against mine, each of us sharing the same sweet green apple taste. We linger there for a moment, pulling apart only to see that we also share the same fixated smile.

"Just having fun, yeah?" Harry studies us.

"Just fun," I smile into Louis' eyes.

"Some real fun," Louis repeats raspily, smiling right back at me.

My stomach flips uncomfortably. It's not like I'm losing myself over him. it's not like my whole reality just shifted because of a simple touch of our lips. I'm not that foolish. Still, I can't help but feel drawn to him in a way that I just can't explain.

This isn't supposed to happen. I'm supposed to keep doing my rock thing and fall for some punk in plaid. I'm not supposed to have actual feelings for someone like Louis. Not the romantic type, anyway. Even my gooey ballad was only inspired by a simple crush.

But I'm forgetting one thing that changes everything, and it's how electric his kisses make me feel.

"Shots, anyone?" I hear Niall call around to the group. I look over at him. He already has six new shot glasses of vodka lined up on the table in front of us. Brilliant.

I feel a little sick to my stomach, but in no way because of the alcohol. More is exactly what I need right now, actually.

We all take our shots together, then Niall refills everyone's round.

"Can't just have one," Louis chuckles as we all do another cheers.

"Ugh," I shudder, feeling the bitter burn from two shots in a row. I snatch a large bottle of soda from
across the table and take a deep swig.

Keith laughs. "Holding up, Scarlet?"

"You're Irish," I grimace. "You've got an advantage."

"Fair point," Keith grins proudly.

"The Irish advantage," Niall raises his own mixed drink to us. "I'll drink to that."

"You would," Louis beams, and I can't help but take in the lean lines that define his expression. His wide-set eyes are happily crinkled and his long, straight teeth are so delicately traced by his pink lips. The double shot of vodka has left me feeling momentarily numb. Either it's like I have a lump in my throat, or like I'm hardly feeling anything at all.

Whatever it is, it's a welcome distraction.

So is he.

Later into the night, the party is still going steady. Zayn and Liam have yet to arrive, but the others said the two singers should be on their way soon.

"Hey, mate... y' wanna go piss for me?" I overhear Niall asking Pete as I tune into their side of the conversation. "I can't be bothered to get up."

"Thanks for reminding me! I'm going first!" Louis grins adorably, spiritedly standing up. The sudden motion causes him to accidentally spill some of his drink. He stops in his tracks. "Well..." Louis glances down at the spill. "I'm not cleaning that up, so you guys just have to watch out." At that, he rounds out of the living room.

"Oh, for god's sake," Harry sighs, grabbing a cloth before proceeding to clean up the older lad's mess.

I chuckle silently to myself as a few of us watch Harry play maid. They're characters, these boybanders. What a life it would be to actually know them.

"Who left the toilet seat up?!" Louis' muffled voice yells from all the way in the bathroom.

I burst out laughing while the lads comically shake their heads. And yeah, this must be completely normal for them.

Louis continues to shout out hilarious ramblings from the bathroom, such as: "How do you expect me to get my daily bicep workout now?" and "You've drained all the fun from this entire experience!" while the lads, for the most part, ignore him.

"He's always yellin' at us," Niall complains aloud, to no one in particular.

"I know, it's terrible," Harry smirks, more amused than anything.

A permanent smile spreads itself across my face. It's true, sometimes Louis does get a little
Niall chuckles, still able to hear the distant sounds of a very muffled Louis. "I need a pint."

"You've got..." Pete examines what's left in the green liqueur bottle, "some sour shit."

I laugh at Pete's choice of words, watching as Niall simply shrugs and goes for it.

Meanwhile, to my left, Harry is pouring his own set of vodka shandies. The sleeves of his dress shirt are cuffed to reveal a sample of his unique tattoos: notably a large, black anchor settled by the base of his left wrist and a few tiny doodles surrounding it. And it's not like I'm paying much attention, but I'm almost certain that the buttons of his shirt are currently fastened a step lower than when I first arrived.

"We're going shot-for-shot," the curly-haired lad claims, gazing straight at me.

"We are?" I ask him, surprised.

"We have the same tolerance," he reminds me.

"Seems fair," I accept the glass. "Alright."

"So, by the time Harry's naked, you should be too," Louis gives a squeeze to my shoulder, smiling as he returns from the bathroom.

"Obviously," I drawl sarcastically, cracking up internally as Louis actually stalls for a second.

"So, should I...?" Harry hesitantly begins to unbutton his dress shirt even further.

"Wow." My pulse increases. "It was a bluff- I didn't mean..." My voice fades off as I watch Harry's fingers pause, hovering over his middle button now.

Louis laughs out loud, giving me a wink. "But if I got naked, you'd soon follow," he teases.

I laugh, flustered. "I'd be sure to, Lou." The amount of hormones in this room is ridiculous.

"Your shandy, Scar," Harry smiles, holding out the drink he just poured. His shirt has been left noticeably unbuttoned to the middle, showing off a fair amount of smooth, tattooed skin as he leans over.

Curs these boys for liking tattoos. Curse me for being so into it.

"Thanks, mate," I take the drink, looking up into Harry's eyes.

He can tell that I've noticed. He's got that glint in his gaze. Yet, he sits back down and silently sips from his mix as Louis pours himself a shot.

"Do you know this one?" Louis turns to me. He taps the rim of my glass with the rim of his shot. "I'm not above ya..."

I grin, tapping the base of his drink with the base of mine. "I'm not below ya..."
"I'm right with ya!" we chime in unison, cheering our drinks and tossing them back together.

"Alright, I'm feeling it," I blush, setting my nearly-empty glass on the dining table. "Harry?"

"Getting there. Bit buzzed," Harry smirks, half-glass in hand, knowing I'm just the same.

"We should play a game," Niall voices, supposedly returning from the bathroom. Funny, I didn't notice him leave. Maybe I am a little tipsier than I had imagined.

"I'm down for that," Pete smiles, pulling out a seat from the dining room table. "A drinking game, no doubt?"

"Spin the bottle?" Louis cheekily suggests, grabbing a seat across from him.

Niall casually raises a brow. "How about Never Have I Ever?"

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, voting and all of your lovely comments :)

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So much for going shot-for-shot with Harry.

Usually I fall victim to *Never Have I Ever*, since I've had my share of risqué experiences, but tonight's game has proven to be easier than I thought. Tonight, everyone is the victim. As it turns out, they're all as bad as I am.

"Never have I ever had sex in a friend's bed," Elijah raises his drink to our small group.

"Sex with the friend?" Pete asks cheekily.

"No, just their bed," Elijah chuckles at our bandmate.

Louis smirks playfully. "Sex with the bed?"

Harry slowly nods, raising a hand. "Yup," he drawls. "That'd be me."

We all laugh and drink as the party goes on around us.

Niall jumps into the next question: "Never have I ever ended up naked and can't remember why."

Harry shakes his head, laughing and blushing. "You're just on my back," he jokes, despite throwing back his drink once more.

"Nah, 'course not," Niall stifles a laugh, staring ahead at the dimpled lad. "Never have I ever slept with someone more than ten years older than me," he offers, making it obvious that he is, in fact,
aiming it towards Harry.

"Nope," Harry denies without pause. "That's not me. That's not real, thanks."

"Those rumours aren't real?" Elijah questions, slightly taken aback.

Keith takes a shot, slamming it on the table. "You're not into older women, Harry?"

I swallow thickly. Keith's question turns me off, not because it affects me, but because it applies to me; I'm older than Harry by two years.

"Rumours are rumours," Harry simply states.

Despite the younger lad's denial, both he and Elijah end up drinking at the next one: "Never have I ever been told what to do during sex."

So does Louis, with a swift tilt of his head and an intriguing: "Not gonna lie."

The corners of my mouth curl upwards. Keeping my vision locked on Louis', I take a deep sip of my vodka shandy.

Louis notices, eyes glimmering with intent, and I can hear Niall say, "Fantastic!" through the older lad's suggestive, smouldering stare.

I'm suddenly struck with an intense feeling of burning lust.

He really does look like a French model.

"Never have I ever watched porn with someone else," Elijah suggests, painfully drawing me back to the present.

"Loving the overflow of sexual questions," Harry comments. Yet even when he's being sarcastic, he sounds kind.

"Fine, fine," Elijah smiles, blushing. "Never have I ever... bought a house with someone."

As they've been living together for years, Louis and Harry are the only ones who drink.

It's a rather bland question and response, until Niall speaks up: "Ye gotta drink for each of yer homes!"

"That's not in the rules!" Harry chuckles.

"Why?" I ask the two best friends, thinking over Niall's question. "How many places do you own?"

Louis shrugs. "I dunno, a few?"

A bloody few? Like that's normal.

Louis chuckles when I don't respond. "It's great investment."

Keith goes next, with a simple: "Never have I ever been on a family road trip."
Most of us drink, including myself. An ill feeling unsettles me, though it should have been a happy memory. I try to ignore it, but I suddenly feel so out of place.

I look down into my empty glass. "I'm dry," I pipe up.

"Here, I'll pour you another," Niall waves me over.

A drunk rush sweeps over my senses as I stand up out of my seat. I'm forced to take a moment for my headrush to settle. And I see it on the floor, just under the couch, as my vision comes to focus: the magazine cover that already makes me roll my eyes.

People are probably reading that shitty article as we speak. In a single night, I've become something else, something less human: a creation of people's judgement. Those rumours wouldn't exist without One Direction and their fame, yet here I am, drinking with the cause.

Niall flawlessly pours me another vodka mix once I'm sat next to him. He holds it out for me to take, but before I can reach it, he draws it back, suggesting that I sit with him by giving an adorable pat to his knee.

I'm buzzed enough not to question it.

I smile as I move closer to Niall, turning around to position myself comfortably on his lap. I feel pleasantly more comfortable – secure, even – as I let my full weight rest over his lean thighs. I finally accept my drink from him once we're settled.

Some of the others look on, some don't bother. And it's not so big of a deal anymore, because then there's Harry, who flops over the lads of my band as a joke to mimic me and Niall.

For the most part, I laugh along with everyone else. Though, in the back of my mind, there lies a hint of intrigue as to what Louis might be thinking of it all. But I like Niall – not in that way, but of course I do – because he's a sweet, all-around genuine, good-time guy. And he's warm and he smells good and I'm a bit tipsy, so that's okay.

"Never have I ever had Scarlet Ryder sit on my lap," Keith says, all too easily, making Niall down his drink with a charismatic wink, along with Elijah and Pete.

"Not even you, Louis?" Harry asks, unreadable as he settles in between Keith and Elijah.

"Now that I think of it – no," Louis plays cool, but the flicker in his eyes shows that he's clearly displeased. "That hasn't happened yet."

"Yet you've shagged...?" Harry clarifies slowly.

"We have," Louis looks back at him, flushed.

"Thanks for the reminder, Styles," I stifle a smirk.

"So, wasn't there a position where...?" Harry trails off, holding his steady gaze.

Louis and I share a look, mutually realising our truth. Like reflections, we grin our faces off.

"Yeah, totally," I blush, only a touch embarrassed to admit it in front of my band and half of his.

Louis laughs, eyes alive. With another tilt of his head, he takes another swig of his drink, having technically had me sit on his lap before.
Later into the game, when we've all had more to drink, I remain comfortable over Niall's lean thighs. Our game of Never Have I Ever has reverted back to its original sexual nature. Even the formerly opposing Harry just shrugged and went with it.

Our corner of the party has transitioned into more of a shameless story time as the questions keep spreading further and further apart, making way for some rather smutty memories. As a result, I've got to know much more about the One Direction lads in this half hour than I'd imagined I ever would.

Much of which I really didn't need to know — let's be honest.

As Zayn is recalling a story about hooking up with a girl at a party in his hometown of Bradford, Louis manages to catch my eye from across the room. I watch him as he raises a single brow. Effortlessly, he sends me a wink.

My breath catches in my chest.

Wanna go? Louis mouths to me.

Do what? I mouth back, entirely intrigued.

Louis simply glances at the doorway, then looks back at me with an enticing smirk.

My heartbeat speeds up slightly. A mess of hormones swirls around my body, into my chest, through my stomach, down to my-

Louis stands up. He gazes at me as if the others aren't here, as if we are the only two in the room. He doesn't hesitate to check me out, licking his lips before smiling darkly into my eyes.

I'm so incredibly turned on by Louis' mere glances. I can't even fathom what's about to come next. All I know is that we're about to be alone together, and that in itself is sexy enough.

Giving Niall's shoulder a squeeze, I stand up. Moving past him and the other boys, I head straight towards Louis. I can feel the others' eyes on us. Unable to control it, my smile reaches my eyes as we meet.

Louis' face slightly mirrors mine, although his expression is sexier and much more in control. He places a hand on my lower back, making my stomach tie itself in a knot. He gently leads me to the door.

"Where are you going?" Harry asks us, still seated.

"To plant a garden," Louis drawls, smoothly alluding to the joke I made right after our first time.

"Louis," Harry utters deeply. He gets it. He's the only one of the boys who truly does.

The younger lad glares at us stunningly.

I send him a cheeky wink before exiting the room with Louis.
The hotel suite door shuts behind us.

Once we're in the hall, without any hesitation, Louis' lips are planted firmly on mine. He roughly pushes me up against the wall, pressing against my body, grazing his tongue across my lips. I open my mouth, allowing for our tongues to play against one another, gladly relishing the drunken moment. Louis' hot breath meshes with mine, making for a completely unexpected, yet entirely steamy make-out session.

"Trying to seduce me in there?" Louis kisses me aggressively. "Trying to make me jealous?" He grips my shirt by my hips, pulling me closer to his body.

I let out a breathy laugh, leading him by playing along. "You jealous of Niall, babe?"

Louis groans, but he's not annoyed in the slightest. In fact, I might even suggest that he's sexually-frustrated. There is a fiery look in his eyes.

I smirk at the sight of Louis before me, gently bringing his lightly scruffed face back to mine. I gain full control, turning us around and pressing him against the hard wall like he did to me. I take his wrists and pin them by his sides, moving my wet lips to his neck.

Louis emits a soft moan from my actions and I can feel him stiffen up against my body.

Before we have a chance to go any further, someone clears their throat across the corridor. I turn to see a large man stood there, hands clasped together, dressed in a suit and tie. How could I forget? Of course security is here all night; they have the whole floor.

"Er..." I begin unsteadily, head going for a spin. "Maybe we should-

"He doesn't mind," Louis assures me, blue eyes glazed over.

And- hold on. "What?"

"He doesn't mind," Louis repeats, placing his smirking lips to my neck, just as I did to him.

And- wow.

His mouth feels so nice.

Drunk and distracted by Louis' advances, I trace a hand up his fit torso to feel his firm chest. I let my eyes flutter closed as I lean into his touch. I can't help it. Hell, if these really are my last few hours with Louis before his team picks a more commercially successful, cookie-cutter, radio-friendly act to open for the boyband at Wembley, then so be it.

I'm going out with a bang.

Literally.

"Let's get the fuck to the room," Louis chuckles, unable to endure any more teasing. Hastily, he grabs my hand, guiding us down the hotel corridor, past the security guard, to the neighbouring suite.

Louis' urgency leads him to fumble with his key card at the door. His strained impairment only makes me want him more. I press up against his back with no mind whatsoever if I'm hindering his actions. I can only hope I'm a welcome distraction.
Among our hesitation, my mouth finds Louis' neck again, causing him to release yet another soft moan. He slightly tilts his head back, consumed by pleasure with every bit of protest. I smirk against his heated skin, impulsively grasping onto his firm, fleshy bottom.

At that, Louis whips around. "I swear I could fuck you right here."

An internal gasp catches me by surprise. I have never seen Louis react to anything so fiercely. If I didn't know any better, I might assume he is furious. However, judging from the tightness in his jeans, he just needs a good release.

"Louis..." I utter lowly, taking my time to near him once again. "What do you think your boys would say if they came out to see you pounding me against that wall?" I edge a step closer. "What about security?"

Louis follows my gaze to the plastered wall behind us, then to the inconspicuous security guard down the corridor. His blue eyes seem dark, hooded under heavy lids.

I softly place my hand over the bulge in his jeans, bringing my lips to his. "Do you really wanna fuck me that bad?" I whisper hotly against his mouth.

"God," Louis would growl, if his voice was any deeper. He stares at me for an intense moment, then instinctively pulls my face to his once again, smearing his lips across mine.

Once Louis finally manages to get the door unlocked, we're greeted by a view of his stunning bedroom suite. It's a similar design to the suite we were previously in, although this one has been left untouched, clearly lacking the chaos of everyone else.

In this one, we are alone.

Louis locks the door, bolting it so none of the lads can walk in on us, even if they do have a key. I remain fixed in my spot as he reaches me. He grasps either side of my waist once we're pressed together. "Let's get naked," he breathes, lips curling before he kisses me deeply.

My nerves tingle with passion. Anticipation.

Regardless of the few times my lips have had the privilege of pressing against Louis', I don't think I could ever get tired of the way his kisses can be rough yet delicate at the same time, or how he continues to surprise me with his incredible sexual spontaneity.

What an experience he's been.

I utter profanities into Louis' lips as he presses me up against the desk in the foyer. He lifts me on top of its cool wooden surface as he makes his way between my thighs, dragging my hips towards his. I wrap my legs around his torso and slide my arms around his neck. We touch and taste and kiss and lick and it's not enough. No matter how close I am to Louis, it's never enough.

"Take it off," I lick his lips. "Take it all off."

"Strip me if you want me that bad," Louis grins darkly, kissing me once more before taking a few steps backwards. He stands in the centre of the room, vulnerable and begging to be touched.
I slide off the desk, taking hold of his hands. I turn him around, pushing him up against the desk as he did to me. I skim my hands down his slim sides, tasting my way down his neck, exhaling hot and lustful.

Louis tilts his head back, allowing me to kiss him harder and deeper where he wants it most.

My lips find the strong tendon running down the side of his neck. I lick and suck at his skin as an unexpected moan becomes muffled behind his tight, pursed lips. I nip softly at his skin and that apparently does it for Louis, because next, he's pushing my shoulders downwards, gently as he does it, as if to say: *Go a bit lower... if ever you don't mind.*

I remove my lips from his flushed neck, pulling away to get a good look at him.

My eyes question and his scream.

He doesn't need to ask me twice.

I kiss Louis again, almost needing to, while working with the button on his jeans. Once his zipper is undone, without hesitation, I lower to my knees.

"Yeah?" I verify, looking up at him.

Louis nods, nibbling his lower lip while tracing my mouth with the rough pad of his thumb. He's right in front of me.

I'm aching to taste him.

I tug Louis' jeans past his hips, exposing his stiffness covered only by thin, black boxer-briefs. Shamelessly, I pull his jeans further down his muscular legs and he slips them off his ankles himself.

If he wasn't hard before, he certainly is now.

I want to make a move so desperately, I'm almost frozen in my advances.

Louis takes my hesitation as an opportunity to reach down and grasp at my shirt. I allow him to pull it up over my head, willfully rendering me shirtless, except for my bra.

And then that's gone.

Louis' noticeable bulge remains in my immediate view as he gazes down at my exposure. I reach out and feel him over his briefs, selfishly massaging him, until I instinctively lean forward. I press my lips to the fabric covering his bits, giving a firm squeeze to either side of his hips.

Louis makes a lustful noise, urging me to continue.

So I do – dragging my lips across the thin material, licking and kissing at his bulge. A small dab of wetness stains the top of the garment, making smile successfully in coaxing his pre-cum. I continue to place open-mouthed kisses over his restricted member, happily trailing my fingertips along his bare thighs, until-

"Think you're gonna tease me like that?" Louis aches, pupils full-blown.

I grin up at him. "I think I'm doing a good job of it," I muse, a single moment before pulling down his undergarments, letting the cool air of the room breeze over what was once covered.
Louis gazes down at me with smug eagerness, kicking off the remainder of his pants.

I watch his tempting expression as I take hold of his length, gradually registering that we're actually about to do this again... and that this time, we're doing more.

I keep my gaze locked with his as I softly lick over his fleshy tip.

He bites his lip, not yet removing his eyes from mine.

I slip his head past my lips, sucking gently and going deeper with every dip forward. His thickness slides over my tongue, constantly slipping past my wet lips so steadily, it's tantalising. Especially when I already know how talented he is with using it.

Captivated, I let my hand work his length as I lower my lips to his balls, giving them a teasing lick before sucking at them lightly and pulling off with a sigh.

"Scarlet... fuck," Louis murmurs his praise from above.

I return the look he gives me, licking up his shaft to wrap my lips around his firm member once more — this time sucking deeper, with greater intention, and moving a hand over him in rhythm where my mouth doesn't reach.

Louis lets me work him a bit longer before he takes my face in his hands. "C'mere," he musters, guiding me upwards from my position on the floor. He wets his lips and kisses me deeply, not caring if he's tasting himself. "You're so fucking good at that."

I smile, feeling like a million sparkles are twinkling inside of me. I kiss him back, tenderly licking into his mouth, carving a memory of his taste. Our tongues slide like velvet against one another. I'm still topless and he's still bottomless.

Why can't we always be like this?

_________________________________________________________________________

Louis leads me into the bedroom of the suite, holding my hand in front of me. I stumble along behind him, still feeling like I'm floating from the effect of the alcohol, but more from the high he gives me.

And seriously, Louis is wearing nothing but a t-shirt. Everything below its hem is bare and his ass has never looked better. Not to mention, everything else that's currently exposed.

"Time for bed?" I quip alluringly, moving ahead of him to sit on the edge of his bed.

"For you, maybe," Louis intriguingly licks across his lips.

"Bedtime for me?" I peer at him curiously.

"Lay back," he instructs, a corner of his mouth curling.

I edge back so I'm laying comfortably over the satin sheets. I'm not quite sure what Louis meant by what he said, but he obviously has something in mind, so I go with it.

And there he is, pulling off my bottoms.
And there he is, kissing up my bare thighs.

Before he reaches my bits, however, Louis sits up and strips off his shirt, rendering us both fully nude and both full of wanting. Immediately, he lowers himself between my spread legs once more, his hot mouth ultimately landing where I need it most.

Louis licks enticingly up my lower lips, causing me to inhale sharply. Then he does it again, kissing and teasing against me until he reaches that one electric spot. My hips are drawn upwards and Louis' mouth remains fixed against me, tonguing and sucking playfully. I moan deeply and bite down on my lower lip, mixing in luscious pain with my current pleasure.

I'm not generally one to expect much in return, but seemingly out of nowhere, I am entirely exposed to Louis and loving it. I always knew he had a talented mouth from our few steamy make-out sessions and everything else in between, but to have him use it like this is just-

_Fuck_, most guys don't do it like this.

Louis swirls the tip of his tongue around my nub, sending sparks of electricity up to my brain, throwing me into an even stronger high. He slips a single finger inside, then again, making me fade into ecstasy. He continues to lick and suck at that one spot as he pushes his finger in and out repeatedly. Then one finger becomes two and the slow thrusts pick up speed, but before I can reach my peak, Louis is pulling away from me completely and climbing off the bed.

I almost roll out of the bed myself, not at all ready for anything to end. Instead, I watch as Louis works with something on the bedside table, touching and tugging himself as he does so. My entire brain is beauty and tattoos and nude skin and _Louis_. He's beyond whatever gorgeous previously meant.

_How in the world did I end up here?_

Once Louis gets the condom on himself, he's back on top of me, kissing my lips and licking at my neck. A sense of relief flushes over me from his body being back on mine. It may be wrong to have these feelings now, especially during sex, but it's Louis, and nothing was ever set in stone with us.

We're pretending like it's not our last time, but we know.

We know, but all of those thoughts perish with a simple: "Open up for me, babe."

Louis positions himself between my thighs and I wrap my legs around his hips. He places the tip of his member against my opening, pushing in slowly with gradual thrusts. Once he's balls deep, his movements become fluid and the muscles in his lower abdomen remain tight under his petite, soft bump of a belly.

Louis glides in and out of me seamlessly, his breath coming out in soft pants like mine. I lay back in the bed, biting my lip to stifle the moans that his rhythm elicit.

"You feel so good," I moan between clenched teeth, looming desperately into his eyes.

"You're so fucking tight," he responds. Tiny beads of sweat are forming lightly on his forehead. The
cursive ink on his chest is flushed brilliantly above his light patch of chest fuzz.

Louis pounds into me, bringing my legs up over his shoulders and pressing in even deeper. He slams himself into my wetness, filling me up completely with every thrust. I can do nothing but watch as his length continues to dip in and out of me smoothly. His biceps are strong above me and his muscles are flexing with every push forward.

A sweet, familiar burning begins creeping its way into the pit of my stomach, daring to release. If anyone can give me a solid orgasm, it's Louis. Simply watching his heavy visage of concentration and frustration turns me on. Sooner than expected, I'm incredibly close.

"Deeper," I keen, "harder, Lou."

Louis fucks me strongly and steadily as my palms slide downwards to grip his bare ass. He dips closer, stretching me out, moaning into my mouth while we kiss. His thrusts are relentless, like clockwork, sending me over the edge. My vision blanches and my thoughts become nothing more than white noise as I release a catalyst of loud, satisfied moans, soaking in my orgasm selfishly.

Louis watches me, still pleasurabley rocking his hips into me, as my high fades back into a steady drunk.

"Babe, let me ride you," I offer, almost eagerly.

Louis doesn't hesitate. Nowhere near ready to let this fun end, he pulls out almost immediately at my offer.

As I rise to my knees, Louis rolls onto his back next to me, drawing most of my attention to his stark naked body. His manhood lies untouched, still hard and ready, over his stomach. I'm sure Louis knows I'm checking him out, but I'm not trying to hide anything. Instead, I linger patiently by his side, mindlessly running my fingertips over his smooth, warm torso.

"Make me feel good," Louis smirks. He folds his hands behind his head, highlighting his toned arm muscles.

And there it is: that strange feeling you get when you think there's an extra step and there isn't. The lurch in your stomach, the tingle through your bones. Basically, that's how Louis makes me feel when he says things like that. Like I'm about to fall, but I always end up catching myself.

Looking down at him darkly, I bring my leg over his hips, positioning myself in a comfortable straddle. I take his swollen length in my hand, stroking it before guiding it slowly into my moist warmth.

I already had mine, but that's nothing to slow me down from giving Louis what he wants. It would be a losing battle with myself to even consider saying no to this right now. The battle wouldn't even begin, if we're being completely honest.

I lower myself all the way onto his thickness, moving slowly with increasing speed. I work myself down onto his member, my breaths short and shallow and my thighs tight.

Louis grabs hold of my hips, bucking into me as I ride him. His fingernails grip deep into my skin, creating a harsh sting, releasing a strained whimper from my throat.

I fuck desperately onto him and he thrusts equally as desperately into me.

We laugh at how horny we are.
Louis’ brows soon become furrowed. His short grunts transition into louder moans. I'm trailing my hands over his flushed abdomen as I'm grinding my hips into his, stimulating us both while his length slips fluidly in and out of me. And still, he continues to moan unabashedly, urging me to become more vocal myself.

It almost becomes a competition of who can fuck who harder and who can elicit the loudest moans.

"M’close," Louis finally stutters out, his high voice breaking below me.

I pant, sweat glistening along my collar bones. And I know myself. I know if I don't do everything humanly possible with Louis right now I'll end up regretting it, so I decide to just go for it. "Come on my face."

"Fuck." Louis lifts me off of his hips and gently rolls me to his side. Quickly removing his condom, he takes his position above me, balls grazing my abdomen.

Louis smoothly wanks himself, suddenly coming in hot, silky streams across my face and chest. He rides out his orgasm with his brows knitted together. His neck is beautifully outstretched and his entire body is glazed with sweat and there is no question that he has the most stunning orgasms of anyone I've been with ever.

He's better than a dream.

As Louis comes down from his high, he collapses on the bed beside me.

I close my eyes, basking in the pleasure of all that has just happened. I fade away to the slowing rhythm of his heavy breaths, releasing a giggle at the realisation that his come is still trickled all over my upper half.

Louis takes notice, chuckling at how he's marked me. He climbs out of bed, then returns with a fresh towel, cuddling up next to me and dabbing gently at the mess he's made.

"You look so good like this, babe," Louis hums as he dries off my left cheek. Then, as if through an urging second thought, he presses a soft kiss to my lips.

"You're fantastic," I can't help myself from admitting, feeling my face redden at such a truth.

"You're better." Louis returns, and I'm unable to tell if he's joking or not, as it often is with Louis, so all I can do is pull him closer and join our lips once more.

I remain in Louis' embrace for what feels like tens of minutes. He holds me securely in his strong
arms as the two of us lie together, still soaking in the aftermath of our orgasms. I soon believe that it wouldn't be half bad to stay like this forever – the moment is that perfect.

That is, until Louis' phone lights up.

He grabs his mobile from the side table, voicing an amused, "Uh oh," before showing me his screen.

**Harry: You might want to come see this.**

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We can hear the noise before we reach the room.

Upon entering the suite, it's just as we had imagined: Anarchy.

At least on Niall's end.

The first thing that Louis and I hear as we walk back into the party is the persistent thump of incessantly loud music and a roaring Irish: "I'll turn it off as soon as I figure out how!"

Niall is three sheets to the wind. In other words, he is drunk as a skunk. Somehow, he managed to accidentally set off the large stereo system in the living room at full blast, causing the bass to boom throughout the walls of the suite.

I crack out a laugh, but I can't even hear myself.

Harry and Liam are currently trying to control the intoxicated lad, rather unsuccessfully, as he continues to scream over the pulsing stereo system. Meanwhile, Zayn is calmly sat back on a neighbouring couch, laughing with my band and enjoying the show.

Dazed, Harry shakes his head. "I'm not sober enough for this."

---

The boys sort out their noise situation no longer than two minutes into our arrival, leaving the music at a moderate volume in the background. I'm still a little drunk. I can still feel the effects Louis elicited all those minutes ago. I can still feel how good he felt.

Before anyone can settle in, though, Niall grabs the vodka. He begins singing traditional songs I've never heard before as he swings the bottle around carelessly, erratically using it as a makeshift microphone.

I emit a surprised laugh, not entirely following what exactly is going on at the moment, which clearly none of the lads are either.

It's a relief when Louis playfully pulls me into his satisfying embrace on the couch. We sit right next to Zayn, cuddling up close in our own corner. I sigh happily and Louis emits a pleasantly relieved aura in himself.

Louis simply glows. He is cute and fluffy and warm and cosy and so, so worth everything. His soft
caramel fringe falls into his icy blue eyes as he hums pleasantly into my shoulder.

I smile up at him, pressing a small kiss to his cheek. He returns the expression, his eyelashes casting light shadows over his delicate cheekbones. And I've already decided it:

Louis Tomlinson is one of the most beautiful things I have ever experienced in my life.

It isn't until Niall begins singing a terrible rendition of Seven Drunken Nights that Zayn groans and Louis faces me comically with: "He's Irish! Did y' know?!"

"First I'm hearing of it," I play along contently. "How could you tell?"

"Might have something to do with the fucking folk songs the prick has been singing for the past thirty minutes," Zayn leans forward in a stretch, pricelessly annoyed, laughing as he speaks. Then he adds: "Hey Scar, mind sending me a drink?"

I grimace at Zayn's expression. "Why? You're right there."

"It's so far..." Zayn does his best to warm up to me with a whimsical look.

And it works, because next, I am pulling myself from Louis' warm limbs and approaching the main table full of alcohol. I grab the first bottle I reach – more green shit, it turns out to be – before sauntering back over to the few lads.

I stand in front of Zayn. "Happy?" I fake sarcasm, handing him the green bottle before cuddling back up with Louis. I yawn, relishing in a big stretch before waiting for an answer.

"Had a good workout?" Louis smirks in my ear as I settle in. He's loud enough for Zayn to hear, as he retorts with a snort.

"Fuck you," I can't help but smile.

"Again?" Louis quips. Smug.

"Shut the fuck up." My grin reaches my ears.

Zayn laughs, pulling out a pack of cigarettes instead. "It's alright babes, chill out."

I stick my tongue out at Zayn as Liam's voice slightly raises from across the room. He's still stood with Niall who is, not even surprisingly, still as wildly cheerful as when we came in.

Harry is hovering next to the pair with his palm pressed against his forehead. He still looks slightly at a loss of what to do, but even I know that he doesn't have the heart to leave any of his mates to deal with a drunken mess.

"Niall- just, like- eat this," Liam insists, holding out half a deli sandwich. "It'll sober you up."

"Are ye kidding?" Niall laughs heartily. "If I eat that I'll smell like you!"

Niall goes on laughing. He laughs because he just quoted Grease. He laughs until he is red in the face and his chuckles become more like cackles before he swigs the vodka to his lips once again.
The lad doesn't miss a beat.

"Niall-" Liam warns.

"S'alright! S'alright!" Niall makes his way into the open kitchen, bottle still in hand. "This one's for my homies... in the sink!"

With that, Niall pours a straight shot of vodka down the suite's kitchen sink. Almost all of us break out in sudden protest, nearly yelling at the poor intoxicated lad, though Niall being Niall takes no notice, simply laughing at his own wit as per usual.

Harry is the one to ultimately move in and grab Niall by the shoulders, pulling him away from the kitchen and back to the living room with the rest of us.

"It's just getting sad now..." Louis huffs, resting his chin atop my head.

"It was sad fifteen minutes ago," Zayn fails to hide his silent grin.

Niall comes to pause in front of an empty seat in the living room between Keith and Harry. It only takes a moment before he suddenly bursts out with: "Tequila ta kill ya!"

"Niall," I struggle to keep myself in check, quite ready to erupt in a fit of laughter myself, "you didn't even drink tequila."

Niall winks at me. "That's because it's ta kill ya!"

Harry firmly sits him down. "I think you're done."

Niall eventually passed out on the floor with only a single leg raised on the chair he was once on. His mouth hung slightly agape and drool formed at the corner of his parted lips.

Harry kept himself preoccupied, trying to sober himself up from all of those Nevers he Evered. He tried to teach me how to juggle, using some oranges he found on the kitchen counter, but I hardly got past two, let alone three.

Louis stood by us with a fond beam, not to mention his hilarious commentary. Meanwhile, Zayn and Liam shared their own craic with my band, relaxing and joking with each other like they had known each other for ages. I couldn't help but smile whenever I would notice them, but I soon migrated over to the eldest member on the couch for one last hurrah.

Louis and I ended up passing out in each others' arms for a good little while, once the party died down to the final few stragglers. We laid sleepily along the couch, our limbs intertwined and our breaths deep and satisfied. His fingertips offhandedly trailed up and down my arm, keeping my pulse low and my mind content. I folded my hand into his free one, interlacing our fingers and idly stroking my thumb along his soft skin. We weren't paying too much mind to whatever anyone else was doing after a while, but it's fun to not really think sometimes.

It wasn't until that moment between sleep and awake did I realise that Louis literally does blind me. Whenever we're together, my smile becomes so big that my eyes get all squinty and my cheeks hurt from smiling.
And during the final hour of our stay, I refrained from telling my bandmates what was truly on my mind — I'm so far gone for him — instead, the only words to leave my lips were the ones unanimous between us all:

"This can't be the end."

Chapter End Notes

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It was the end.

We said goodbye for now, just in case our managers are in touch, but most of us understood that it was goodbye forever.
By the morning after the party, I was living in hangover city. My head was full, throbbing from such a random mix of alcohol the night before, but any headache was worth it.

I'd just experienced a boyband, of all the possibilities in the world.

What a ride it was.

Mitch sits us down as soon as we enter his London office. He places a finger over his lips in thought, playing up the fact that he's burning to tell us something. I'm still a little mad at him for taking me to such a shady gossip magazine those few ago, but it's part of the job — as Mitch said, any publicity is good publicity — and I'm just waiting for the answer, the resolve.

But it's a no.

"Unfortunately, you didn't make the Wembley show," Mitch finally tells us, as if saying unfortunately before the bad news will make it any better.

Obviously, it's unfortunate. We already know it's unfortunate.

Most of the air escapes my lungs.

We knew exactly what we were in for, yet it still hurts to hear it. Our surreal celebrity days have come to a close. Even my band looks let down.

"You didn't make the Wembley show," Mitch goes on, "because there was no Wembley show."

"Wait, what?" I react, frowning up at the man before us.

"What are you saying?" Elijah voices skeptically.

"Now... bear with me, here..." Mitch begins, taking his time to process each of our reactions. "The idea was that you were being auditioned to open a single stadium show at Wembley stadium. Although the supposed opening act would only perform a select few songs if chosen, One Direction's people had you play for them as if you were going through an entire setlist. And, like some of you seemed to have caught on," he looks specifically at Keith here, who grins successfully, "that full set was actually your audition for something more."

"Wise Keith," Pete shakes his head to himself, while Elijah and I still remain confused.

Mitch raises a hand, as to finish.

"One Direction has a world tour coming up in the next couple of months," our manager directly spells it out for us. "The Wembley show was bait, to audition bands undercover and find the most substantial act for their upcoming tour. Unknowingly, you auditioned... and they want you."

"Hold on..." My pulse reaches my ears, numbing my chest.

"You just said we didn't get it," Elijah stalls.

"We did..." Pete clues in. "We didn't get the show, because there was no show..."
"Lost the show and won a tour..." Keith sums it up in a sentence.

"Fuck," I blanche.

Elijah looks at us, then back to Mitch. "How do we know this is real?"

"It's real because it's a contracted deal for just over eight months on the road," Mitch says matter-of-factly, pulling out a file folder with papers for us all. "It's real."

"Why didn't y' tell us before?" Keith asks our manager. "About the tour?"

Mitch laughs. "Maybe I should've. But in a way, it calmed you down and let you show your true colours for the judges. No pressure, right?"

"No pressure," I scoff under my breath, shaken in awe and disbelief.

In a similar state, Pete's eyes remain glassy and wide. "It worked."

"It's an amazing deal," Mitch agrees. He seems to notice how I'm gazing over my contract like it's a forbidden novel. He smiles. "I'll let you look over the details now. We'll nitpick minor agreements later, but in the mean time... do we have a consensus?"

"What's a consensus?" Elijah asks.

"It's when someone has ESP and they can sense us," Pete tells him, milking it.

"Shut up," Elijah laughs, rolling his eyes because he knows he's joking.

"Does everyone agree?" Mitch re-words himself, naturally chuckling along with the rest of us.

"Yeah! I'm good," Elijah offers right away. "No second-guess for me!"

Pete ponders the offer for a moment. Gradually, he takes a deep breath as he nods. "I think, yeah... I don't think I could say no to this."

"Keith?" Mitch smiles, turning to our guitarist.

The eldest lad of our band sits forward in his seat, hands folded with his elbows on his knees. He draws his lips into his mouth, deep in thought. "I'm not doin' this for the boyband," he clarifies, first of all. Yet he laughs, shaking his head. "Fuck it. I'm in." Keith modestly beams as Pete rubs his hair with his knuckles and Elijah reaches entirely across the two, gripping onto Keith's knee in success.

"We have a band!" Mitch proudly watches the lads celebrate amongst themselves. "Do we have a singer?"

Beaming, all three of my bandmates turn to me, faces slowly dimming in wait.

No one says a word.

I sit up a bit straighter, looking around at my companions like it's all on me.

It is.

My lips part. A blush peeks through my stony expression. Ultimately, I speak.

"Well... obviously."
Mitch claps his hands together, pulling in an ecstatic group hug for us all. We're in a daze, I get rustled and jostled — it seems so unreal — and I don't think I could stop smiling if I tried.

A week and a half later, we haven't had any free time.

Like, at all.

Since we agreed to open for the tour, all we've been doing is work. Aside from our persistent rehearsals and run-throughs, we've been involved with an insane amount of undercover tour promotion. That means more than a few interviews — mostly written, but some radio — not to mention shameless promoting of our band via all kinds of media outlets.

All of this, without actually admitting anything about the status of the upcoming tour to the public. As far as the world knows, we're still supposedly nominees like everyone else. It won't be until February that we'll be given the green light to announce our life-changing news. Yet, even life-changing sounds underrated.

Alongside our day-to-day schedules with our manager, we've recently begun working with One Direction's team as well. Our band is quite new to the glamour scene and we haven't had much experience in the fame department, so for the length of the tour, we've gained some professionals: a stylist, a hair and makeup artist, a tour manager and a music director.

We've been in light contact with the boys themselves too, but they're twice as busy as we are. They agreed that it's hectic now, but things will fall into a steady rhythm once we're following the schedule of the tour.

I haven't appreciated a day off so much since I can remember.

I spot Elijah during our break by some folding chairs, texting on his phone. Needing a moment of peace away from the lively conversations of everyone else, I walk up to my humble drummer. "Still talking to your brother?"

"Mmm," Elijah responds, absent in thought. "Proper imbecile. He got detention for shooting a spitball at the blackboard. What kind of teenager still uses spitballs?"

"Clearly your little brother," I smirk, taking the empty seat next to him.

"Idiot," Elijah laughs, finally glancing up at me from his screen. "Still talking to Harry?"

I check my own phone. It's been nearly an hour since the younger lad's latest response, but I shrug, nonetheless. "We get along."

"Are you, like, friends now?" Elijah wonders.

"We made plans to hang out," I say, grabbing Elijah's sunglasses off the top of his head.
"Just casually made plans to hang out with Harry," he mimics me, making me grin in modesty. "When?"

"In a couple days, I think," I tell him, slipping his shades over my eyes. "Before our first group rehearsal, for sure."

"Wait, so, like, a hang-out?" Elijah clarifies. "Or a hang-out?"

I give my drummer a look through his tinted lenses. "We're talking about Harry, not Louis."

"Yeah," Elijah shrugs, indifferent.

I laugh out loud. "The popular frontman isn't really my type."

"I'm gonna pretend to believe that's your label for Harry," Elijah teases. "And him?"

"He's not into older women."

"Oh, right."

When the *OK!* article was released to the world, my online followers were rising and spamming almost non-stop. The flood has since decreased, but a crazy amount of people still haven't let up about my paparazzi pictures with Harry.

I think Elijah keeps forgetting that none of it is real.

It's funny, because this isn't the first time it's hit me that we're on the inside of the spectrum now, too.

This whole fame aspect might take some getting used to, but the constant countdown until our world tour kicks off is everything to be excited about.

With all of the time my band and I have been spending in the city preparing for the tour, I've decided to rent out a temporary flat just outside of central London. It's nothing too fancy, and I'm still entirely in the moving-in stage, but that hasn't held me back from having company. My new friend Harry has been over for the past little while.

"The thing about touring is that you can only explore so much, and the time for certain things is limited," Harry tells me, continuing on with our conversation about this new phase in my career. "Like, baths. We couldn't have a bath every night if we wanted to."

"We?" I scrunch my nose.

"I mean, like, in general," Harry says, brushing off his accidental innuendo. "Things like that need to be scheduled. They take time. Most days, it's a quick shower and you're already in the van."

"Are you trying to psyche me out?" I jest.

"No, I'm just saying," Harry voices kindly.

"Something to look forward to," I muse, giving him a subtle smile. "You're a bath guy, then?"
"Well... yeah, I like a bit of both," Harry considers, chuckling in a friendly manner. "Before the boyband, when I had more time, I'd stay in the shower or bath a bit longer sometimes, just to listen to full albums and sing along."

I smile at that. "Which albums?"

"For a while, it was a mix between The Rolling Stones, The Police... and The Beatles, of course."

"Right on," I grin widely.


"There we go," I nod along, impressed. "Right up my alley."

"So I've noticed."

"And now?"

"I've expanded... I like new indie rock too, some pop and the odd R&B ballad," Harry tells me, and I have to focus on not reacting like I just smelled something foul. "Still love that classic stuff."

"Uh huh..." I trail off, because I don't know how else to respond without sounding the least bit snarky. "What about, like, Cream or The Hollies or The Byrds?"

"Now you're going way back," Harry chuckles.

"Can't get enough," I beam in return, my gaze lowering to the trio of candles on my coffee table.

Half of my belongings are still packed away in boxes, with only my essentials scattered around my new place so far, yet I still managed to decorate. The homes and hotel suites that someone like Harry is used to must make my entire flat look like nothing more than a table and a lamp, though he doesn't seem much of the type to mind. Celebrity or not.

"So, were you all a fan of boybands before you started this?" I ask the younger lad out of curiosity.

Harry laughs, like I just told a joke. "No, definitely not all of us," he smiles fondly. "Niall and I were. Liam was kind of on the fence with the boyband thing, but he was all for it, regardless. He ended up being one of our most dedicated bandmates, if not the most, once we got going. And Zayn and Louis?" Harry shakes his head, snickering to himself.

"I'm guessing that's a no," I smirk, unable to help the indulgent smile that tugs around my lips at the mention of Harry's best friend.

"Big fat no," Harry agrees, licking his lips. "What about the eighties?"

I raise my eyebrows. "What about the eighties?"

"Do you like anything from 1980-on?" Harry mimics my expression, trying not to laugh even more.

"Well, yeah," I shrug, openly considering it. "I guess. David Bowie, Sting, Eric Clapton, they all continued on with their thing... The Stones, of course..."

Harry suddenly gives off a hearty chuckle. "I'm talking bands that started post-1980."

"Oh," I realise a moment too late. I don't want to admit that I blush, or that I might be a touch embarrassed by the way he's looking at me, but, well. "I don't even know. Maybe some."
"You don't even know," Harry repeats, and I can't stand it. I want to pinch that cheeky expression off his face.

I shake my head, smiling in light bashfulness. "Honestly, you'd have to look at my record collection to understand."

Harry's expression remains the same, yet his mouth curls. "Let's."

"Heroes, Electric Ladyland, Morrison Hotel..." I list in an undertone, flipping through some of my currently accessible vinyls. Then I find it. "Dark Side of the Moon."

"You've got quite the collection," Harry comments, still distracted by my unsorted array of shelved and boxed records in my second bedroom.

"Thanks," I smile, handing him the vintage album.

Harry takes it from me. "And they're not alphabetised?" he asks.

I shake my head.

"That was a quick find," he comments, turning over the album cover to give it a look.

I shrug pleasantly. "I like to keep Pink Floyd handy."

"Even when moving in," Harry notes, like I should be proud of such a trait.

A genuine glow lights up my eyes as we round back to my living room. "I love music, what can I say?"

The 1973 record album was Harry's selection.

Or, maybe it was technically both of ours.

It all started once we began going through my collection of vinyl. We got talking about concept albums and our favourites, if we could choose. Then I referred to layering music over movies – like the common fusion of Pink Floyd's Dark Side of the Moon album over the classic film, The Wizard of Oz – and how it's something I've never tried but always wanted to. Right away, Harry said he's done it once with his friend Tom and there is no way he's leaving tonight without me having experienced it.

So, here we are.

The old speakers softly crack out the album's ninth track, Brain Damage, as the scarecrow dances along on the screen. The incense I lit for us is half ash by now; the trail of thin smoke reaches past our vision. We're sober, but I'm in a daze.
"What would they call it?" I wonder aloud, still not entirely sure.

"I'm sure there are many names," Harry reckons.

"Dark Side of the Rainbow," I suggest, as a basic thought.

"Dark Side of Oz," Harry raises me one.

"The Wizard of Floyd," I grin, really liking the sound of that.

"The Wizard on the Moon!" Harry exclaims successfully.


"What did I say?"

"On."

"Crap," Harry dejectedly closes his eyes, flaring his large nostrils in mock-disappointment. "It's not Dark Side 'on' the Moon, now, is it?"

I don't know whether to laugh out loud or shake my head. "Was that supposed to be a joke?"

Harry clears his throat, casually settling in. "Let's pretend it wasn't."

We spend the next few minutes sharing celery sticks and debating the official title of the famous mash-up, because neither of us know it.

It isn't long before Harry invites me to come sit with him, claiming that he's lonely and needs human comfort, and the first image that comes to mind is of the charismatic lad so instinctively flopping over my bandmates during that last hotel party.

Naturally, all I can do is laugh and oblige.

The van glides over the small cracks in the road, softly rocking us in our seats. The feel of gravel ripples through the tyres, slowing the vehicle as we enter the warehouse park.

My limbs are kicked out in the back seat, my body in a casual slump with my mobile in hand. Pete is sat up front with our driver, while Elijah and Keith are sat in the rear with me. I've been texting Harry since the van revved its engine, smirking every time my screen lights up with his cheeky texts.

"Who you texting, Scar?" Elijah nudges me playfully.

"None of your beeswax," I respond.

"Did you just-?" Pete laughs out loud, catching my gaze in the rear-view mirror. "Who even says that anymore?"
"I say it anymore," I maintain, sticking out my tongue at his reflection.

The three members of my backing band and I have only grown closer since this life of upgrades began. We've always been on the same page and we've always clicked musically, but at this point, we're on the road to feeling more like siblings.

The four of us have been unusually quiet, rather on-and-off today, but I'm not complaining. It might have something to do with our first time rehearsing with One Direction since the tour was decided.

I tilt my head to look out the window by my side, watching our designated warehouse growing closer and closer among our barren view. Slowly, the nerves begin correlating in my stomach; an ugly, familiar sickness.

Until I get another text.

**Harry:** My hair's damp and curly. Liam's laughing. Not happy.

I smirk silently to myself as I type out a quick response.

**Me:** Spent too long in the shower, yeah?

"Someone's blushing," Pete hints suggestively, this time peering back at me from the front seat.

I shoot him an unconvinced look, rolling my eyes at the fact that anyone would think I'm blushing this early in the morning. Unconvinced and indifferent, I go back to my phone.

As it turns out, Harry has already responded.

**Harry:** You're thinking of me in the shower.

Keith chuckles. "Well, yer sure blushing' now."

My jaw sets as I stare at my phone. "Come on..." I roll my eyes civilly. "I'm texting a friend."

"Some friend," Elijah implies, causing the others to crack up around us.

"Stuff it," I scoff uneasily, making sure to avert my vision from the lads as they continue on with their teasing remarks.

I read Harry's message over, then I read it again.

A frown creases between my brows. I type out the most basic response I can think of, not wanting to draw the conversation into something it isn't. With a single boring word, I press send.

**Me:** Cheeky.

It's not like Harry is sexting me, or anything so vile. It's probably just another weird joke of his. He does have an odd sense of humour, Harry Styles.

And no, of course it can't be a sext, because we don't sext. We never do. We never push it that far. We're friends.

Sure, we might sometimes refer to sexual innuendos, but we all do. Our jokes are always laughable and we would obviously say the same thing with any of the lads in our bands. That's what makes it so good. It's more of a game than anything.
But, now...

**Harry:** Why don't you help me get dirty again?

The vehicle slows to a crawl in front of the warehouse entrance. I nearly smack the side of my head off the passenger window once we finally stop. Too distracted for my own good, I slip my phone into my back pocket and keep it there.

The van doors open and the lot of us pile out onto the solid asphalt. I shake off the nervous feeling that sinks its way into my gut, ultimately playing off Harry's messages as a joke and nothing more.

As we enter the spacious warehouse, I spot our instruments and equipment set up just across those of One Direction's band. The five singers are gathered in a circle with our crew, wrapping up a private meeting. Mitch is stood a few yards away from them, chatting up a couple of executives.

Since we signed the tour papers, we've all been unbelievably busy. To our fortune, we've also gained a wonderful team of people to help us along the way. It's wild to believe that all of this happening for us. I'm not very used to being catered to, yet we now have our own driver, Mitch has since hired a publicist and a social media worker, and even our equipment has its own vehicle. It's a lot to take in.

Slowly but surely, the energy of the tour is burning over the horizon.

And we haven't even reached the stage yet.

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**Why don't you help me get dirty again?**

Needless to say, it's on my mind.

Once Mitch has introduced our schedule and expressed his piece, I'm almost ready to find Louis in hopes of a needed distraction. Harry, however, is the first to walk over to us, greeting my bandmates with a handshake each. Before we even make contact, I can hear his husky voice ringing clear in my mind.

"Scarlet...?" Harry gradually warms up to me, his words still blatantly written all over his face.

"Absolutely not," I whisper, knowing exactly what he's hinting at.

Sometimes I forget that Harry is the baby of the group. Whenever it hits me that he's two years younger than me, it's almost like I'm waking up. He will carry himself in such a way and he will have this hold on me and it will be so strong, so powerful. Then, all of a sudden, everything will become clear again, real again, and- I don't know how to explain it, exactly. It's just... different. An intriguing different, that is.

Basically, even if you don't like Harry Styles, you like Harry Styles.

But I'm not into him like that.
We're friends.

And he's not into older women.

Yet here he is.

He won't back off.

And he's not looking away.

Chapter End Notes

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I am officially a space case.

With our hectic schedules and our growing amount of band homework, I completely forgot that the holidays are soon approaching. I didn't even clue in that our first group rehearsal with One Direction was also our last rehearsal together until after the new year.

"At least you'll get more time with Louis," Elijah offers positively over our phone connection.

"We don't need more time. We're just hooking up sometimes," I dismiss, brushing off the matter. "Besides, his birthday is Christmas Eve. He's going home to Doncaster with his family."

"For the whole break?"
I needlessly shrug. "Most of it."

"Huh," Elijah considers. "When he's not out for photo ops, I reckon."

"You said it."

Until the tenth of January, we've come to a much needed slow. Aside from our band's tradition of Secret Santa during the holiday season, we've mostly been active with promotion and preparation for the tour. Basically, this is our calm before the storm. It's our time to sort things out at home and let our rehearsals sink in, all while we hold fast and brace ourselves for the announcement to be released.

Unfortunately for One Direction, being on "break" doesn't necessarily mean they're any less busy. As the biggest pop group in the world, they've constantly got so much more on their plates than we do.

I hope they remember to eat their vegetables.

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"HAPPY NEW YEAR!" a drunken man passes us, stumbling down the sidewalk.

Keith checks his watch, frowning. "It's half ten."

"Put on your party hat, Quinn," Pete charms lightly, walking along next to him. "The night's not over yet."

"D'you think this is a good idea? Goin' out there tonight like this?" Keith asks skeptically. His brown paper bag hasn't been lifted once for a swig since we left Pete's.

"Why should we care?" I dismiss lightly, a little buzzed from our pre-drink. "We're here, in person. Everything's easier in person."

"It's New Year's Eve," Elijah adds with a smile. "Everyone's gonna be drunk anyway."

"See, ya don't see it," Keith criticises, still too focused on the negative reviews we received today. "Our own fans are turnin' on us, just because we're even an option. What about when they find out we're it? It's like ya don't care that we're gettin' ripped on."

"We care, Keith!" Pete laughs, assuring him. "We're just getting drunk about it!"

Keith looks at our bassist and gives off a sigh. Knocking his bottleneck off the one in Pete's hands, he takes a deep swig for himself. "True, amigo."

---

The four of us file through the front doors of the pub, only to continue pushing towards the rear. There is a band on stage and the patrons of the tavern are drunk and enraptured. My ears are full, a wall of noise.
"Smoke a joint?" Pete calls back as we're moving through the crowd.

"Yeah," I nod ahead at him.

We reach the back of the venue and break on through the exit door. The noise considerably eases, then falls back to a muffled pulse of bass as the door swings shut.

Pete pulls out a spliff.

"Mitch said we shouldn't smoke anything funny tonight," Elijah mentions, despite sticking with us.

"Shouldn't be seen," Keith corrects him. He hands his lighter to Pete.

Pete is about to raise the joint to his lips and spark it, until there is a sudden wave of live music and the back door slams shut once more. He lowers the unlit spliff to his side.

Three girls and a guy step out into the alley, noticing us right away. They mull the situation over for a moment, then decide upon pulling out their own joint, coincidentally or not. They spark their spliff without wait, not forgetting to send another glance in our direction as they pass it around.

"Should we-?"

"No."

"It's just them."

"Shouldn't be seen, Quinn."

"Hey!" the guy of the group calls for our attention, raising their own spliff for us to see. "You wanna join us?"

My band and I share a few looks. I pull my jacket around myself. Elijah fiddles with his cuffs. We end up shrugging amongst ourselves. It's just them.

Our two groups soon become one with the help of the pot. As it turns out, all four of the strangers know who we are. Two of the girls have been fans of our band for the past year, as has their guy friend, while the third girl solely knows who I am through One Direction's celebrity frontman.

We have a laugh with the fans while we toke and talk, but within no more than ten minutes, the back doors are breaking open once again.

This time, more than enough people filter out into the back alley. The band inside has just finished playing their set and all of the smokers in the crowd now have a chance to venture outside for their break.

As the once casual crowd grows to a small mob, the lads and I exchange pressing glances. It's one thing to blaze with a few fans, but we could earn some serious repercussions if more than enough people spotted us doing drugs, especially in public.

"Shit, well fucking come on, then," Pete breathes. He leads us and the few original fans through another nearby alley, quickly but kindly moving away from the growing crowd. We curve down
another road and in no time, Pete is rounding us out to walk along a neighbourhood street.

"Freedom!" Elijah walks backwards through the street, stretching his arms out into the night air.

"Don't pretend like you don't love it," I chuckle as I watch him.

Elijah grins back. "Love what?"

My mind blanks. "I don't know where I was going with that. I'm stoned."

"Aren't you a little used to people recognising you?" one of the girls asks us.

"Not really," I admit. With a smile, I accept the half-burned joint from her friend. I raise it to my lips and take a pull.

"We're just a regular band who plays pubs all the time," Pete insists, for everyone to hear.

"We've opened a few big shows," Keith commends.

"Okay, a few," Pete reasons with a grin.

"What's the biggest show you've opened?" the girl questions further.

"Isle of Wight festival was the biggest, hands down," I tell her, smoke blowing past my lips as I speak. "We played the smallest stage, but our set was a couple hours before sunset, so the crowd was pretty amazing. Definitely more than we're used to."

"We played Leeds, too," Elijah reminds us, as an afterthought.

"You played Leeds?" the guy friend asks, visibly impressed.

Elijah chuckles. "We did, before Isle of Wight, actually, but again, we were on the smallest stage and it was really early in the day," he laughs, sheepishly humoured. "No one was there."

The rest of us laugh out loud. The fans, because it's embarrassing. Our band, because it's true.

"It was good!" Pete defends spiritedly. He shrugs. "Isle of Wight was better."

"I saw you at the The Windmill in Brixton a couple times!" the shorter girl beams as I'm passing the joint to her. "Last time, Pete, you were wearing swimming fins and inflatable armbands. It was hilarious."

"I remember that! You were there?" Pete chimes, laughing his ass off. "That's bizarre. We had a few shows where we were really keen on jamming to sixties surf rock."

"We like to share our phases," Elijah tells the fans, smirking, "and we're just extremely comfortable on stage."

"A bit too comfortable," Pete teases, wagging his brows at Elijah, and I know he's referring to the time our drummer performed an entire set wearing only a pair of boxer shorts and a tie.

"It's an illusion, really," I chuckle, slowly looking around at everyone. "We play pubs and bars and parks. People who see us open for these huge shows might think we're used to doing it all the time. We're not quite used to that scale yet."

"It gets the blood pumping," Keith jokes, but I know exactly what he means.
"Wait, so, what about One Direction?" the fan of the boyband asks. "Aren't you gonna open for them?"

The three fans of our own band laugh, like she must be kidding.

"We don't know that yet," Elijah denies.

"That hasn't been announced yet," Keith says, practically at the same time.

"Wait, really?" the guy of the lot questions curiously, handing the burning joint off to one of his friends. "Opening, like, a show?"

"We're one of many bands in talks... to open a tour..." Pete covers loosely, "but one of many, so..."

"Whoa..." is the general reaction.

"That's so... weird for you guys," the girl with the spliff thinks out loud, coughing from her toke. "Sorry, I mean, that's huge! But, er... you guys are actually a good band."

"You're too good for them," her other friend agrees.

"Hey, they're nowhere near bubblegum anymore. Their sound has matured and they write most of their own songs now. They're a good band..." the One Direction fan enlightens the group, "and you know Harry," she looks right at me.

"Erm... yeah," I smile, modestly pleased. "We've hung out a couple times."

"Wait, Harry Styles?" the guy mildly raises his brows. "Shit, he's a celebrity."

"He's a friend," I nod. I'm high.

"How are we even hanging out right now?" the fan of the boyband chuckles, doing her best to contain herself despite the circumstances.

We all laugh; we're all stoned together.

"Is Harry really that nice?" the sweet girl wonders, like such a fact is very important.

"He's really that bloody nice!" I break out laughing, along with everyone else. My eyes are relaxed, perhaps squinting a little from the pot.

In retrospect, I could care less about any negative reviews we may have received today.

If there is a little good in everyone, as has been proven tonight, maybe this gig won't be half bad.

As we're walking back to the pub for the countdown, Elijah scoots up next to me. A weirdly endearing grin is splattered across his face, like we're sharing a secret. If we are, I've forgotten what it was.

"So much talk about the lads..." Elijah begins with a sigh.

"Wind Direction?" I smirk, walking along.
"Yeah, those guys," he bites his lip, beaming. He slips his hands into his coat pockets.

I smile at the lad. "Anyone catch your eye?"

Elijah shrugs, frowning indifferently.

I don't say anything. I simply nod. Right.

Elijah nods back, like that's that. "Hook me up, will you?"

"Oh my god," I scoff out a laugh.

"Do it, Scar," Keith consents, overhearing us. "Elijah's in heat. He wants to pound on something other than his kit for once."

"Bastard," Elijah curses. He shakes his head. "He's right, though."

I laugh along with the two, catching up with the others just as we're nearing the pub once again.

Although my drummer has immersed himself in the rock scene since he discovered vinyl, he's grown quite fond of the five young men I've got to know so well these past couple of months.

Really, how could anyone not?

"Alright, it's just out the back," Mitch tells us, leading me and my band around the vast exterior of the warehouse. It's our first day back to rehearsals and, knowing our manager, he's clearly got something up his sleeve.

As we reach the back of the warehouse, we are instantly struck by the largest representation of One Direction I've ever seen in my life. Across the side of a massive red tour bus is an enormous group shot of the five lads, up close and photoshopped in high definition. I need to blink a few times to focus on Louis' giant, gorgeous head.

"That one's for the crew," Mitch explains with a chuckle. "Yours..." he continues, guiding us around the vehicle, "is right over here."

Behind the crew's transportation, two more tour buses equal in size are parked right next to each other. The black one, Mitch tells us, is for One Direction. The grey one, he's pleased to announce, is for us.

The lads light up, sharing their awed reactions. All three of them immediately go on ahead. I watch as they walk around the sizeable vehicle, checking it out.

"I can't believe we get a bus," I voice quietly.

My manager smiles down at me. "Of course you get a bus! How else would you tour?"

"I know, it's just..." I shake my head, unable to keep a grin from spreading wide across my face. "This is great. This is all so great. Thank you."

Mitch pulls me into a comfortable one-armed hug. "Don't thank me, love. Go explore!"
The door is unlocked.

I make my way into the empty tour bus, climbing up its few steps until I spot the lads inside.

My three bandmates and I spend the next short while discovering all of the caravan's corners and amenities; the broad driver's seat and the ample storage space; the cosy bunks, the compact toilet and the tiny kitchenette. Once we reach the back, we find ourselves in what can only be classified as the crash pad.

We test out the cushions of the fine leather couches built into the back of the bus. We kick up our feet and mellow out, simply taking in that this will be our home for the next eight months.

It's strange to believe that we're actually living this reality.

I pinch myself and it stings.

Pete and Elijah soon leave with Mitch to work on their drum and bass rhythms in the warehouse, leaving Keith and me to ourselves. No longer than seven minutes into our conversation about ideal road trip playlists, there is a knock on our bus door.

I get up, laughing at how the new vehicle seems like such a home to us already. At my own leisure, I head to the front of the bus.

It's Louis.

He stands at the base of the steps, grinning up at me. He's wearing a faded Queen shirt that's a little too large for him and his eyes are shining bright like stars. A shadow of stubble is fading along his jaw and I didn't know he liked that band. He looks so beautiful, I want to tell him right here. Instead, I wrap him in a warm hug as a greeting, letting my embrace speak for itself.

Louis hugs me back sweetly. "This is it, then," he follows up the steps behind me, "the big time!"

I laugh, guiding him through the carrier. "First tour, first bus," I smirk, "first boyband."

"Your favourite bit," Louis teases, the corners of his mouth curling only to intrigue me.

"Tomlinson!" Keith pipes up as he notices our company.

"Keith!" Louis beams. "Hey mate, how's it going?"

My guitarist shares a handshake with the singer. "Not bad, man. We got a bus."

"Sweet bus," Louis praises, taking a seat across from the lad. Like nothing, he pulls me down along with him — casually, like we're used to when drunk — and Keith doesn't say a thing.

The three of us talk for a while about the tour. About how the shows and fan attention will take some
getting used to. Awkwardly enough, we also come to talk about how hundreds of thousands of people will suddenly want to get into not just my pants, but my backup band's pants, as well.

The subject elicits a somewhat uneasy laugh from my throat.

Louis grins through a bright chuckle, calming me by sliding a strong arm around my shoulders.

Keith raises his eyebrows at the two of us, but I merely pull a face at him.

I hadn't thought of that part before. I mean, sure, there's no doubt that we're soon to gain fame — all of us — but it's just a little weird to comprehend that people will actually have favourite band members and idolise us and daydream about us.

It's an exciting sort of weird, is what it is.

As Keith goes on about said slow rise to fame, he throws in another mention of our new fans, and how people all over the world will likely be pining over me specifically, by the time our announcement is released tonight.

"Why me?" I ask, amused.

"You're the saucy frontwoman," Keith determines.

"How am I saucy?" I chuckle.

"You're sweet and spicy," Louis fills in for him.

Keith points at Louis, as to agree, and we all break out in a round of laughter.

Then, as I'm all too caught up in the blissful nothingness of the moment, I feel Louis take my hand in his free one. He runs his thumb along the shape of my wrist and I find myself smiling up at him.

A warmness suddenly envelops me.

Louis really does have gentle hands.

"So, you two, like, a thing then?" Keith wonders aloud.

I tilt my head back in a grin, resting my neck against Louis' arm that remains around my shoulders. This is probably the third or fourth time we've been asked this. Each time, it's the same answer:

"We're just having fun."

And there it is, it's always fun. That doesn't mean we like each other any less. In all honesty, I probably like Louis a little more every day.

Interesting.

"You must've used some sort of pick up line on him, at least," Keith jokes, easing away from any deeper sort of conversation.

I smile, relieved at how my guitarist knows me. I grin up at Louis, then back to Keith. "Yeah," I tell him. "I said, Do you have a shovel in your pocket? 'Cause I'm digging that booty."

Louis nods, trying to remain as serious as possible. "She totally did," he agrees with a straight face. "I was there."
Keith seems to believe us for a moment, then he cracks a cheeky smile and we lose it, laughing our heads off until our eyes water and our stomach muscles ache.

And it's not the first time it's hit me.

But Louis is cute and sweet and he's obviously a sex machine, plus he's hilarious and edgy and he smells good and all of that is very, very bad, because now it's reached that point.

It's getting out of hand.

Now, it's really hard not to like him a lot.

"Let's take a thirty-minute break," Jon, our music director and the boys' keyboardist, announces to our two groups. "Go to the loo, have some food, call your aunt, whatever your heart desires... Thirty minutes!"

Both of our bands scatter around, tending to our separate activities. Four days back to rehearsals and we're already smack dab in the eyewall of the cyclone. Thirty minutes wouldn't seem like much a few months ago, but today, it's as good as gold.

I head towards the toilets, my footsteps echoing through the barren warehouse corridor. I'm about to round the corner, but a delicate rasp distracts me.

"The ones down there are out of order," he calls out.

"Oh, yeah," I turn around to see Louis, looking as fit as ever. "Thanks, I forgot."

"You had a good set," Louis nears me, his skate shoes practically silent on the concrete flooring. "Holding up?" he smiles, showing his straight teeth and rather pointy incisors.

A smile forms on my own face as we come into contact. "I'm a little wiped, but good. How are you?"

Louis shrugs noncommittally. "Same."

I laugh in disbelief. "If I'm a little wiped, you should be knocked out."

Louis chuckles as well, licking his tongue across his thin lips. "Why's that?"

"We're doing seven songs, you're doing twenty-one," I tell him, respectively.

"Your set's thirty minutes long, ours is an hour and a half," Louis agrees, placing it into perspective.

"See?" I tease. "You beat me."

"Mine's longer than yours!" Louis grins, teasing me back in a playful sing-song.

I chuckle at our banter and how easy it flows. "We're not measuring our willies, Lou."

Louis' laugh echoes through the corridor. "I've got a story for that..."

"Do you?" I raise my eyebrows.
"Not the time, not the time," Louis mutters to himself, chuckling away. "Speaking of willies... how's Harry?"

"Harry?" I repeat.

"I saw you two talking before our set... looked like you were getting rather cosy," Louis suggests, and I can't tell if that's a compliment or a slight.

"We're good friends," I simply state.

"So he's mentioned," Louis adds in a similar tone.

I shift my weight, watching him.

He shifts his weight, watching me.

In the midst of our strenuous working hours, Louis and I have barely had any time to slip in a single -- much needed -- stress-relieving hook-up. We're lucky enough to be living with essentially the same agenda, but I'm still trying to adjust to the growing demands of this new life, and, as one fifth of the biggest boyband in the world with a headlining tour on the horizon, Louis is naturally three times busier than I am.

Even so, he seems a little misguided. I'm sure someone at his level of fame is far from having blue balls, so it can't be that. Maybe this pre-tour stir-craziness has gone to his head.

"Louis... do you think-?" I laugh out loud, aiming to gather what he's on about. "Do you think I'm gonna go for Harry?"

Louis shrugs. "We're not..."

"I know."

"...dating or serious or anything..."

"We're just having fun," I maintain casually.

"Right," Louis agrees, just as casually. He looks me up and down. "There's nothing stopping you."

I laugh again. There's nothing stopping me from going to Harry? That's a good one.

"Louis, it's really not like that. I'm just- not..." I cut myself off to bite my lip, almost nervous to say it. "There's, like... that turn-on factor."

Louis responds with a curious flicker of focus.

"Harry's my friend," I dictate deliberately. "You..."

Louis takes a step closer to me. "I, what?"

I take a step closer to Louis. "It's different with you."

"Really?" Louis reaches out, locking his fingertips between mine. "How's that?"

I'm drawn to him, magnetically. "You turn me on."

Our lips meet and our eyes close. We kiss in the corridor, tenderly making out with our fingers
interlocked and our breaths heated. With barely a moment to spare, we glance around in lust, making sure not a soul is nearby to watch.

"See what I mean?" I chuckle lightly, keeping my voice down.

"A little bit too much," Louis smirks in amusement. "Might be a problem when we go back to rehearsal."

A ripple runs through my body as his front presses against mine. "Nothing my mouth can't fix."

Before I'm fully aware of what's happening, we're breaking into the toilets, the out-of-order ones just to be safe. We're pressing against each other's bodies and sucking each other's faces and we're only focused on one thing.

Like a whirlwind, Louis pulls me into the furthest stall from the door. He bites his lip, his grin sharp and smug, like it's all part of the game. I lock the door and we're kissing again, then he's sliding a hand into my pants, he's touching bare skin and he slips right in.

I moan out loud, a shock of pleasure. My fingernails grip into the cloth stretched across Louis' back as he stimulates me. He kisses me. He licks thickly into my mouth. I feel vulnerable.

"Fuck," I kiss Louis back, slick and wet. I feel over the bulge in his jeans, palming him, massaging him. "Let me fix that."

Louis exhales deeply, blue eyes hooded and dark. He removes his hand from my pants and I press him against the stall door. My lips press against his neck as I undo his jeans.

"Scarlet Ryder, are you in here?" a voice calls out from the toilet doorway.

"Shit," I hiss as we break apart.

Louis and I share a look, like two deer caught in each other's headlights.

"It's Pete," I tell Louis under my breath. I clear my throat. "Yeah, what is it?"

"These toilets are out of order," Pete says.

"I know," I voice aloud, studying Louis' unreadable reaction. "What is it?"

"Mitch is asking for you," Pete mantras like it's nothing new.

"I'm on break," I justify, bashfully swatting away Louis' hand as he silently teases the skin under my shirt. "Can it wait?"

"I dunno, I'm guessing he wants a group photo or summat," Pete reckons aloud. "He'll probably come looking for you himself."

"Fuck that," Louis whispers, either disbelievingly or disinclined. Maybe both.

I give Louis an apologetic nod, whispering back. "He's right."
"Is someone with you?" Pete asks offhandedly.

I sigh, ready to get out of here.

"Does he care?" Louis hesitates, flicking a thumb in Pete's direction and a finger between us.

I roll my eyes, unlocking the stall door. "He doesn't care."

I exit the faulty toilet stall with Louis behind me. Pete gazes at us in brief amusement and, although I know he could care less, I still feel dirty. It's like a flashback to my own history less than a year ago — like a random night of getting drunk and hooking up with my date in a pub toilet — except here, I'm sober, on one of our few breaks while rehearsing for our world tour, with Louis.

He's so my type and I never would have known.

I made my way back to the rehearsal space with Pete. We met up with Keith and Elijah and, as it turned out, all Mitch wanted was a group photograph of our band with himself included.

I was bothered, but I sucked it up.

When I told Louis what happened, I made it out to sound like a joke.

Louis joked back, saying he's not surprised — apparently it's typical of management to cockblock, whether intentionally or not.

I'm guessing that wasn't his first time fooling around between rehearsals.

Sooner than I know it, there is exactly one month until opening night.

The past two weeks of preparation have gone by so quickly that it felt almost unlike I was living them, rather floating through them. That's not to say they were easy. Our rigorous schedules and endless run-throughs still leave us beat by the end of every day.

Now that we're more towards the image stage — fashion, hair and make-up, presentation — we've adapted with the rolling flow of our days. When we first agreed to this career upgrade, we figured that most of our decisions would be made in professional offices without us. We're pleased to learn about our close involvement with the crew and the fact that we're still able to share our personal voice, if only in moderation. At least we're allowed some say in how we're looking and what we're wearing.

"Right, so, Elijah's a year older than you..." Caroline, head of fashion, briefs with me. "Pete's got a year on him and Keith's got two on Pete?"

I nod, agreeing. "That sounds about right."

"Okay, mature, fun, edgy, exciting..." Caroline looks over the notes she had been taking earlier. "We
want a lot of leather, a lot of rock and roll... play you up with some jewellery... we don't want the lads to be too matchy... anyway. I have a lot of ideas. You're gonna love them."

"Think so?" I light up, liking the sound of everything so far.

Caroline winks confidently. "You lot are gonna look good."

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The warehouse has become a place familiar to us these past few weeks, with all that we've experienced here and how we've grown between its barren walls. It's a place of fatigue and energy, of stress and pure comfort. We've come to understand our team and co-workers just like our team and co-workers have come to understand us.

Except for today.

Louis has seemed slightly distant, albeit polite, for most of the afternoon. I would chalk it up to stress or lack of sex, but he seems the type to be able to handle both of those matters rather well. Whatever it is, something is off.

Maybe it's me.

"Hey," Harry approaches my aura as I'm returning from the table of refreshments. "So, I know we're both very busy, but I've got a free day coming up and I was hoping you do, too?"

"Yeah! I mean, I hope so," I chuckle, twisting open my bottle of water. "What's the occasion?"

"Well, I was thinking you could join me and Louis at our flat," Harry offers, "next week on the fifth, since my birthday's four days prior."

"Right, happy early birthday!" I nudge him warmly.

"Thank you."

"Join you for what?"

Harry laughs. "Louis likes you. He's my best friend. You and I are friends."

"Ah," I nod, breathing to calm my internal flood. Louis likes me. "Great time for friendship and bonding. I understand."

"You completely do," Harry nods along with me, cheeky and overly self-assured.

I touch Harry's arm as I pass him. "Let me just talk to Mitch, I'll see if I have it off."

---

I find my manager in the midst of a casual conversation with Keith and Jon. I ask if I can speak to him aside and we saunter out of earshot of everyone else.
"It's the only time we're gonna get to hang out around Harry's birthday, and he's a good friend of mine," I tell Mitch, summing up my reasoning after he's already said no once.

"I don't know what to tell you, Scarlet, it will have to wait," the man tells me, visibly shrugging at a loss. "We're booked up solid for practically the next two weeks."

"There isn't even, like, half a day I can spare?" I grasp at straws, however loosely.

"Not around the fifth," he declines. "I'm sorry, Scar."

I sigh.

Mitch looks at me, a critique of a glance. "This tour is our priority. These shows, the performance, our-"

"I know, I know-" I cut him off before he can get too wrapped up in it. "I was just asking about one day."

Mitch hums. "I'll see what I can do, but try not to count on it."

Call me the bearer of bad news.

"Harry, I'm so sorry, I can't," I reluctantly inform the younger singer as I'm walking back to him. "We really have no time to spare."

Harry nods, despite seeming a touch let down. "That's okay. I expected as much."

"Maybe I'll see you around or something," I joke apologetically.

"We are touring together," Harry points out, picking up on my charade.

I smile at how considerately he's handling it. "I'll make it up to you, I promise."

Harry raises his pinky, giving me a look.

I chuckle, locking my own pinky with his.

We share a pinky promise, his larger digit wrapping around my smaller one. I feel a little discouraged, but I'm okay. As we break contact, however, and Harry slips his hands into his front pockets, he shows me his white teeth in a cheeky smirk, as if I'm suddenly clear on something else.

Something we didn't mention.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, voting and all of your lovely comments :)
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"Over here, please," our interviewer's assistant guides us to a single couch in the middle of the studio. "Take a seat, settle in. The cameras are right in front of you."

"All four of us on one couch?" Keith asks, though he doesn't receive an answer.

The assistant writes something in her notes, then she looks up at us before departing. "We'll get you mic'd up and Leslie will be right with you."

Unfortunately, Harry's birthday is the day our most intense schedule begins. Ten days remain until our announcement with One Direction is released to the public, and both of our management teams want us to get a head start on one of the most important aspects of our lives now: promotion.

"How about our new team, then?" Elijah fits himself onto the small couch between me and Pete.
"What do you think about our new publicist?"

"I think she's cute," Pete winks, overconfident.

Keith snorts. "For someone yer babysitter's age, sure."

"What did she say about her two kids?" I openly recall, sarcasm dripping from my tone. "She is married, right?"

"You can shove it," Pete lends me an unaffected smile, eyes as bright as a daisy. "She's cute. I can look."

"Gross," Elijah scoffs.

"She's our publicist, mate," Keith shakes his head.

Pete grins, the blasphemous bastard. "She can publicise me anytime."

"Ew," I cringe, gaping at our bassist. "What the hell does that mean?"

"Don't answer that because I don't care to hear it," Elijah raises a hand. Bless his sensitive ears.

Pete cracks up laughing. "I'm only half kidding, keep your boots on. I think she has a good vision for us."

"I have to say, the new image isn't half bad," Keith agrees for once. "I think Mitch actually did us a good one here."

"I agree," I smile reassuringly. "This whole... everything... is out of this world."

"Shagging a hot boybander is out of this world," Elijah mimics me, voice and all.

"I did not say that," I clearly oppose.

"Aye, but you implied it," Elijah shamelessly teases.

"Hey, isn't it Harry's birthday today?" Pete asks me, while we're on the topic of the boyband. "Are you going to his party worth two-hundred-thousand pounds?"

"No, I'm not going to his party worth two-hundred-thousand pounds," I decline calmly. "I know how much a pound is worth. I know what it's like to get by with practically nothing. To blow away so much wealth in one night like that is just sick."

"Ouch, Scar..." Pete raises his brows. "That's... you're completely right."

"Really puts things into perspective, huh? That could be an entire lifetime of cash for someone," Keith sighs, having dealt with his own share of meaningful rallies and peaceful protests. "I'm glad you stood up for what's right. Good for you."

"Thanks," I smile softly, yet it fades.

I don't mention that I wasn't invited.
"And in music news, the following headline may strike a chord with the teenage population. The opening act for One Direction's upcoming tour was announced to the public earlier this morning," the news woman dictates into the camera. "Her name is Scarlet Ryder."

A montage of video clips of myself and my band performing at previous events plays across the news screen. The three lads and I stand around the television, watching the broadcast with intent focus.

"The English singer-songwriter, who currently resides and rehearses in London, was born and raised in her North West hometown of Cheshire — something she has in common with One Direction's own frontman, Harry Styles," the woman continues, and the videos are all of me now. There are personal close-ups and promotional reels, then the montage transitions to a collection of images of the five famous boyband members posing together at a recent red carpet event. "Scarlet and her band, whom their fans have deemed The Three Amigos, are set to join the British-Irish boyband on the road for the next eight months. As most pop fans have known since tickets sales dropped, One Direction's one-hundred-and-twenty-three-date world tour kicks off in only thirteen days, but unless you've already purchased your tickets in advance, don't get your hopes up too high for catching an early show — most of the opening dates have been sold out since January."

I swallow thickly, turning away from the television.

"Well, that was... informative," Pete remarks.

"Too much me," I conceal my cringe.

"Mitch always tells us you're our golden ticket," Pete raises his eyebrows. "There you have it."

Keith shrugs off the matter. "It's just wild to believe our tour starts in only thirteen days."

"Thirteen days too many, lad," Pete chuckles. "I just wanna get out there and play."

Elijah lets out a sudden noise, transfixed with his mobile phone. A horrified expression fades over his visage.

"What's wrong?" I immediately react.

"I dunno, they're not liking it," Elijah wavers, on the verge of panic.

"Who's not liking what, man?" Keith asks him.

"I dunno, I just saw the words 'detest' and 'betrayal' and I'm freaking out," Elijah continues to scroll through his phone, appearing rather queasy.

"What are you talking about, Elijah?" I cautiously frown.

Elijah holds out his phone and reluctantly lets us have a look at his screen. I gaze over his social media feed with Keith and Pete as our drummer watches us with sullen eyes. "So, like, since the announcement this morning, people have reacted. There's some hype, yeah, but there's a lot of backlash..." Elijah tells us. "A lot of it."

"Shit, they don't hold back, do they?" Pete comments, skimming his eyes over the chaotic timeline.

"I can't look at that," I step back in distaste. "They're biased opinions. Even after all these years, people automatically assume One Direction still plays pop music for hormonal twelve-year-olds."
"So did you, until Mitch made you get to know them," Elijah points out.

"Oh, god," I sigh. "You're right, 'Lij."

"It's okay, listen, we're gonna leave this to the new social media girl, yeah?" Keith calms us down before we begin to fall apart. "She did tell us it'd get out of hand for a bit when things were announced. She's bloody right so far... but she's handlin' it all, right?"

"Yeah," I admit.

"Good," he says.

"Why are you, of all people, so chill about this, Keith?" Pete laughs, though he sounds a tad sour.

"Because I know we're a good band," Keith declares, holding true to our well-earned merit, "and no matter what anyone says, nothin's gonna change that, so long as we keep on keepin' on."

We look around, amongst ourselves.

I was the last of all four of us to agree to this journey, yet for some reason, I feel the most guilty. We're a band, but so much of the media's focus has been on myself, specifically, and it's a lot to take in.

Mitch said it was expected.

I didn't want to believe it much, but ignoring reality didn't change a thing.

To our lack of fortune, and despite our hard work, the fans don't let up with their opinionated remarks.

We're told to accept it and leave it to the social media girl.

Daze after days of continuous promotion, I can't remember if we're on our way to a radio station or a photoshoot.

Waking up from a nap in the van, we record a demo in East London.

The flash goes off for my passport photo.

I'm just glad I didn't blink.

"This is the part of the show where Scarlet tells you who we are," Elijah introduces to the small, buzzing pub.

"What the drummer said," I welcome his broad lead-in to our entertainment.

Along with our constant promotion for our upcoming world tour, we've been playing a series of
acoustic gigs around England. Today it's Valentine's Day and we're only a tiny bit unprepared — we had to invent a spontaneous, romantic sort of game only a few minutes before our designated set time.

"Elijah Connolly," I begin, kicking off our routine introduction, "a Geordie from Newcastle, on drums!"

Elijah creates a snappy assortment of beats, giving a few raps to the cajón box drum he's sat comfortably atop.

"Keith Quinn," I chuckle, motioning to my eldest bandmate, "an Irishman from Dublin, on guitar!"

Keith slides his fingers up the frets of his electric-acoustic guitar, sounding out an improvised lead melody.

"And Pete Jones, this dude," I smirk over at my fellow songwriter, "a Scouser from Liverpool, on bass!"

Pete laughs along, thumping out a funky tune with his deep, heavy instrument of choice.

"And I'm Scarlet Ryder, I'm from Cheshire and I play the microphone," I wrap up our prelude, and I can hear my own laughter echo through our stage monitors. "I sing the songs that I write with Pete, and these talented, special sunbeams supply the rock and roll."

The crowd cheers, intoxicated and all for the music.

"We're going on tour soon," Pete comments, as previously instructed.

"Yes, we are, Pete," Keith banters naturally.

"How many days until opening night, now?" I ask the expectant audience, microphone to my lips. "Nine days?"

"Less than than ten days," Keith raises his eyebrows, placing it into perspective. "Can ya believe it?"

"We're gonna be opening for a little band called One Direction," Pete mentions for everyone to hear, and there is a mixture of proud positivity and harsh negativity in the talkative crowd. "You lot should come see us on tour."

"Come see us play the big stage!" Elijah laughs into his microphone.

Regardless of the audience's miscellaneous reactions, I can't help but beam. "We're playing all over the UK and Ireland, from the twenty-third of February to the twentieth of April—"

"Four-Twenty!" a random bloke yells out from the crowd, influencing others to cheer.

"-then we're being shipped off to the rest of the world," I laugh bashfully, not wanting to promote too much of the fact that I'm fond of a joint every now and then. "It would be groovy to see you there... but we're all here right now, and first, we wanna have some fun..."

"So, since it's Valentine's Day and all, we're gonna play a romantic little game with you," Pete flirts with the audience, bass in his lap, charismatically taking his microphone in hand. "Instead of the traditional Kiss Cam that we're all fond of, we're gonna play a little game that we invented... about ten minutes before we walked out on stage... Catch a Head for a Kiss."

Right on cue, Elijah pulls out a large wreath: a pink, sparkling garland of tinsel, in the shape of a
heart. He walks to the edge of the stage, then he's throwing the wreath into the crowd, and in seconds it's out of sight.

"Did it land on anyone?" Pete laughs into his microphone, craning his neck to get a better view into the audience. "I dunno, we've never done this before," he murmurs to a lad in the crowd, then something flashy catches his eye. "Yes! There! You!"

The crowd somewhat scatters and there's a young woman, laughing and lifting the pink wreath from her head. There are whistles and carefree applause. Swell.

"The wreath has chosen you! Now it's your turn to choose someone to kiss! That's how this game works," Pete explains to the girl, yet she opposes, shaking her head. "It has to be consensual! Use your manners. A peck on the cheek is fine, if you don't want any full on lippy action tonight... Erm-what's that, miss?"

The girl in the audience continues to shake her head. She speaks with her hands to describe what her decibels cannot. She's clearly expressing something to Pete, but the murmur of the restless crowd isrowning her out.

Pete gets it, though, warmly moving through her kind refusal. "Well, toss it over someone else's head, then!"

The girl laughs once more and whips the wreath into the air. The flash of pink sparkles escapes the awaiting heads, then dips below the crowd, landing somewhere on the floor, towards the front.

A fit, burly lad with a strawberry-blond beard grasps onto the wreath and raises it in a fist over the crowd. Rather than tossing it away, he pulls the heart over his own head and roars around at the lively bodies. Everyone gets a massive kick out of him.

The bearded guy then spots a short girl with choppy black hair next to him. She begins laughing, like she's clued into exactly what's about to happen. It's obvious that the two have never met until now.

"Okay, okay..." Pete smirks into his microphone, "I see what's brewing here... Let's have it!"

The crowd begins chanting a whimsical pulse — kiss, kiss, kiss — right up until the pair of strangers simply go for it, sharing a very short yet sweet peck, all thanks to our bassist, Pete.

"Come on up here, you two," Keith calls into his own microphone. As Elijah and Pete help pull the pair up onto the stage, Keith strums a mindless chord on his electric-acoustic. "We're gonna sing you a ballad now, so sit tight."

The strangers perch themselves atop a pair of stools — Elijah and Pete to their right, Keith and myself to their left. Pete leads us into the ballad with a single bass note. I can already see lighters in the air.

I think of Louis as we play through the intimate song. Even still, as the fans return to the crowd and we fade into the next segment of our upbeat, acoustic set-list. I've thought of Louis much this week, with all the hearts in the air and love songs on the radio, but I haven't had much time to instigate idle conversation.

We haven't slept together for two months, now.

We've both been so busy — we've noticed, but we kind of haven't.
We're led through a series of backstage corridors, a streamline of painted brick guiding us through the endless passageways.

Three more days.

We round through one last tunnel, then we're stepping out into the spacious arena core. Our eyes scan outwards and upwards. The epic scale of the stage and the thousands of empty seats send a shiver through my spine.

It wasn't many years ago that my parents didn't see the point in rock concerts, let alone consider allowing me to attend a single one. Now, my feet are rooted to the floor of the arena where I'll be opening for one of the biggest bands on the planet; performing to tens of thousands spectators for a couple of sold-out shows in a row — tour dates which have already been booked solid for months.

Then, onto a few more continents.

"As you can see, they're almost done building the stage itself," Mitch gestures over to a couple of men on some scaffolding towards the side of the stage. "The construction on the catwalk was just completed yesterday." He guides my band and me to the end of the lengthy strip of platform. "You'll be getting the most use out of this structure, Scar, since you're the only one who doesn't play an instrument."

"It's enormous," is my first comment yet.

"It gets even bigger for the main act," Mitch says. "That entire backstage curtain drops when One Direction comes out. The whole set-up is a massive light show."

"Holy shit," I remark, impressed.

"Lads, you've been practicing with wireless adaptors on your instruments," Mitch says to Keith and Pete, "so you'll be able to move around and get some use out of the catwalk, too, when you're not following main-stage cues." He then clears his throat, turning to our drummer. "Elijah."

"Sir," Elijah half-teases.

"See that giant, floating structure towards the back of the stage?" Mitch asks him.

"Yeah."

"Your drum set is going on top of that."

Elijah's eyes widen, twice in size. "Me? Up there?"

"You're not scared of heights are you?" Pete chuckles in jest.

"No!" Elijah cracks up laughing, riddled in disbelief. "That's badass!"

Once Mitch leaves us to discuss amongst ourselves, all four of us jokingly suggest that we should
just break out the champagne now. We've become even more like a close-knit family throughout our entire process of preparing for the tour. Now everything we've been working towards it's finally about to happen: there aren't many days left until we hit the road.

Elijah climbs atop the sturdy catwalk. He wanders down the stretch, head in the clouds.

Keith jogs as far back as the floor will let him, all to get a good look at the stage we'll be breaking in sooner than we know it.

Pete stands beside me, soaking in the magnetism of the empty arena. "This is gonna be our next eight months with One Direction."

I remain next to him, a dreamlike existence. "It's so real."

One day.

One more day until we're officially the opening act of a worldwide tour.

You could say I'm excited.

At home, I've basically packed up my life. Here and now, my schedule has finally allowed me to spend some time at Louis and Harry's temporary flat in North London. The elder of the lads is out visiting with his mum and sisters before we leave to tour, so Harry and I have the place to ourselves for the afternoon.

Currently, Harry is washing up the last of his dishes, trying to get his flat as clean as possible before leaving it bare for eight straight months. Meanwhile, I'm sat on his kitchen counter, wrapped up in my nervous thoughts about tomorrow, watching him work and not really helping at all.

It's a team effort.

"I like your duck," I voice aloud as Harry is scrubbing a plate.

"What?" Harry chuckles, following my gaze next to his fridge. "Oh, it's a goose."

"Ah... I like your goose," I nod, observing the carved white feathers of the life-like figurine.

"Thanks," Harry smiles to himself, rinsing his plate clean before placing it in the drying rack. "Louis stole it from Sweden."

I give Harry a look. "He stole it?"

"Well, there were a lot there," Harry reasons, not having much else of an argument. "I guess he figured taking one would do no harm."

"Why were there so many fake geese?" I stifle a laugh. "How did Louis get it out of there?"

"I don't really know," Harry ponders, as if he's just considering it, himself. "We went to a dinner event and came back with a goose."

I nod, vaguely. "And then decided to keep it in your kitchen."
"Basically," Harry smirks at me with his fist in a mug.

Louis and Harry are an interesting pair. They're probably the coolest best friends I know, if you could consider Harry cool. Right now, he's got on quite the floral apron, along with bright yellow rubber kitchen gloves up to his elbows. If we were back in the fifties, he would make the perfect housewife.

"Had any die-hard fans yet, Scar?" the singer draws my focus away from his questionable attire.

I rack my brain for a moment, letting out a breath. "Yeah, there was this one the other day."

Harry nods for me to go on.

"Well, first, she sent me an insane amount of private messages. Then, she screenshot those messages and sent me all the pictures of her screenshot messages to me. Then, she sent me screenshots of her screenshots, and I just-" I sigh. "It was so much."

Harry laughs, natural as ever. "You'll get used to that."

"I dunno how you do it," I smile at him fondly.

Harry picks up a fork from the water it was soaking in. Rather than scrubbing the utensil, he calmly stops to look at me. I can see the reflection of his kitchen window in the green of his eyes.

All of a sudden, Harry drops the fork back into the water, creating a small splash. His large eyes widen like distant moons.

Flustered, Harry struggles to pull off his rubber gloves. "Scarlet! My phone-?!"

My expression freezes. My pulse increases. "What?"

"My phone's buzzing!" Harry urges, scrambling to get the gloves off his hands. "It's an important call!"

"Shit," I hesitantly glance around his figure. "Where is it?"

"Oh god, my pocket," Harry turns around, parting his apron to expose his — well — rather tightly-clad front.

"I..." I don't move. I can't move.

Harry continues trying to rip off his yellow rubber gloves, but it's just not happening. At a pure loss, he gapes at me in an amused panic. "Scar-!"

"I don't wanna touch your-"

"-just get it!"

"Bloody hell," I huff, moving closer to him.

In reality, I could ask Harry many questions right now. I could ask him why this is happening, or why his trousers have to be so bloody tight. I could ask him why he has to keep his phone in his front pocket, of all pockets, or why he can't just ring his caller right back.

Instead, I stand beside the lad and make an attempt at slipping my hand into his narrow front pocket. To my luck, his jeans are simply way too tight for that, so I move behind him. Pressing the front of
my torso against his back, I slide my arm around his waist. Clutching onto his firm hips for leverage, I manage to slide my hand underneath his apron and slip my fingers around his vibrating mobile.

I try not to focus on how incredibly close my fist is located to Harry's bulge, or how tightly my lower front is pressing against his firm bottom, or the fact that I'm practically feeling the poor guy up, or-

My stomach flutters and a wave of heat flushes through my chest.

I take a step back.

"Get it!" Harry repeats, laughing a bit more nervously this time.

Without a second thought, I plunge my hand into Harry's front pocket and pull his vibrating mobile out. Unprepared, I gape up at the tall lad. "What do I say?"

"Anything. Tell them who you are..." Harry suggests encouragingly. In haste, he laughs. "Tell them you're my manager."

"What?"

Harry chuckles persuasively, still fumbling with his yellow gloves. "Do it!"

My gaze doesn't budge from the younger lad's as I finally accept his call, raising his phone to my ear. "Scarlet Ryder, management for Harry Styles." I can't help but smirk.

A deep male voice greets me on the other end — a name and an introduction.

My eyes go wide.

"Shit," I hiss, holding Harry's phone out to him. "It's your actual management."

Harry smirks, ripping his gloves off in one go. Without a word, he retrieves his phone from my grasp. He gives me an alluring stare as he walks away, leaving me stood alone in his large, empty kitchen.

"We didn't really talk after that," I summarise in an undertone for Elijah, as we're waiting backstage for our arena debut. "I mean, we talked, but we didn't mention what happened."

"What happened?"

"Nothing happened."

Elijah sends me an inquisitive glare. "Scarlet, our first opening show is starting in mere minutes and Harry-"

"-is still giving me the silent treatment," I finish for him.

Elijah raises his eyebrows. "Really, now?"

"He's even texted me — I'm still not talking to you... but good luck — with a little ex at the end."

Elijah hums, somewhat intrigued. "Sounds like a proper charmer to me."
"It's all in good fun," I insist.

"Hm," Elijah frowns. "Weird, then."

I sigh in agreement, however unsteadily. "It's probably just another thing I don't understand about Harry Styles."

It's then that Mitch calls back to the two of us. "Coming?"

I gaze ahead at Keith and Pete walking up the backstage steps and Elijah beginning to follow them. The pulse of the intro music and the roar of the thousands of awaiting fans in the arena have since merged into a steady wall of white noise. A sound technician approaches me and adjusts my in-ear monitors, because in my sudden daze I had forgotten to. It's as if time has instantly slowed to a crawl.

Mitch calls my name once more, though I barely comprehend it. "You're invited...!"

I shake away my thoughts, uttering a short apology, yet I can't quite tell if I hear it for myself.

"Are you alright?" Mitch places a hand on my shoulder, giving me a light squeeze. "You seem a bit off."

I nod, swallowing my entire stomach. "I'm alright."

Mitch hums. "Boy troubles?"

"Just nerves," I reveal the half-truth, adopting a weary smile.

"You're gonna blow them out of their seats," my manager winks. He smiles at me warmly. Knowingly.

I tug down the waist of my leather jacket. Ruffling my hands through my hair, I let out a deep huff, immediately centring myself.

"Ready, Scarlet?"

"Let's fucking do this."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, voting and all of your lovely comments :)  
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The thick buzz of the arena dulls as we round the first corner.

Mitch guides us through the backstage corridors, mere seconds after we've run off stage. "Are there any words to describe the feeling of getting out there and playing for thousands in a sold-out arena?"

I scoff, hardly able to believe that's really what just happened. "I don't think so."

"Other than-" Keith chuckles, cutting himself off. "Nevermind, you'll badger me for cursin'."

"Other than what?" asks Mitch.

"Fuck," says Keith.

We all break out laughing in agreement.

"I won't badger you for that, lad," our manager grins, proud as ever.

"Really, though... we've just finished playing a half-hour opening set at London's O2 arena," Pete reminds us, probably just to hear it out loud. "Fuck is right. It was unbelievable."
"Unbelievable is a fitting word," Mitch suggests.

"So is fuck," I share a smirk with Keith and Pete.

"Surreal," Elijah mentions.

"That's the one," I must agree.

Mitch smiles down at me as the lads walk ahead of us, filing into our dressing room. "Weren't too nervous, were you?"

"Maybe a little at the beginning," I reason, entranced by spectacular flashes of memories from the past half hour. "I may have missed a few words halfway in, but no one seemed to really notice."

"It couldn't have gone any better," Elijah gives his head a dazed shake. "I'm vibrating."

"Literally, the adrenaline flowing through my body is unlike any drug I could take, ever," Pete emphasises, in complete agreement, "and then some."

"Any afterparties, then?" Mitch questions the lot of us. "Post-show plans?"

"I dunno what the lads' plans are, but after intermission I'm gonna go see my first boyband, live in concert!" I head over to a vanity mirror, mocking the fact just as much as I'm relishing in it.

"Then the afterparty," Keith reminds me with a wink.

"Then the afterparty to the afterparty," Elijah flat out giggles.

Mitch chuckles, watching me glance over my reflection. "Well, there's something to look forward to."

"I'm just looking forward to getting back out there again tomorrow," I take a towel to my face, dabbing off some sweat beading over my stage make-up. "I want to feel that rush every night for the rest of my life," I turn around with a grin, tossing the towel aside, "and I plan to."

I raise the can to my lips, smooth beer flowing over my talkative tongue. A warmth settles in my stomach as I gaze around the tour bus full of familiar faces. We're all here to celebrate a successful opening night for our world tour: myself and my backup band, One Direction and theirs. We'll be off to the formal celebration party in less than an hour — we're just getting a little buzz first.

"Glad you lot could make it," says the lads' live bassist, Sandy. We've been discussing the rush of performing live for the past little while.

"We were only a whole tour bus over," I joke with him.

"That's a big trek for the drinkers," Louis leans over his bassist with a smirk, "moving from one parked vehicle to the next."

My heart jolts. I'd barely realised he's been sat next to Sandy this entire time.

"We only had a beer each," I reason with the two. My eyes might hint at the inconspicuous joint my
I can hear Louis laugh, but he's already out of sight once more. He becomes hidden by Sandy's figure each time he rests back against the bus couch.

"You blew every single person in that arena away, myself included," I go on, already too nostalgic for my own good. "The indoor fireworks, the sheer volume of the crowd, your energy, your talent..."

I don't intend to become distracted as I'm conversing with Sandy. However, halfway through my gushing, I happen to lean forward and notice that Louis has someone's arm rested around his shoulders.

I blink at the sight of him, a vulnerable contrast to his Mona Lisa smile.

That very same someone has been giving me the silent treatment since yesterday afternoon.

"That was a nice blend of our voices," Liam tells me later into the evening, referring to our vocal warm-ups before the show. "It was good to have another female voice in there, aside from only Helene."

"Yeah, I like working with her," I say of our newly-appointed vocal coach. "She's got that cute pre-show ritual, too."

"A bundle of grapes and a bottle of water!" Liam recalls warmly. "That's her thing."

"I liked yours with the lads; how you all put your hands together, then added more of your hands on top," I smile at Liam, feeling rather light, having recently hit the bottom of my second beer. "That was cute too, like a football team... or summer camp."

"We do that before every show; it's tradition," Liam tells me, his soft brown eyes happily buzzed. "I'm guessing you do, too? Have a ritual with your band, I mean. The, erm- what were you saying? Gabba gabba...?"
I laugh out loud. "Pinhead."

Liam frowns. "What?"

"No, that's the name of the song," I fill him in. "Gabba gabba hey, and all. It's the chant from an old Ramones song from the seventies."

"Oh, alright, then," Liam catches on, chuckling. "For a moment, I thought you were calling me a pinhead."

"I know," I chuckle along with him.

Pete laughs out loud, having overheard our reference. "Pinhead!"

"What?" asks Harry now.

"Nothing, just imitating Scarlet," Pete grins.

"Right... well, if you're Scarlet, then I really shouldn't be talking to you right now," Harry jests with Pete, sending me a cheeky wink like no one can see it.

"Still going with this silent treatment thing, are we?" I wonder aloud, indifferent to his answer by this point.

"Hey, Niall?" Harry pipes up, seemingly ignoring my question. "Can you please remind Scarlet that we're not talking right now?"

I would normally crack a smirk at such cheek, yet he says it all while staring straight at me, causing me to do nothing other than roll my eyes.

Louis scoffs too, and I don't blame him.

"Scar, Harry says he's not talking to you," Niall tells me without missing a beat, "but hey, there's beer." The blonde lad cracks open another can, handing it out to me.

I accept the drink, tapping my rim against his before taking a sip. "So, is there any real reason why you're so quiet, Styles?" I ask aloud, lowering the can from my lips.

Again, Harry doesn't give me an answer. Instead, he maintains our eye contact as he takes a deep sip of his own drink.

"Oh, just talk to the girl!" Louis finally snaps, making me laugh from my stomach. "She's not falling for it, Harold, just say something!"

"Harry can talk to me if he wants to," I tell Louis, brushing off the matter. "You don't have to convince him to say anything."

"Course I do," Louis licks his lips as he smirks at me, "I'm Harry's wingman."

As if on cue, I feel my mobile vibrate in my pocket. I pull it out, only somewhat confused to see that I've received a new message from a familiar number.

**Harry:** Tomorrow. Under the stage. 4pm.

Harry's text makes my stomach lurch, as all his others did. Though, I hardly have time to think it over before Elijah's body suddenly lands right next to mine.
"Dan's about to shotgun a beer outside the bus, if anyone wants a laugh," Elijah offers, referring to One Direction's on-stage guitarist. "Thought I'd come in here and let you lot know."

Liam hums, mildly interested. "Right now?"

"Yeah," Elijah blushes.

Louis snickers to himself. "The lad's gonna choke."

Niall shrugs. "I'm down."

We all voice our words of approval, rising from our seats. Louis leads the way as our two bands gradually filter through the carrier of the bus.

Aside from myself, Harry is the only other person to lag behind. As the lads pass us by, I catch a glimpse of his gaze through the steady movement of bodies. It seems as if he's about to say something once we're face to face. However, he must remember that he's staying silent, as he ultimately decides upon a simple wink, gently touching my arm before walking ahead of me.

Really, the only thing I am left to do is follow him in a baffled trance.

Harry turns around again, just before we exit the bus, only to send me yet another cheeky grin.

And I just silently observe him, because I don't know how else to handle it.

Mark my words, Harry Styles is a goddamn tease.

---

It's a good thing we've grown accustomed to the immense O2 Arena this past week, or else I definitely would have gotten lost trying to navigate this place.

It's our second night on tour and there are only two hours before we'll be running out there again, playing to another sold out crowd of twenty thousand. I'm scheduled to be in the make-up chair in thirty minutes, but with my mind completely elsewhere, all I'm set on finding out in the mean time is why exactly I've been invited under the stage.

There are a few signs posted on the walls of the backstage corridors, serving purpose to guide us from the dressing rooms to the arena floor. The boyband's passport photos from years ago have also been plastered on every other wall I seem to pass. They're for security measures, I'm assuming, but it's hilarious to see the faces of their golden youth everywhere I go. It's almost a task not to crack up laughing at every turn.

I reach the empty performance space of the vast arena at long last, suddenly gaining an antsy, creeping feeling that I shouldn't really be here right now. Thousands of vacant seats surround me; an expectant aura still lingering among the empty sections. The roof stretches centuries high, making me feel much smaller than usual. It's amazing how different a place can feel when you're alone.

"Harry," I hiss, approaching the side of the stage.

No response.

My mind fires off a series of uncertainties: I shouldn't have agreed to be any part of this mess. I'm
going to get caught and it will all be Harry's fault. I should really turn back.

Rather than giving in to my doubts and taking the easy way out, though, I make it my mission to head straight towards the main stage. I navigate around all sides of the structure, on the lookout for any sign of movement, but nothing catches my eye.

As soon as I decide that I should probably turn around and walk right out of here for real, a deep voice calls my name.

"Scarlet, over here."

And there's Harry with his long, curly locks, leaning through the curtain directly beneath the right side of the stage.

I shake my head in a laugh, jogging over to him.

Harry helps me slip my way underneath the structure, making sure I don't hit my head off anything while I'm at it. He pulls me into a casual hug once my feet hit the ground.

I pull away, smiling at him warmly, then I take a look at our surroundings.

It's a dark and spacious stretch. The rows of metal supports are flocked by some unused gear and spare speaker cabinets. The further we walk under the stage, the sooner I find that we have plenty of standing room and everything. It's practically another room under here.

Harry shows me around the space, ultimately bringing me to rest by an intricate control board directly beneath where the drum set rests above. "They were teching around with this console this afternoon," Harry tells me, looking it over. "I think this one's just for more basic functions... testing, I dunno... since the main controls are towards the back of the crowd."

It's not until now do I realise that Harry has finally broken his silent treatment with me.

Harry naturally smirks once I confront him about it. "It was all part of my plan."

I hesitate. "There was a plan?"

"Well, there was," Harry trails a long finger across the switchboard. "The plan was to get you here. I guess it kind of worked."

"I would've come if you had just asked me, Harry," I lend him an amused expression.

"Yeah," a smile plays on Harry's full lips as he takes a single step closer to me, "but this way was much more fun, wasn't it?"

Harry's eyes bore deeply into mine. Maybe it's the first time that his eyes don't cut through me, rather into me. I'm sure it's the first time I fully notice that they are this magnificent rich forest green that glisten a little when the light catches them. It's a pleasant thought to think, until I register that Harry is staring and that I am, too.

So, I break the mood.

If there was a mood.

There wasn't any bloody mood.

I scoff at my wild thoughts, turning away from Harry and his stare. I pretend to be interested in a
certain set of knobs, aiming to avert the situation. "Anyway," I voice nonchalantly. "I'm bored."

"Me too," Harry's lips curl. "Let's kiss."

My pulse goes mental, yet I manage to keep my cool. "Thanks, but I prefer rock star types, you know."

Harry hums in agreement. "I look like Mick Jagger."

*Bloody hell.*

Okay, now I'm offended.

I don't understand how he gets away with it. It's like he doesn't even try. Harry just has this thing about him that makes anyone and everyone instantly drawn to him. It's magnetic.

I move slightly away from the younger lad, needing to wander. "Clever."

Harry mimics my motion, advancing to follow me. "Thank you."

I watch Harry's figure and the way he moves in his silk shirt as he traces my steps. He is trim and muscular, yet his limbs are long and lean and his wrists are bony. He is graceful and captivating and charming as ever, all wrapped up into one elegant package.

Until his hand slips.

Harry's palm clumsily falls forward onto the board of controls, suddenly causing the entire stage set above us to illuminate at its brightest. Immediately, he whips back to the board, furiously muttering out an uncensored chorus — *no, no, no — shit, shit, shit* — while anxiously trying to undo what he's just done.

I hastily glance around, searching for the quickest way out.

Because, first of all, we aren't even supposed to be here. And to make matters worse, this millionaire boybander, awkwardly fumbling with a giant board of controls that neither of us know how to use, has just accidentally set off the lights for his entire main stage backdrop, making it completely obvious that — *yes, hi* — we are very much here.

"What do we do?!" I panic.

"Gotta turn it off-" Harry stutters. "I- *shit*- where is it?!" His large hands hover over the array of keys, mindful not to set off anything further by accidentally activating something more.

"What did you press?!"

"I haven't a clue."

My eyes hastily scan over the intricate electrical board, trying to locate any switch or knob that looks like it might be the one that Harry hit. "This one, maybe?" I point to a large blue switch.

"I dunno, I don't want to-" Harry's brows knit together. He cuts himself off. "No, *this has to be it.*" He reaches towards a long, yellow switch labelled "BACKING — MAIN" and boldly slides it down.

Almost right away, the set above us is plunged back into complete darkness. Heavy sighs of relief escape from both of our sets of lungs. Slowly turning to each other, we shakily end up laughing the situation off.
"Let's get out of here," Harry breathes.

"Please," I chuckle, letting Harry lead the way.

We climb out from below the stage — Harry helping to lift me back up through the structure — and we quickly exit the floor of the arena. The moment we walk through the backstage doors, however, we spot a couple of security guards chatting a short distance down the main corridor.

"Crap, Preston's down there," Harry halts us from moving any further, and then he starts snickering.

The little shit starts snickering when we're this close to being caught.

"Harry-?" I begin, but my question is interrupted as the tall lad pulls me around the nearest corner and presses me against the smooth brick wall.

A smirky little laugh plays at the corners of Harry's lips. "Here's the plan..." he utters in his deepest of whispers. "We're gonna cross this corridor here... we're going to be really quiet, and."

"Why are you laughing?" I pant, slightly out of breath due to fear of being caught. More so, because of how unbearably close Harry's face is from mine.

The left side of his mouth curls upwards. "Because you're going first."

"No, I'm not!" I hiss, giving his chest a whack. "You're going first."

"I draw too much attention," Harry reasons.

I glare into Harry's eyes, judging his intentions. I swallow thickly, always seeming to forget how this friend of mine is, in fact, one of the most famous, recognisable people on the planet — even people who have never once met him constantly know of his whereabouts, let alone his security guards.

I huff out a shallow breath. "Follow me."

Before Harry has a chance to react, I grab onto his large hand, pulling him alongside myself. We speed silently down the corridor, catching a mere glimpse of Preston and his fellow security partner before we make it across the passage. Without a word, we reach the final set of corridors.

I peer around the wide corner. "Down here?"

Harry shakes his head, eyes intent. "There are meeting rooms down that one. Here..." Harry leads me down the opposite turn. "This should lead us out," he says, making sure to check that no one is down there before taking my hand in his once again and speeding me alongside his stride.

Harry turns out to be correct, because next thing I know, we're breaking through a set of back doors and finally reaching daylight. The heavy arena door can be heard slamming behind us as we cross the pavement. Finally, we reach the large, black tour bus and run up its steps.

Once we're inside, we forcefully shut the door behind us, laughing at how we actually made it out of there alive. Both agreeing that we need to sit down, Harry and I make our way towards the back of the bus.

Where we find Louis.
Louis looks up from his position on the couch with a mixture of expressions, all of which make me feel caught in my tracks. He can visibly notice that we've been running, as we're both moderately panting.

"You two been making out or something?" Louis spites. He delivers it as a joke, but there's an underlying sensation of jealousy.

A laugh escapes from high in my throat.

Harry replies without a thought. "You jealous?"

My face drops as I watch Harry give Louis a steady smirk. That was absolutely not the response I was expecting. My eyes dart over to the seated lad, watching how his raised eyebrows lower into a knowing grin.

"Of you?" Louis casually looks Harry up and down. "Not at all. So, what's with the heavy breathing? You being chased or something?"

Harry and I share a look. Practically reading each other's minds, neither of us can hold back, bursting out with laughter once again.

"Not exactly," Harry chuckles, regaining his shallow breath. "It was quite a situation."

"Should've been there, Lou," I shake my head, grinning at the lad. "This bloody class act, I'm telling you-"

"Hey!" Harry interjects. "I did get you out of there!"

"We wouldn't have had to escape in the first place if you hadn't set off all the lights in London!"

"My hand slipped!"

"If I had a pound for every time I heard that one," I roll my eyes.

"Wow," Louis pipes up. "Good to see you two are talking again."

"It was a temporary thing," Harry says, and this time his smirk is directed down at me.

"And I still don't know why it started," I give him a nudge.

"You know why," Harry lowers his voice, moving closer.

A disagreeable hum sounds from Louis' position, moments before a warm hand wraps around mine. Louis tugs on my fingertips with an expression that I could only describe as sexy and demanding. There's something persuasive about the flicker in his steely blue eyes.

I go with Louis' silent offer, allowing him to pull me down next to him. The older lad draws me in with his arm around my shoulders, just like he had done in front of Keith the other day. This time, however, he suddenly brings his lips to mine.

A wave of raw intrigue flashes over my body as Louis' lips press forcefully into my soft skin. His tongue flits over my lower lip and I freeze, really not caring to do this in front of sweet Harry.

It's not like I'm one to ever complain about being kissed, but this one feels a little pressed. As taboo
as it seems, I know it's all because of the one person stood facing us. All of Louis' bandmates have seen us make out a few times before — of course they have — but it's like this time it was done for a reason.

"Ask him if he's jealous," Louis whispers into my neck, sending shivers down my body.

And there it is.

I let Louis work on my neck while I steadily watch Harry loom over us, his green eyes made dark from his strong brow. Louis presses deeper and Harry's nostrils flinch. His strong jaw sets.

I swallow my unease, trying to rid the lump in my throat, but it only makes it more difficult to breathe. Harry is rooted to his spot and he still hasn't said a word and he probably watched the whole thing.

Louis' soft lips continue to drag over my moist skin. My chest rises, controlled by my pulse, and my eyes remain locked with Harry's.

Ask him if he's jealous.

I won't say something like that to Harry. I couldn't. I'm not going to ruin the friendship we have over some silly desire of Louis' to make his best mate jealous. Because, no, Harry is my friend and obviously I'm going to defend his honour in any situation.

Especially a situation like this.

Breaking my gaze with Harry, I place my hands on Louis' lean chest. "You've got a mouth," I push him away, despite his tempting persistence, "ask him yourself."

"Ask me what?" Harry articulates. Such curt words sound like a proper demand coming from his innocent mouth.

And for once in his life, Louis has to stall for a comeback. His thin lips vaguely part and I can sense just how hard that clever brain of his must be working to invent a believable cover-up.

"I thought you said you were Harry's wingman, Lou," I can feel a smirk growing on my face. "I think you're doing it wrong."

Harry curls his lips inwards, trying to hide his shared amusement. "I think you broke him."

One more glance with the younger lad and that's it.

Harry and I burst out in another round of laughter. Even Louis can't help but crack a grin. Before the three of us can get too comfortable, though, there's a sudden sound towards the front of the bus. The racket causes me to sit up in my seat, shocking my senses alert.

If I had been expecting someone, it wasn't who it turns out to be.

Harry's expression dims.

Louis stiffens up.

None of us are laughing.

"Scarlet, can we talk?"
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Mitch stands in the doorway of the boys' bus. He watches Louis, Harry and me with an expression on his face that I can only describe as much too serious. He knows something that I don't.

I wrap my arms around my torso for warmth as Mitch leads me outside, down the steps of One Direction's bus. We come to stall by the side of the vehicle where our new publicist awaits. I give her
a meager smile, not entirely ready to admit that I've done something wrong.

My behaviour was foolish and I feel like a child.

It's the closest I've felt to being caught by my parents in years.

"Scarlet," our publicist, Ainsley, smiles brightly. "Your band said we might find you here."

I give a half smile to the young woman. "Only a little embarrassing."

"Don't worry about it," she chuckles, "so many people would kill to be you right now."

I release an unsteady huff, taking in the nearby sounds of singing and chatter. Tonight's concertgoers must already be lining up around the other side of the arena. I wouldn't feel so guilty — or, I wouldn't feel guilty at all — if Harry and I hadn't just foolishly escaped beneath the stage we're about to perform on for those very people. I'm caught in my tracks and it's all the young bugger's fault.

Or, I would say that, but Harry is such a painfully nice guy that I couldn't even think of putting any blame on him, right now or ever — I would just end up feeling bad.

I really should have known better.

*What the hell was I thinking?*

Then, Mitch speaks, and it's entirely the opposite of anything I expected to be confronted with: "We want you to date."

I feel my brows furrow, entirely confused. "Wait, what?"

"We've just started the tour and your face is fresh," Ainsley explains, looking me in the eyes. "You're in a band, but you're the eye-catcher. We want you in the papers, in the media, every source available. We want people to know who you are, aside from just an opening act."

I blink, waiting for her to continue.

"As shallow as it is, relationships are what drive the celebrity world," Ainsley elaborates, as Mitch nods along. "If you're seen with someone who has more fame than yourself — someone that many people recognise and are naturally drawn to — it intrigues people... it pulls them into you, in a way, and it makes them want to look you up without a second thought."

"Before you say anything, Scar," Mitch intervenes, "I wasn't too keen on the idea at first, either. I suggested a number of other routes to take, but it seems the shallow dating approach really is the best option."

"No, I think a fake date with a celebrity could be kinda fun," I glance between my manager and publicist, entirely in shock that I'm not being confronted like I'd presumed. "It won't be a full-on paparazzi event, will it?"

"Actually, that's exactly what this is," Ainsley says, on the contrary. "There will be a photographer hired for the job and you'll be going on a scheduled date with someone of our choosing."

"So, we're talking an actual publicity stunt..." I exhale, eyebrows raising. "You know, I've never even been papped... not by pros, anyway."

"There's a first time for everything," Mitch suggests.
I take a moment to consider the vast offer. I gaze around the exterior of the bus, the stretch of asphalt leading towards the arena and elsewhere. The lively murmur of the fans echoes around the park like a wave. A steady smile grows on my face. "I like it," I nod agreeably. "Ainsley... Mitch... I really like it."

"I thought you would," Ainsley smiles in return.

"Wait, so, who exactly am I gonna date?" I catch myself before getting too caught up in the idea.

"We have a few ideas at the moment... and a few offers," Ainsley explains, twisting aside a strand of her natural ringlets. "We don't want to get in too deep with one person just yet, since your first event will be only temporary... and we'll be gone in two months, keep in mind."

Mitch chuckles. "Which is why I suggested it should be someone in the band."

"Ew," I frown.

Ainsley visibly hesitates. "Yeah, but that would skew the band's vibe entirely. Plus, the reason we're doing this is to get exposure through someone much more famous than Scarlet and her band. That's the only way this is going to work."

I almost want to laugh. Having to plan out exactly where and when and who I can date was never something I ever thought I would have to deal with. Not with such scrutiny, anyway.

Ever since this whole thing started, the thought of dating hasn't exactly been a priority. Everything has been constant — go, go, go — since day one. Even on my days off, I'll usually end up around my band or the boys.

Maybe it would be easier if I could just pretend to date one of them.

A fake date with Louis wouldn't be half bad, either.

"It's not going to be real, right?" I ask out of curiosity. "I mean- aside from the date, it's not gonna become anything more, is it?"

"It's just one stunt for publicity, love. Besides, you won't have to worry about it for another month or so. We just thought we'd run it by you first," Mitch smiles, guiding me back towards the bus. "Anyway, if you could grab Louis and Harry and tell them to join the rest of us. Soundcheck is in ten."

Ainsley heads back towards the arena with Mitch. They continue conversing back and forth once they're out of earshot, and then they're gone.

It's getting about that time. More fans have gathered by the barriers surrounding the arena, from the sounds of it. Their chatter is noticeably louder than when I first stepped out and there is a sudden, growing cheer from the lot. It's a beautiful, warm sound. I smile to myself as I climb back onto the boyband's tour bus, only to be greeted by a very frantic Harry.

"Are you okay?!" Harry rakes his fingers back through his long hair. "You're not in trouble, are you?! I'm so sorry, this is all my fault-"

I place a hand on the lad's broad shoulder, immediately calming him. "I'm fine, Harry, it was nothing."

Harry steadies himself. "Does he know about- you know?"
I shrug. "If he does, he didn't say anything."

"What was it, then?" Louis cuts in, licking his tongue across his lips. "If it wasn't the- you know, thing with Harry."

I raise my eyebrows.

Harry hums deeply. "Easy, pal."

"Pal?" I smirk. What a word.

"What was it?" Louis echoes himself.

I practically gape at the older lad. I almost want to laugh, but the moment is too good to pass up, so I hide any expression with a purse of my lips. I soften my voice, slowly looking Louis up and down. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

Louis' breath visibly hitches. He shifts in his seat. The subtle twist of his lips is mesmerising.

"Lou, we better get going," Harry checks his watch. "We'll be late for soundcheck."

"That's what I came back to tell you," I break my gaze with Louis to briefly lock eyes with Harry. "They'll be letting everyone find their seats before we've finished vocal warm-ups at this rate."

"How many fans are out there?" Louis asks me, standing up from the built-in couch.

"I'm not sure," I start heading out through the wide carrier once more. "They're loud."

"We won't be seen, right?" Harry naturally follows me.

"I don't think so; they're all behind barricades," I recall, nearing the front of the bus. "I'd reckon they're around the other side of the arena, since I could only hear them when I went outside."

"It's gonna be a loud night," Louis suggests, and I wonder why I would hear a hint of flirtation in his voice with such a comment, until I turn around and see that he's smirking ahead at me.

I can't control the curl my lips create.

"The louder the better," Harry remarks, and when I look up at him, his face is twice as close as anticipated. He smiles down at me, then he chuckles as he walks around my figure, going first down the front steps.

I share a flushed glance with Louis, who fondly shakes his head at his best friend's antics.

The three of us walk out onto the asphalt, one after another. The murmur of the nearby fans has noticeably risen in volume, somehow sparking the realisation that I'm currently with two of the five lads they're all lining up to see. Not to mention, one specific frontman whose moves are far less smooth than some of them might imagine.

I'm on the inside looking out. I hardly wonder whether Harry damaged anything under the stage — any faults will be fixed in soundcheck and I'm far more absorbed by the surreal, near-magical waves that surround us. There is an unconditional craze for this boyband unlike anything I've ever experienced before. It's something I was oblivious to until I was fully involved, likely because I never paid any mind to the pop of my generation.

It's refreshing.
I keep pace with Louis and Harry as we stride from the bus to the backstage door, where the security guard promptly lets us inside the arena.

A slam of the exit and we're safe.

I only wish my stomach knew that.

The airport is a playground, a rush of turnstiles and travellers. London to Newcastle, then get used to security checkpoints and waiting gate drool and remember: your airplane seat cushion may also be used as a floatation device.

So far, we've only gone through two official concert dates, but I find myself captured in a daydream of relaxing pre-show hair and make-up sessions: spa-like treatments that Louise does so well. All four sets of our luggage are packed with pre-determined outfits from the fashion department's sponsors and designers, and Caroline is a gem for positively nailing our style, yet I'm still not used to the concept that any of this is real.

It's like every time someone mentions that we're on a world tour, I'm hearing it again for the first time.

"I didn't know anyone could tell if I was dating someone from the way I walked," I chide aloud, passing my phone to my bassist, as I've had enough of it.

Pete huffs an entertained laugh, scrolling through the elaborate feed, before handing my phone back to me. "Maybe if you both walked backwards, they'd think you're enemies."

"C'mon, Jones," I roll my eyes in endearment, my focus drifting back to my screen.

"No, you c'mon," Pete gives me a nudge, pointing at my device. "Too much eye candy isn't healthy."

Hours before our first show in Newcastle, days worth of gossip weighs heavy on my mind. Online fans have scrutinised an unholy amount of candid, amateur photographs of me and Harry together — walking around different venues, getting on and off our tour buses — and they've come to a final decision that we're not dating.

"You're not dating," Pete replies, once I fake-gag at the claim.

"Of course, we're not," I scoff, amused. I gaze around the hotel lobby, practically used to the sunken rock in my stomach by now. "It's just a little bothersome that they always have to come to some sort of be-all, end-all conclusion with us... any of us."

Pete sighs. "It makes them feel better."

"What?" I look at him.
"Having a sure mentality with no facts," Pete tells me, resting his arms over the back of the lobby couch. "It makes them feel better to feel like they have a chance... to believe that, even though Harry's going around with his pretty opening act, there's no possible way that he could be shagging her... because, anything. Remember what Ainsley was telling us in that first meeting?"

"Oh, you were actually listening to her?" I question sardonically.

Pete smirks, chuckling to himself. "I can still chat with a cute woman and keep my head on my shoulders. Why do you think I'm a pig? You get what I'm saying."

"You're a pig, Pete," I tease my bandmate, just for the fun of it. "I get what you're saying. Like, what if I was dating Harry? Or, any of the lads, for that matter. Nothing would change, we'd still be the same people we are now... but, for some reason, even a simple idea like that—"

"Regardless if it's true or false..." Pete makes sure to mention.

"Right!" I stress, in full agreement. Yes, Pete. "It's like any little thing can snowball into everything. Literally, anything in existence could create a dramatic rise in this fandom. It's nuts."

"Those One Direction fans always find a way to put on their monocles and turn into little Sherlocks and Watsons," Pete adds, keeping a straight face.

"Pete, I know you're joking, but I'm gonna take that as the truth, because that sounds exactly like the kind of hype that Mitch and the team are going for, with the whole wanting-me-to-date-someone idea," I raise my eyebrows in a sigh, yet my bassist shakes his head in a ridiculous laugh. "What? I'm not complaining."

Pete raises his eyebrows at me, grinning. "Don't you have to not complain to not complain?"

Before I can call Pete a smart-arse or worse, we spot Keith and Elijah making their way towards us from the hotel lifts. We're about to greet them, but Elijah's shoe catches on the edge of a tall potted plant, sending him to trip and sprawl over the carpeted ground.

Keith whips around, immediately cracking up at the display. He doubles over just to contain himself. "Welcome home, Connolly!"

"Oh, no, mate!" Pete resists barking out in too much laughter, holding back from causing even more of a scene in the public lobby.

"Elijah!" I speed past the others and reach out to my drummer, helping him off the ground. "You okay, pal?"

"Pal?" Elijah grunts as he accepts my hand. "That's a new one."

"Still got a laugh in you," I smile, recalling exactly where it came from.

Elijah lets out a huff and brushes himself off. We catch up with our other two bandmates, then round through the revolving doors at the entrance of the hotel.

"I swear, I had plans tonight..." I slip on my sunglasses as we walk outside. "I just can't remember."

"Did you write them down?" Pete asks, tugging out his own pair of shades.

I shake my head. "Thought I'd remember."

Pete gives off a chuckle. "That's when your phone rings at two in the morning and someone
drunkenly asks where you are."

The four of us share a laugh, meandering down the streets of Elijah's hometown. We soak up the calm that goes along with our scheduled time off, yet we're all caught up in a similar frame of mind: "Maybe we'll get lucky and find some green."

After a good hour of dead ends and dry dealers, my band and I return to the hotel with empty hands. It's not long until we're shipped off to Newcastle's Metro Radio Arena, where we open another sold out show for a crowd of only eleven thousand this time — a walk in the park compared to our first two shows for twenty thousand.

What a life.

We're driven back to the hotel in a black SUV, making a not-so-quick stop for dinner along the way. Once we're back in the hotel lift and moving upwards, my mobile starts to ring in my pocket, almost as if Pete had predicted it earlier today. To my surprise, it's a semi-intoxicated Harry.

"Where're you, Scar?" Harry's gravelly voice bleeds into my ear.

"I'm in the hotel lift," I tell him, watching the numbers change on the panel above. "Where are you?"

There is a rustle heard on Harry's end, as well as some distant chatter. I'm almost about to ask if he's still there, until he speaks up again. "Come t' the twenty-third floor."

I furrow my brows. "I thought you guys were staying on the twenty-second-"

"Twen'y third," Harry insists. "Meet you there. Two minutes."

The line goes silent.

I look down at my mobile, but Harry has already disconnected. Unsettled, I press the button for the twenty-third floor. "Apparently, I'm staying on."

"Aren't they on the twenty-second floor?" Pete asks me, rightfully assuming it was one of the lads who rang.

"That's what I thought," I shrug as we reach our own floor, the eleventh. "Erm, I still have no idea what was supposed to be happening tonight. I think Harry's drunk. I'd honestly remember if we had any plans, but... whatever. I have the memory of a goldfish today. I'll let you know if anything's happening, lads."

"We'll have some pints while yer rememberin'," Keith chimes. "See ya, Scar."

"If we don't hear from you in an hour, we'll assume you've been kidnapped!" Elijah teases while the door begins to close with the lads on the other side. "Or, arrested! Either way!"

"Bye!" I sing in response, and then I'm alone.

I laugh to myself as I can still hear my bandmates carrying on, yelling out their lengthy goodbyes. It's not until I've passed the next two floors that their voices start to fade.
"Shit, Zayn!" I hiss to myself, once my thoughts gather. It was Zayn who wanted to hang out tonight, not Harry. Those were the plans I forgot I had.

I sigh, settling myself.

Harry will understand; he's bound to.

The lift door opens at the twenty-third floor. Rather than Harry, or even Zayn, however, there stands a very large man with very large muscles. My neck cranes slowly upwards as I come into focus with his smooth, bald head. The man even has muscles on his eyelids.

Yeah, that's definitely intimidating.

"I- uh," I stutter out.

"Miss, you can't be here," the man states in a firm Scottish accent.

I swallow thickly. Maybe Harry was more drunk than I thought when he called me. Maybe they really are on the twenty-first floor and he was just being a tipsy little idiot.

"My friend said to meet him here," I tell the guard, not entirely ready to get lost in a lift tonight.

"Yeah?" he prompts. "Who's your friend?"

"Given how you're looking at me, I think you know it's Harry Styles," I claim, then instantly regret my choice of words.

The man glares down at me, cocking a single eyebrow.

"Douglas, it's fine!" Harry jogs into view, grasping onto the security guard's arm in front of me. "This is Scarlet!"

"Ah," the bald man's face ultimately cracks a light smile. "Sorry, love. Go on, you two."

Harry laughs, thanking the man before leading me down the twenty-third floor corridor.

Neither Harry nor I say anything as we pass the vacant rooms, reserved for the band's privacy. I don't tell Harry that he looks good, because he does. He's dressed in a patterned shirt and blue jeans as tight as ever. His locks are long, loose curls dancing with his stride. A slight scent of booze surrounds his aura, making my mouth water for a drink.

"Louis should be up any minute now," Harry tells me.

At Louis' name, it's like something clicks in my mind. There is a sudden unspoken tension, but I couldn't say exactly what it entails.

"I can't stay long," I inform Harry as we pause by another security guard. "I have to meet up with Zayn."

The guard outside the room lets us in, earning a handshake from Harry while he's at it.

"I 'ave to meet Zayn, too," Harry lightly slurs once we're inside. He gets me to follow him around a corner, then deeper into the spacious suite, where we reach an airy room, lively with people.

And there's Zayn, sat among our stylist, Louise, and a few others around the couches and lounge chairs of the living room. The boy's drummer, Josh, and some of the lighting guys are off on the
other side of the room with another pair I don't recognise, all sharing a large bottle of wine. Most are familiar faces from our crew, but it's a small gathering at that.

"Zayn!" I chuckle, not expecting to see him here.

"Yeah, sorry, I got Harry to ring you," Zayn gives me a nod from across the room. "My hands are kind of busy." The tattooed lad raises a single rolling paper in one hand and a small nugget of weed in the other.

And, no.

"You've got to be bloody joking," I take in the scene, most notably the stoner paraphernalia scattered all over the main table.

"What?" Zayn smiles at my reaction. "Do you not burn?"

I gawk, laughing. "I've been toking away from you lot with my band this entire time."

Harry points at Zayn, beaming ridiculously. "I called it!"

"Harry called it!" Zayn grins in agreement, shaking his head. "I had my doubts, but Harry called it!"

"Does everyone here get high?" I chuckle, still bewildered by the sight of Zayn rolling on the table.

"Pretty much, yeah," Zayn shrugs. "Not everyone all the time, but yeah."

I release a sigh of exasperation and relief. "Do you understand what I just went through with my band, trying to find some?"

"Invite them up," Zayn offers, "tell them you found some."

"Yeah," Harry ponders, "where is your band?"

"Drinking in one of their rooms because we couldn't find any pot," I admit, chuckling at the irony.

I send out the news to my bandmates without any further hesitation. Elijah responds right away: the three amigos will be on their way once they've had a few drinks. I wonder if he's expecting Liam to show up.

"Why are you here, Harry?" I hear Louise ask the younger lad once I put my phone away. "You don't smoke."

"I don't!" Harry repeats. His innocence glows.

"Why not?" I ask.

"I tried it once," Harry admits loosely. "Nearly had to strap an inhaler to my face right after."

"Cut the crap, Harry, ya twit," Josh shouts from across the room, beer in hand. "Weed expands your lungs, it's good for asthma."

"That's a load of horse shit," one of the lighting guys comments, sat across from him. "It's smoke; it does not expand your lungs."

"Yeah, it does," Josh laughs. "Cigarettes constrict your lungs. Marijuana dilates your lungs and increases their capacity."
"You're on another level of stoned, man," the lighting guy maintains, shaking his head. "Facts or I won't believe it."

I turn to Harry as the lads delve into a debate of their own. "So, why are you here?"

"I dunno, why am I here?" Harry mocks the question, the cheeky bastard.

"Seriously," I laugh.

"I couldn't miss your first time with Zaynie," Harry straps on a grin, wiggling his brows.

I roll my eyes and I can practically feel Zayn do the same.

"Go home, Styles, you're drunk!" Josh yells mid-argument, causing us all to burst out howling.

"Harry's drunk already?" sounds a high, raspy voice from the doorway. "Couldn't even wait for his best mate. Shame."

I'm beaming before I even turn around. There appears Louis, softly shaking his head, pretending to be disappointed. He's wearing a loose black t-shirt and tight black jeans shaped to his curves, and he looks so, so bloody good.

A smile grows on my face as I watch Louis make his entrance. "You got here quick."

"Yeah," Louis returns my expression, walking closer. "Didn't you?"

I shrug, exchanging a glance with Harry. "Your friend Douglas nearly kicked me back down the lift."

"Why?" Louis chuckles. "What did you say to him?"

"What?"

"Well, did you tell him your name?"

"No, I-"

"Next time, just tell him who you are!" Louis chuckles again, walking past me to take a seat next to Zayn. "They'll let you in right away."

I part my lips, still fixed in my stance. "I can do that?"

Louis' eyes twinkle. "You can do that."

We share a lengthy stare. I'm practically entranced by Louis' sparkling blue eyes and the way his lashes flutter during a gaze cast down to my lips. If I could, I would talk with Louis for ages, hours — anything to indulge in his delicate voice, salty-sweet. He is a warm shot of whiskey on a cold winter's day.

"So, you're joining us, then?" Louis asks me suggestively, nodding his head towards Zayn's busy hands.

I laugh, flustered. "Well, yeah."

"Four twenty," Louis smirks, averting his gaze to his bandmate. "All ready, Zayn?"
"Yeah, just about," Zayn gently smooths out his roll, sealing it before placing it behind his ear. Grabbing a lighter and a bong from the living room table, he stands up.

"You're allowed to smoke in here?" I wonder, watching his movements.

"Not exactly..." Zayn muses, "but we can hotbox the bathroom."

I scoff in shock, struck with disbelief.

Moments ago, I heavily doubted the lads smoked anything, aside from Louis and Zayn with their cigarettes. Now, we're bending the rules to hotbox a luxury lavatory. I mean, these lads are in a boyband. If anyone told me a few months ago that I would ever be doing this kind of thing with these kind of people, I wouldn't believe a word, let alone believe any pop star would get high on their own.

"Pass the dutchie 'pon the left hand side..." Harry begins singing for a laugh, snapping his fingers to the beat. "I said, pass the doobie to the left hand side..."

"Harry," I crack up laughing.

Louis beams, eyeing his best mate. "This one's more excited than you, Scar."

"Impossible," I tease.

"Let's take this to the toilet, yeah?" Zayn walks around Louis and me. "This way, no one will find out we even flicked a lighter." The dark-haired lad leads us down the wide corridor, briefly entering the bathroom to set the bong aside. "Louis, get us set up. Gimme a minute," he says, then he disappears back into the suite.

Louis and I enter the spacious bathroom. I aimlessly gaze around as Louis flicks on an extra set of lights, beautifully illuminating the pearly white countertops and fixtures that fill the regal space.

"Make yourself comfortable," Louis says, closing the door behind us.

I find myself smiling at our newly enclosed surroundings. "Is this where you take all your dates, Lou?"

"Is this a date, now?" Louis chuckles, propping himself atop the stretch of counter space next to the sink.

I bat my lashes, shrugging softly. "Well, I was supposed to be hanging out with Zayn tonight... then Harry... but you'll have to do."

Louis smirks at me, his eyes darkening. "Well, in that case..." he spreads his thighs apart, allowing me to move a little bit closer.

I take a few steps forwards, until my hips are resting between Louis' knees, and he pulls me in, eyes never leaving mine. My hands instinctively rest over the thighs by my either side, subconsciously sliding up the rough fabric of his jeans, feeling how his firm muscles strain against the pull of the tight material.

Our faces near, our noses graze against one another's, and our lips barely touch before Zayn opens the door.

"That's not getting us set up, Lou!" Zayn tisks with two white towels in hand.
Louis hisses a silenced curse against my lips, pulling back before we can even share a proper kiss. I bite my lip, tracing him with starry eyes as he hops off the counter.

Smirking to himself, Zayn seals the room, placing the spare towels at the base of the door.

Meanwhile, Louis runs the shower, waiting until he's satisfied with the steady stream of scalding hot water. That's when he whips around with a devilish grin. "Let's get high."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, voting and all of your lovely comments :) 

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Zayn's flick of the lighter gets us started. He leans against the bathroom wall, cupping the flame as he lights the spliff rested in his between his lips. One more shallow hit, then he holds it out to me.

I reach out, accepting it with a laugh. "That's a fat joint."

"Oi," Louis shouts, sitting on the countertop once more. "I thought I was your second."

"Scarlet's on my left," Zayn reasons through his light haze. "It's only fair."

"Yeah, Louis," I smirk at the lad. "Wait your turn."

Louis raises an eyebrow at me, turning to Zayn. "What's this waiting thing she's talking about, man?"

My smirk lingers on my face as I reposition the joint between my fingers. I watch, entertained, as Zayn rolls his eyes at his bandmate.

"Wait? Never heard of it," Louis chuckles, amused at his own joke. "I'm an impatient little shit."

I'm practically beaming as I raise the spliff to my lips, still lit. I take a deep pull, gradually feeling a fiery fullness grace my lungs. I hold the smoke in, not letting it escape even through my nose, until I willingly part my lips, slowly letting the smoke filter into the moist room.

A much needed calm floods my head as I sit on the closed toilet seat. I take another small hit as Zayn did, before handing the spliff to Louis.

*Louis.*

I'm getting high with Louis.

Casually, the older lad places the joint to his lips and sucks in deeply, his thin cheeks hollowing. Slowly, he tilts his head back and wisps of smoke gently filter past his nose and lips, creating a glowing haze around his silhouette.

My lips attempt to move, but I can barely form words, the trance he has me under is so intense.

Louis gazes down at me from his place on the countertop, smoke curling past his thin lips. "Like what you see?"

What comes on as a head-rush radiates through my entire body. The hot steam from the shower is keeping the air perfectly moist and I'm flushed.

Louis' blue eyes pierce through me, not yet glazed over from the weed. His wet tongue distracts me, darting out of his mouth to lick across his wet lips. Pink lips.

I censor myself with a simple: "Looking good, Tommo."

Louis grins smugly at my faded expression. His chuckle is husky. "Yeah, you like it."
A shiver ripples through my body and chest as Louis passes the joint to Zayn. I feel the sensation despite the hot, humid room.

We send the spliff for another pass around the circle.

Then another.

"Fuck, the rules!" Zayn exclaims, nearly dropping the spliff from his mouth.

"There are rules?" I ask.

"Before we get too fucked up-"

"We're getting fucked up?"

"-we need to lay down some rules."

"Alright," I chuckle. It's like a permanent smile wants to stretch across my face. "What are the rules?"

"Lou?" Zayn offers.

"Rule number one!" Louis points his finger out to make a statement. "Nobody opens the door, nobody leaves the room."

"Isn't that two-?"

"Rule number two!" Louis continues, index finger still straight with determination. "Nobody opens the door, nobody leaves the room!"

I smile, licking my lips. My teeth graze tauntingly over my lower lip before I can stop myself. Sure, Louis' joke was funny, but all I can think about is how rough and strong those fingers are and how good I remember they feel.

"Got it?" Louis voices lowly, noticing my suggestive gaze.

I smile at him darkly, raising a single eyebrow. "Solid."

It's like we're reading each other's thoughts — with our stares, our glances, the way we're speaking. We're turning each other on without trying.

Zayn passes me the joint, half-gone by now.

I take another long toke, my fingertips grazing against Louis' as I pass the spliff on to him once more.

The entire bathroom is soon filled with hot steam from the running shower and dank vapour from the weed we're smoking. I can barely see the far walls of the room, let alone Louis and Zayn's hazy expressions. My clothes are clinging to my sides, my hair is sticking to my forehead and I'm not entirely comfortable.
We finish the joint.

Zayn smokes out the last bit of roach, flicking it into the sink before sliding down the wall to rest on the floor. The three of us lounge in silence, absorbed by the constant patter of water on tile, echoing through our hypnotic state.

After minutes on end of lazing in the bathroom, Louis slides off the counter and begins to chuckle, just because the room is so damn steamy and he is so damn high. "I'm taking me trousers off," he beams, as if such a task needs an announcement.

It does.

My throat feels somewhat thick as I laugh along with Zayn. The two of us watch as Louis struggles to unbutton his jeans, tripping over nothing once he gets his zipper down.

"Fuck," Louis chuckles out another laugh, physically unable to stop grinning as he shimmies his jeans down past his curvy bottom. Louis hoists himself up on the counter once again, exposing his briefs as he pushes his jeans further down his thighs. "Babe, help me out," he says, then he leaves the rest to me.

"This is too good," Zayn snickers as Louis watches me expectantly.

"Oh, god," I rest my face in my palms, attempting to hide my bashful grin. "This is not happening. There's no way I'm helping you get naked right now."

"Wouldn't be the first time," Louis smirks under his breath.

"Shut the hell up," I resist doubling over in laughter.

"Come on, Scarlet," Zayn winks. "Help the lad out."

I hold back a groan as I reluctantly stand up off the toilet seat. I move in front of Louis like how we were positioned before, except this time, his legs aren't as widely spread.

And his trousers are halfway down his arse.

And we're all high as hell.

Shaking my head at my own actions, I place my hands on either side of Louis' thighs and grip onto the waist of his jeans. I tug them down, baring his legs. The jeans end up catching around his ankles and I wonder how feet as small as his can still get stuck in any narrow hem.

Louis lets me work on him without helping me out in the slightest. He smiles down at me, clearly taking pleasure in watching me sweat. "Slower..." he quips, sending Zayn into a fit.

My intent is to scowl up at the tease, but I fail to hide my grin. "I swear, I'll punch you in your jewels."

"With your mouth?" Louis doesn't miss a beat.

With that, I give the ankles of Louis' trousers a firm tug. His torso jerks around, his arms trying to stop the motion, bottom nearly slipping into the sink. I reach a hand out to his, steadying the lad before he can do any real damage to himself. "Wanna ask me that again?" I whisper fiercely, pulling him in.

"Wanna give Zayn a show?" Louis muses in the same tone. His own lips are just close enough to
mine so that I can feel my own breath radiating warmly off of his.

I scoff out a laugh, my breath hot from Louis’ skin. "You would be such an arse if I wasn’t attracted to you."

"Maybe you’re attracted to me because I’m an arse," Louis smirks, kicking off the remainder of his jeans.

I roll my eyes through my fondness, letting go of Louis’ hand at a familiar bubbling sound behind me. I turn around and there’s Zayn, sat cross-legged on the bathroom tile with the bong in his lap. He sparks the bowl, sucking a heavy stream of smoke through the chamber and into his lungs.

"Are you serious?" my head spins at the thought of bong hits in this state. "We just smoked a whole joint, mate!"

Zayn holds the drug in a bit longer before expelling a thick cloud of smoke into the steamy vapour that surrounds us. "That was just our warm up, babe," he chokes out.

"I’m warm enough!"

Zayn laughs out loud, attempting another wink, but his eyes are so glazed over and his lids are so heavy that I can hardly tell which eye was the one that actually winked. "It's your turn."

"No way."

"I have to pass it to the left," Zayn raises a hand in innocence. "Those are the rules."

"There were only two rules," I crack a smile because I can’t help it. "Don't try to fool me, Malik."

"New rule!" Louis swings his feet around the cabinet below the sink, his legs too short to reach the ground. "We always have to pass to the left! And…” he continues, eyes barely visible from how much he's smiling, "no pass-ups! Scarlet..."

I feel a blush creeping its way up my neck from the way Louis is looking at me, but after a roll of my eyes and a quick sigh, I accept the glass bong from Zayn. Sitting back on the closed toilet seat, I hold out my hand. "Lighter."

Zayn smirks, handing me his metal lighter.

Placing the round mouthpiece of the bong to my lips, I spark the bowl rested by my knees. I breathe in deeply, slowly causing the water in the base to bubble and the thick smoke to rise through the chamber in delicate, wispy spirals.

My chest fills completely. I want to speak — say something, at least — but I physically have to hold my breath unless I want to choke up a lung. Finally, my lips part to release a long, steady cloud of thick smoke that momentarily fogs my vision. As the drug leaves my lungs, it dissipates into the steam above us, a dreamy haze.

It's not just our own hits that are getting us high — it’s the smoke that lingers in the air after each of our tokes, the constant build-up of marijuana vapour that’s staying sealed tight in the enclosed room that’s really frying our brains.

That's when it really hits me.

"Oh... fuck..." I muster, passing the bong and lighter up to Louis. My movements feel so fluid
they're almost watery. My brain feels fuzzier than a white-out snowstorm. "I'm so-..." I want to say stoned, but my words fade off without me even realising it.

"Good weed, yeah?" Zayn hums from somewhere on the ground, bringing me back to reality.

"Fuck," I repeat in an amused chuckle, trying to focus my wavy vision on something other than the curls of smoke above my head.

And then I remember that Louis is sat on the counter above me.

Beside me.

Whatever.

And.

"Shit."

My mouth dries and my eyes come into focus as I look up at the lad beside me.

I exhale and forget to inhale again.

Louis is propped lazily on the countertop. His black t-shirt hangs loosely around his thin waist, his muscular bottom is practically visible in his skin-tight briefs, and his thighs — god, his thighs — they’re fully exposed, nearly up to his bulge itself. To make it worse, they’re pressed firmly atop the smooth countertop, showing off his perfectly taut, perfectly tan muscles.

I want him.

Wow, do I want him.

With a flick of the lighter, Louis takes a deep hit from the bong, his lean chest slowly rising.

And it could be because I'm high — it's definitely because I'm high — but Louis, right now, is undoubtedly one of the sexiest things I've ever seen in my life.

And I don't know how it happened — it's not like I'm in control of my actions right now anyway, let's be real — but Zayn happens to make a slick comment about my looking at Louis like he's a piece of meat.

Naturally, I make an even slicker comment about having already experienced Louis' meat and how it wasn’t entirely a terrible experience.

Before I have a chance to comprehend what's happening, Zayn has got the bong again and Louis is the one who’s sat on the closed toilet seat and as for myself, I'm sat on his lap... with my mouth on his mouth, but that's a given.

Louis' tongue slides like velvet across my lips, licking in as he tastes around my tongue. He tastes like bong, with a dull hint of something minty from some gum he must have been chewing earlier. Spearmint. Peppermint. Whatever it is, he's delicious.

My mouth is far too chalky from the effects of the weed to properly make out with anyone right now — so is Louis’ — but we're both far too high and aroused to let any of that bother us.

It's becoming increasingly hot in here. The steam, the smoke and the constant hot mist of the shower are all getting to me... though, nowhere near as much as Louis.
"You're sweating in that nice shirt of yours..." Louis whispers between kisses to my lips. "Might wanna take it off..."

"Er- are we done?" Zayn hesitantly speaks up. "'Cause I'd rather leave before you two start fucking in front of me."

I'm not gonna lie, I completely forgot he was here.

"Thought no one could leave the room!" Louis quirks with a grin. "Weren't those the rules, Zaynie?"

"Fuck the rules. I'm leaving. I'm gone," Zayn scoffs. He takes a few breaths before attempting to stand up, legs loose from being sat for so long, but he manages to rise. He walks over to the shower, shutting off the water before heading to the door.

"Can you move faster?" Louis presses, only to annoy his mate. "Really wanna get me cock out."

I crack up laughing well harder than I intend, gripping tightly onto Louis' shoulders as he holds me by my waist.

Zayn, on the other hand, can't leave fast enough, spitting out an emotionless farewell before rapidly disappearing through the bathroom door. He's gone before the steam and smoke have a chance to escape the dank room.

Louis and I exchange a look as we hear Zayn's muffled voice filter through the shut door: "Louis and Scarlet are steaming up the mirrors more than the fucking shower!"

"Tell it to the world, why don't you, Malik?!" Louis shouts, also probably loud enough for everyone out there to hear.

I chuckle to myself, eyes glazed over as I mindlessly run a hand through Louis' shaggy hair.

"Babe, get up for a second," Louis glides his fingertips down my back, making me want to do everything else other than get up, but I do.

As I move out of Louis' lap, our bodies grind together just enough so that his bulge accidentally presses into my bottom and-

Oh.

There's definitely more than something there.

Louis moves in front of me, bending down to readjust the towels at the base of the doorway. I watch his thigh muscles flex as he moves, his thick bottom as he stands up again, and maybe it's weird, but I'm practically entranced by the way his fingers dance across the switches to turn the bathroom vents on.

Before I can get too comfortable with shamelessly checking out the older lad's figure, however, he turns around, displaying a rather inviting bulge in his jeans.

"So..." he looks me up and down, smirking with a playful glimmer in his eyes, "where were we?"
My knees go weak.

I need to take an extra moment to swallow the thick lump that forms in my throat.

It's like each time I want Louis, I want him that much more than before. I'm pretty sure he locked the door when he activated the vents. Even just assuming that sends a ripple of intrigue up my body.

The bathroom is still steamy and I'm still sweating and I'm so incredibly baked that I'm almost spinning. We haven't lit up since Zayn left, though we're still getting higher and higher simply from being in here. The ventilation will make the bathroom less clouded before we know it, but minutes are starting to feel like hours.

Stoned, surreal hours.

Louis steps closer, sliding his warm palms to fit over either side of my hips. He presses me against the sink counter and brings his lips to my neck, tauntingly exhaling against my clammy skin. "You look like you want a kiss," he whispers just under my ear, giving a nibble to my lobe as he pulls away.

My legs nearly give as I stare into Louis' glassy blue eyes, darkened from his large, dilated pupils. The whites around his irises are a pretty pinkish-red from being so stoned. He's so fucking beautiful, I want to lick his skin off.

Louis takes a single step back, allowing me to glance down and admire his tight briefs and tan legs. His loose black t-shirt is clinging to him in all the right places, showing off his lean curves. If the room wasn't already so dank and steamy, Louis would definitely be the one making me sweat.

Simply considering that makes me finally realise how hot and sticky I am, myself. Nothing has changed since Zayn started the hotbox: my clothes are still clinging to my sides, my hair is still sticking to my forehead and I'm still not comfortable in the slightest.

That's it.

I grasp onto either side of my shirt and pull it up over my head, removing it in one swift motion.

Louis' eyes flicker, smokey and dulled. He licks his lips, taking another step towards me. His vision is locked on my face, though I can tell he's distracted.

"You were the one that wanted my shirt off, Lou," I smirk at his reaction. "If you do remember."

"God, yeah."

"And I'm pretty hot..." I shrug amongst the heat, smiling for show.

"Yeah," Louis takes my face in his hands, "you are." He presses his steamy lips to mine.

I moan into Louis' mouth, letting him take control of our kiss. I run my hands over his warm sides, snaking my palms across his thick hips and down his muscular rear because, wow, Louis has a really nice body. It's even nicer when he's pressed so firmly against me like this.

Louis' fingertips flit across my collar bones, sliding under my bra straps to drop them off my shoulders. The straps hang above my elbows, tickling my skin as Louis ghosts his hands over my breasts.

Louis lowers his head, kissing the hot skin of my chest, dragging his lips down. Down. With both of
his hands, he squeezes my breasts over my bra, then he pulls the garment to my waist, effortlessly
taking one of my nipples in his wet mouth.

A deep sigh escapes me.

"Fuck, Louis," I moan, curling my fingers in his soft, shaggy hair.

My nipple slips past Louis’ lips as he sucks on it. His pointed tongue dances in circles, sparking an
orgasm-like rush to wash over me. Louis tilts his head, moving his mouth to my other breast. His
sharp teeth graze over my other nipple, suddenly making me shudder with lust. He goes in for
another playful nibble once eliciting my reaction.

"Shit," I tug his hair, bringing his talented mouth back up to my own. Gripping tightly onto his firm
arse, I pull him as close to my body as physically possible as I mould his lips with my own.

I can feel Louis growing harder as we make out. His thick member presses against me with every
kiss we share. I lick into his mouth, feeling a warm spark as his tongue meets mine. I suck him past
my lips, swirling my tongue around his own, just as I would do to him otherwise.

Louis gets it, mindlessly grinding himself against my groin. He fits his hand between our bodies,
rubbing his palm over his briefs, hungry for more contact. I replace his hand with my own, making
him groan appreciatively at the touch.

"Let's get these off," I breathe.

Within seconds, I take my hand away from his bulge, immediately earning a whimper from his lips. I
smile softly to myself, loving the sense of power over someone like Louis. Loving the anticipation.
Unable to resist him much longer, I slide my hands over either side of his hips and grip onto the
waistband of his briefs.

Louis licks his lips smugly. "Thought you said you weren't gonna help me get naked tonight."

"That was when Zayn was here, you wanker," I chuckle, eyes heavy.

"Maybe I wouldn't be such a wanker if I had somebody's mouth around me," Louis feigns an
exaggerated shrug at the idea. "Maybe."

"You-" I kiss his lips, "-asshole."

"Oh, you like me," Louis' eyes glaze over as he slips a hand around my waist.

"Do I, now?" I smirk, reaching into his briefs and getting a feel of his bare length.

"Mmm," Louis moans behind closed lips, soaking in the feeling, "but it's okay," he rambles, "I like
you too."

My heart swells. It's like a fire has been lit in my chest. A blazing warmth swirls throughout every
inch of my body.

Obviously, I know Louis likes me. We've had a mutual thing for the past few months, with all the
flirting and hooking up we've done, but to hear it from his own lips is something on such a new
level. It’s personal. I’ve never wanted him so much as I do now.

So, with Louis' words, I glance up at him, teasing him by licking my fingers and painting the wetness
around his head.
Louis' eyes want to flutter shut, I can tell, but he keeps his hazy vision locked with mine. I watch his lips part at my painfully slow actions, his jaw slacken in much needed lack of control.

With a lick of my palm, we’re snogging again and I’m getting him all wet. Another lick, and my fist is sliding over his hardening length, slick and rhythmic.

Louis softly moans, mindlessly thumbing over my bare nipples. Then, seemingly out of the blue, he begins snickering to himself, shaking his head.

"What?" I sigh, caught up in the sensation.

"Nothing," Louis responds quickly.

"What?" I repeat.

"Nothing, it’s a terrible joke," Louis tells me, making his high voice seem lower. "Don’t wanna risk breaking the mood for you."

"Oh, so there’s a mood now," I smirk, tugging his wet length, squeezing, sliding.

"Yeah, there’s a mood," Louis groans, dipping in and mouthing a thick kiss over my neck.

I’m blinded by his moist lips and his fiery sighs, overtaken by a taunting graze of his teeth. "What’s the joke, Louis?"

"It’s…” Louis grins, bright eyes crinkling at the sides until they are mere gems shining through his contagious smile. "Literally, it’s so bad, don’t even worry."

"Fine," I take my hands away from his body, raising my palms in defeat.

Louis laughs out loud, gently pinching my nude waist. "Hey…"

"Tell me the joke, Louis," I smirk, glowing at how forward we’ve both become with each other. Or, maybe we’ve always been a little forward, but it’s our level of comfort that has since bloomed into something warm and fuzzy.

"It just… popped into me head, like…” Louis snickers again, beautifully stoned. "I was just gonna say…” his glazed eyes steadily soak over my bare chest, "I thought Harry had perky nipples."

My lips part in an unexpected blush. "Is that-? Erm…”

Louis’ teeth drag over his lower lip. "I like 'em."

"My nipples or Harry’s?" I tease, mouth dry.

Louis beams and wags his brows at me, the cheeky bastard. Rather than a comeback, he grips the front of my jeans and pulls me into his lean, half-naked figure. He mouths softly along my neck, his breath tickling my skin. "Wouldn’t you like to know?"

I shiver at his voice echoing my own words from only a couple of days ago.

Louis pulls back, a radiant smile fashioned on his bright face, then he leans in to kiss me properly.

We press mouthy kisses to each other's lips, relishing in our high with cotton tongues. My hands trail downwards, until I’m making contact with the thin material of Louis' briefs once more. An electric current shivers through my body as he gives my breasts a squeeze.
"Why are you telling me this now?" I pipe up again, having to ask him. "You’ve seen my nipples before."

Louis laughs, shaking his head. "It was just a bad joke."

"Are Harry’s nipples really that perky?" I smirk.

"They’re like… rosebuds…" Louis gradually decides. His thin lips are smug.

"You’re cute when you’re high," I lick my lips, ridiculously sticky.

"By the way, I love that you get high," Louis grins just the same.

"We’re getting distracted again," I press closer to him, losing contact with the counter behind me.

"Oh, right…" Louis curiously smirks. "Weren’t you gonna…?"

"Yeah, babe," I bite my lip, immediately blushing. It’s one thing for my friends to call me babe. It’s another when Louis does. When it’s coming from my own lips, however, and aimed at the gorgeous, famous Louis himself in a situation like this, it’s something entirely else.

More than ready, I slide down Louis’ figure, so I’m on my knees and his pelvis is taking up most of my vision.

Then, I look up.

As a lad who’s only a few inches taller than a short girl like myself, it’s very rare to see Louis from this angle, which is unfortunate, because he's absolutely stunning. His jawline cuts around his visage, forming a perfectly edged silhouette, almost as if it was meant to be carved into stone. His nose is sweet, perched beautifully in the centre of his face, just as dewdrop would sit on the petal of a flower. The hooded lids of his blue eyes are heavy in stoned concentration and his Adam's apple bobs as he swallows in anticipation and, yeah — stunning.

The confident smile Louis sends down to me is instantly disrupted.

The bathroom door rattles — bang, bang, bang.

My heart leaps into my throat.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, voting and all of your lovely comments :)

Read "Tangerine" on Wattpad for quicker updates!

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"Open up, I gotta piss!" Josh's familiar voice bleeds through the wall as he pounds his fist against the locked bathroom door.

Louis and I share a look before hastily redressing ourselves. I slip my bra straps back over my shoulders, carelessly throwing on my wrinkled shirt before giving my hair a quick shake.

"Need any help, bro?" Louis yells through the door, just to tease his friend. He grabs his jeans from the floor and slips them back on. As he zips his fly, he gives me a wink.

"I think I can hold my cock by myself, thanks, mate!" Josh counters back. "Get the fuck out!"

Louis grins, gathering the towels from the base of the door. Tossing the towels into the tub, he unlocks the door, smoothly placing a hand on my lower back.

My stomach tingles as he guides me out.

Josh waits for us on the other side. He takes a single look at us — disgustingly sweaty, with creased clothing and messy hair — and he smirks, shaking his head. "Kids," he muses, then he shuts himself
inside the bathroom before yelling out once more: "Holy fuck, it smells dank in here."

Louis and I share a laugh, locked out of the steamy bathroom we’ve become so familiar with. Once Louis has readjusted the bulge in his jeans, we round the corner into the living room of the suite.

Zayn is the first to give us a nod. "Have a good shag?"

Louis gives off a high, raspy chuckle. "We weren't shagging."

"Yes, you were!" Josh distantly shouts from inside the bathroom.

A number of the people in the living room burst out with laughter. I shake my head, smirking as Louis goes to sit among our hair and makeup team.

That’s when Harry walks up to me, eyebrow raised in a knowing look.

"We weren't shagging," I repeat Louis' words for Harry to hear.

Harry hums disbelievingly, expression ceasing to change.

That forward, steady stare only lets me realise how little shagging Louis and I did engage in. Thanks to our stoned distractions and Josh’s harsh interruption, I’ve been stranded in limbo… and I’m not the only one.

Josh - 1

Louis and Scarlet - 0

Harry takes a step closer to me. "So, what did you do in there?"

"Not Louis," I raise my brows. Turning my back on him, I head into the kitchen.

Despite my stoned headrush, I’m still ridiculously aroused. Anything Louis and I accomplished in the bathroom was simply foreplay. I’m all worked up with no release. Even the lingering taste of the older lad on my lips is making me crave his touch. I need something — anything — so bad, it wouldn’t take much for me to whine out loud.

Harry keeps his eyes locked on me as I round through the archway into the kitchen. I can hear him trailing behind me as I enter the tiled section of the suite. I near the fridge, opening it to find multiple bottles of different colours; an array of name-brand alcohol.

"Harry, let's get weird! Let's do shots!" I yell into the fridge, audibly earning high-pitched laughter from the women in the living room.

Maybe that will give Louis a hint.

Harry chuckles along, leaning over my figure to grab a bottle from the fridge. Our shot-for-shot rule was broken hours ago and, aside from being utterly bloody stoned, I’ve been without a drink all night and Harry’s clearly had a few. He walks over to the sink, stumbling over a tile as he reaches for one of the kitchen cupboards.

I pause, gazing up at the tall lad. "Are you that drunk?"

Harry turns around, grinning down at me with all of his teeth showing. "I'm not drunk, I'm Harry!"

"You loser," I give him a playful shove, reaching over him to grab two shot glasses from the
"You know, it takes only one drink to get me drunk," Harry continues, beaming.

I close the cupboard and step aside. "Is that so?"

Harry nods with a clever glint in his eyes. "The trouble is, I can't remember if it's the thirteenth or the fourteenth."

I slam our two shot glasses onto the sleek countertop, whipping around to face the younger lad.

That was the corniest joke in the world.

"How the hell does half of the world's population see you as a womaniser, Harry Styles?" I ask him, bewildered in my foggy state. "You're such an... adorable... idiot."

I didn't mean to say adorable.

"It's not my joke," Harry chuckles, dimples on display. "That's all George Burns' genius."

"Eclectic, I'll give you that..." I utter, half to myself, as I glance around the counter space for the bottle Harry fetched.

"You seem a little tense," Harry disregards my comment, nearing me smugly. "Might need a shot?"

I release a huff at the sight of the bottle in his grip. "Gimme that, you bugger," I chuckle, reaching out to grab the liquor in Harry's hold. However, just as I do so, he raises it in the air, a mere few inches out of my reach. Without a thought, I go for it, grasping onto his chest and shoulders, attempting to lower his arm in the slightest, but his muscles resist any pull from my end.

I'm on my toes and I still don't have a chance and Harry knows it.

Too soon, my head becomes fuzzy and my stoned adrenaline continues to flow through my body, sending me to cling onto Harry's shirt in a fit of defeated laughter. I've quickly worn myself out and I still can't reach the damn bottle he's dangling so casually above his figure.

Harry's laughing, himself; still tipsy from the few shots he took earlier. He draws an arm around my shoulders; steadying, though he continues to tease.

Before I have a chance to push myself away, Harry begins doing this thing where he will lower the bottle in the air so I can barely touch it, then raise it before I can get a good enough grip on it. I genuinely try to snatch it from him a few times more, but soon decide that it's best to completely give up.

"You're killing me," I finally claim. Defeated, I nestle my head into Harry's chest. My stomach hurts from laughing so hard.

"You have no idea," Harry chuckles warmly. His voice sounds even deeper, vibrating in his chest with my head against his rib cage.

"Does anyone have the rum? Caroline seems to have misplaced-" Louis appears in the kitchen, his line of vision immediately landing on Harry and me. His eyes gaze over the state of us, both feather-brained and clinging onto each other's bodies. "Oh, lovely."

This time, I do push myself away from Harry's chest, though I struggle to hide my amusement as I give Louis an uncontrollable once-over.
Harry, on the other hand, either doesn't recognise his best friend's jealousy or he doesn't care. Foolishly, he swings the glass bottle over his head, arm still secure around my shoulders. "Wanna go for a reach, Lou?"

"Don't fuck with me, Harry Potter," Louis jabs the lad in the gut, causing Harry to curl over, still laughing harder than ever as he clutches onto what is apparently a ticklish spot. Louis then grabs the bottle from Harry as if it’s nothing, winking at me like he just won something.

In his mind, he probably did.

Louis - 1
Scarlet - 0

"Come take shots with us, Scarlet," Louis makes his way back through the archway, assuming I'll follow him, yet I stay put.

"Thanks," I tell Louis, because he can’t have it that easy, "but Harry promised me some snogging lessons… kinda wanna stay for that…"

Slow as ever, Harry turns to look at me.

Louis stands there, thin lips parted in curious disbelief.

Neither of them know what to say.

"I, er…" Louis stammers.

Louis - 1
Scarlet - 1

After a moment of tantalising silence, I can't hold my laughter in any longer.

"Oh, I'm bloody joking!" I push past the two lads. I catch sight of the suggestive glance they exchange as I send them one last entertained grin. "Let's go do some shots!"

"A hangover, two concerts, and a plane ride later..." Pete sighs, lazing in the lobby of our Liverpool hotel. "The rock band waits for the man in the suit... desperate... thirsty... horny as a pack of wild dogs..."

"Piss off," I crack up laughing, giving my bassist a shove.

"Loving your narration, Pete," Elijah comments tenderly. "Really goes well with the pounding in my head."

"Oh, yeah, no worries, lad," Pete squeezes our drummer’s shoulder.

Yesterday was our last night in Elijah’s hometown of Newcastle upon Tyne, so the four of us went out to drink and celebrate with his family and friends. As the guest of honour, Elijah was handed beers and shots all night long. It wasn’t exactly like he could refuse a celebration as beautiful and
wild as a Geordie one, nor would he want to, and although we all got pretty tankard, Elijah got it the worst.

"Speakin’ of hangovers," Keith raises his eyebrows, "those boybanders know how to drink, I’ll tell ya. I’d a two-day drag. Still felt it yesterday, before Elijah’s thing."

"You’re telling me," Elijah chuckles, massaging his forehead.

"I’m the Irish one, man," Keith laughs. "I’m tryin’ t’ make a point."

"I know, I know," Elijah smiles softly, coddling his headache.

"All ready, band?" Mitch briskly strides over to us from the hotel lifts.

"Yeah, are you?" Pete barks, standing up.

Elijah tisks, rising with the rest of us. "Sass."

"Sorry for the wait, there. I was on a phone call with the lads’ management team," Mitch explains as he leads us through the wide front entrance. "We’ve got some big things coming up. Nothing I can mention, so you’ll have to hold tight."

We’ve heard this before, so we take it with a grain of salt. One of those times lead to being offered this tour, however, so we never know what to expect anymore.

We’re guided to a large black van that waits for us outside the front of the hotel. Mitch takes his seat next to the driver and the four of us pile into the back, soon to find out that we’re not the only ones being transported.

"Ainsley and Olivia will be joining us today," Mitch says of the two young women in the seats behind himself and our driver. "They’ll be coming along with us for a handful of our outings, from now on."

"Good to see you," I send a smile to the girls, as do the lads.

We all buckle up while exchanging our greetings, and then we’re off.

This morning was spent in our hotel rooms, graciously being groomed for the media by Louise and Caroline. Now that it’s nearing ten o’clock, we’re on our way to a local Liverpool radio station. It’s the first time that both our recently appointed publicist, Ainsley, and our new social media specialist, Olivia, will be joining us for a promotional event.

Things are finally starting to feel a step above professional, if that’s even possible.

________________________________________

"Pete," Elijah voices, once we’re coasting at a steady speed.

"What’s up?" Pete asks.

Elijah gingerly clears his throat. "So, remember when you told me that most of One Direction’s fans only like them so much because they want a chance with them?"
"Pete told me that, too," I recall.

"Yeah," Pete shrugs. "So?"

"It’s not true," Elijah states for all of us to hear. "I was talking to some of my cousins last night. More of their fans care about them than you think."

"Care about them enough to suck their dicks, right?" Keith immediately chides, earning a whack on the chest from the back of my hand and a roaring high five from Pete. Keith continues to chuckle along with Pete as he rubs where I hopefully gave him a small bruise.

Ainsley and Olivia share a humoured look.

Mitch pensively gazes out the window.

"Their fans help raise money for the charity work they’re involved with," Elijah presses, with intent this time. "They’re a community, always there to support each other. They literally save lives by being a fandom, and…" Elijah emphasises, before Pete or Keith can further cut in, "most of them understand that they don’t have a chance with any of the lads, nor would many of them want one, with their mad hectic lifestyles and all the fame they carry around."

I’m struck speechless from such unexpected information. I’m only a little embarrassed because all of that refers to Louis and his life, too. "Thanks, Pete."

"Hey — yeah, right," Pete chuckles, still not having it. "They think they’re hot, let’s be honest. I’ve seen what they say about them online."

Mitch nods along from the passenger’s seat. "Sex sells, ladies and gentlemen."

"Oh, god," I roll my eyes. Even our manager’s getting in on it now.

"Listen… when it comes down to it, the fans understand that real life is different than the tabloids they’re fed. Apparently, most of them are smart enough to see through the lads’ celebrity personas. It’s the rest of the world that their people are marketing to," Elijah tells us, conveying his cousin’s rationale with quite a bit of sense for someone with that much of a hangover. "The fans understand how the lads have changed over their years in the spotlight. It’s like the fans and the boys matured together, because they literally grew up alongside each other all this time. That’s real love. I doubt any of that comes down to sucking their dicks."

"Ho, ho!" Keith raises his brows, snickering at Pete’s defeat.

"It’s true," Olivia adds from her seat near the front. "A good majority do think they’re attractive. Of course, who doesn’t? But it’s more than that to their fans. They’re a family, above all else."

"Okay, listen, maybe it’s just my experiences," Pete defends earnestly. "Last night, right? I ran into a girl who didn’t know us. I mean, she knew us, but she didn’t want a picture. She just wanted to know where the boyband was."

"Why are you telling us this?" I ask him.

"Because later in the night, when she had a few more drinks, she tried hitting on me," Pete reasons, as if that proves everything.

"Again, why are you telling us this?" I repeat, a little more smug this time.
"Because, clearly, she was in it to get laid in the first place," Pete calmly sustains his rationale. "She couldn’t find the boyband, so she had to settle for second-best… the bassist from their opening act… someone close to, but not from, One Direction."

I shake my head at Pete’s logic, because that’s all I can do.

So does Elijah, with his fingers pressed between his eyebrows.

The girl could have simply thought Pete was cute, because he’s tall and he’s got a charming sort of face. Though, with the way he explained her secondhand intent, he could just as well be right.

"Pete, that’s nice and all, man," Keith offers, ultimately releasing a laughing scoff at our bassist’s loose claim. "Only, next time, don’t let us assume shit without having actual facts."

It’s our first of four Manchester shows with a day off in between. The speakers radiate with the pulse of the song and the crowd is a blur as I shake my hair to the wild beat. The cool metal of my microphone touches my lips and I can hear my own voice through my in-ear monitors.

Backstage, no more than twenty minutes ago, both Harry and Louis referred to the snogging lessons I suggested last week. I’m an ocean of butterflies and regret. I wasn’t even drunk. I just wanted to put Louis on the spot.

Elijah goes for the break down, pedal thudding steadily against his amplified bass drum. His sticks are in the air and the rest of us are getting the crowd to clap along. I’m locked into the illusion that time is going by both quickly and slowly. I was too stoned for my own good and I shouldn’t have made that ridiculous joke.

I should be focusing on my lyrics, but they’re engrained. I should be focusing on the show, but Louis looked so good backstage, with his collar bones and his feathered hair. We’ve been instructed to keep a friendly distance around the arenas, especially considering the select number of fans with backstage passes, and that distance has only been making me want him more.

It’s unfair.

His best friend is allowed more action with him than I am.

By the time Mothering Sunday rolls around, we’re already halfway through our English leg of the tour.

With a single day off between Manchester and Sheffield, a rare day off from promo gigs for all of us, One Direction took the opportunity to fly home and spend the day with their mothers. My own band has been chatting with their own mums throughout the day, both over the phone and on video, and as for myself, the person I’ve been exchanging with most has been Louis.

I can’t help but blush at his mention, even as Elijah whispers the familiar name across the table in a
Manchester café.

"Better keep your voice down, 'Lij," I smirk, leaning across the small table between us. "The fangirls might start coming out of the woodwork."

Elijah gives me a knowing look. "He’s why you’ve been smiling at your phone all day?"

"He’s spending time with his mum in Doncaster," I dismiss in a hushed tone. "We haven’t been texting all day."

"Doesn’t mean you can’t read his texts over," Elijah gives his brows a raise.

I smile down at my hands. He’s right. "He’s actually hilarious."

"You’ve already shagged a few times, just come to terms with it," Elijah smirks, fiddling with the rim of his tea.

"Oh, I’ve come to terms with it," I admit and make a point of it. "If there’s ever a time when one of us won’t bring sexual innuendos into the conversation, please enlighten me."

"Shush," Elijah chuckles, releasing a sigh. "There’s so much electricity between you two, it’s blinding."

"Please… I know we’re just hooking up and all…” I beam, hardly able to grasp the fact, "but it’s getting a little hard to resist falling for such a gorgeous, charming thing."

Elijah cheers his cup of tea against mine. "And down the rabbit hole she goes…"

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, voting and all of your lovely comments :)  
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"Four more days…"

"We’ve heard this enough, Niall."

"Did you pack my deodorant?"
"Let's be honest, greatest holiday in the world, St. Patrick’s Day."

"No."

"Hands down."

"Absolutely not."

"Let the lad have his moment."

"I think I lost my deodorant."

I chuckle to myself, listening to the lads banter back and forth. Their tour bus goes over a few bumps in the road, gently rocking me in my comfortable position. We’re already about halfway through our one-hour drive from Sheffield to Nottingham, and although I have yet to actually fall asleep, the journey has been making for a good laugh.

It’s my first time travelling on One Direction’s tour bus rather than my own, thanks to Louis’ sweet invitation. Our teams didn’t see any restrictions with our travel accommodations, since we’ll be unloading within a private area of the underground car park once we arrive at our Nottingham hotel. Besides, my own band is following nearby in the grey bus behind, so it’s not like they’re far away at all.

We’ve been falling into the rhythm of the tour with newfound ease. Even on our so-called days off, we’re either travelling or promoting or both, but our sold out crowds in arenas of thousands have been making everything worthwhile. I used to belittle such an outlandish fact, but when it comes down to it, One Direction really know how to fill a place up. No audience is too big for these lads.

"Oh my god, I absolutely cannot wait for gobs and gobs of Guinness! Last year, I’d a boat race with the entire lightin’ crew… Anthony was new then, too! Top lad, that one!" Niall blathers on, not really concerned with who's listening. "Was a shit show, though. One of my best mates had a few too many and it all piled down from there, but lads! I'm tellin' ye! Go on St. Patrick!"

"Shut the fuck up, please," Zayn’s voice groans from inside his bunk.

Liam whistles. "The mouth on that one."

"At least he's polite," offers Harry.

I smile to myself, pleasantly curling into the seat of the tour bus couch. A sigh escapes my lungs as I wrap Louis’ blanket around my body, warm and content. He was kind enough to have lent it to me, sensing how heavy my lids were becoming earlier.

Speak of the devil, Louis fussily waltzes back through the bus carrier. "Has anyone seen my deodorant? I've been searching all over."

"C'mere, smelly," Harry rises out of his nearby seat. "You can have one of mine. I always pack a spare." After a moment of nipping off to his bunk and rifling through his bag of toiletries, Harry manages to retrieve his spare stick of deodorant for Louis to use. "Happy?"

Louis accepts the stick from Harry, plastering on a shit-eating grin. "Happier than a fly on a dog's arse."

"Who's the fly and who's the arse?" Harry winks at the older lad.
"I'm the arse," Louis claims. "I'm the dominant one."

"Hey," Harry laughs. "Why am I on your arse?"

"Oh, would you prefer if I was on yours, then?" Louis raises his brows.

"You two sound really suggestive right now, I hope you know that," I chuckle quietly, halfway to dreamland.

"Aren't you supposed to be sleeping?" Louis wanders over to my position on the couch.

"Go away, smelly," I voice, eyes still closed.

"Hey," retorts Harry, yet again, "only I'm allowed to call him that."

A smile forms on my lips. "I have his blanket, I can do what I want."

Louis meanders closer, sitting down next to me as a smirky expression plays on his face. "Is that what you think, princess?"

I sit up, sleepily resting against Louis’ figure in front of the lads. My hands squeeze his shoulders from behind as I press my lips against his ear. "Don’t ever call me princess."

Louis releases an intriguing sigh, leaning into my touch. "Wanna stay with me tomorrow night?"

My heart jolts. It’s down right embarrassing how much of a crush I have on him. "Something like a sleepover?"

"Something like that," Louis returns.

"How long do I have to wait?" I tease.

"Less than twenty-four hours, babe," Louis murmurs.

I hum in thought, uttering my following words in a tone so low that none of Louis’ bandmates will hear, not in the slightest. "Twenty-four hours and I get to make you come."

Louis’ eyes darken. Our eyes lock through his heated whisper. "Do you want me to get a boner in public?"

I bite my lip, releasing a modest giggle. "I’d like that, yes."

Louis smirks, placing a single kiss to my lips.

I try to ignore the eyes that follow our every move.

It’s our second night in Nottingham and Louis has just fetched me from my hotel room, as promised. After yet another sold out concert and a brief shower back in my private quarters, I packed a light change of clothes, along with a small bag of toiletries for the night. It was only mere minutes later did I receive that electrifying knock on my door.

Louis and I wander down the wide corridor, heading towards his personal suite in our shared hotel.
We've somehow gotten to holding hands. There’s a homey sort of feeling that's coursing through my veins — delightful and intimate, almost like how I would feel before a first date. Only, this is so much more than that, with a lad that’s so much more than I could ask for.

Louis rambles away during our stroll, foreshadowing all the good things to come. "We’ve got unlimited room service, so that’s always fun… and I’ve ordered extra pillows so we can cuddle on a cloud…"

I smile, going along with his charm. "You got that off a greeting card, didn’t you?"

"Heard it on an infomercial, actually!" Louis muses.

"Bugger," I smirk, giving his hand a squeeze.

"Hey, you… shove off…" Louis playfully bumps his shoulder into mine. His glowing smile radiates over me. We pause by his suite door for a brief moment to greet the security member stood guard, then Louis turns to me with a rather hesitant air for such a confident lad. "There’s, erm… there’s just a little problem…"

"Problem?" I echo.

"With the rooming situation…" Louis discloses vaguely, "erm… you’ll see."

I frown, unsure of what Louis means as he lets go of my hand to swipe his key card through the door. The tiny light on the handle turns green as the room unlocks. Louis lets us in without further delay.

Immediately, from the moment we step in, I gain a sense that someone is in here. I can hear movement from somewhere deeper into the suite — a few shuffled steps leading closer — until:

"Hey, roomies!" Harry rounds the corner. A massive grin is plastered over his face as he readjusts the white cloth band around his head. He's dressed in a plain grey t-shirt and too-short white shorts that barely cover half his thighs.

"Nice legs," is what comes out of my mouth. "I didn't know Richard Simmons was rooming with us."

"Scarlet!" Louis barks out laughing, unable to control himself.

"Sorry, just-" I laugh, taking in everything that’s transpiring. "This is the situation, isn’t it? You’re staying with us, Harry?"

"Yeah, I am… there was a bit of a mix-up…" Harry mentions, sharing a brief glance with Louis. "Is that okay?"

"That’s fine," I smile, a tad disappointed that Louis and I won’t get our alone time like we so hoped, yet simultaneously okay with the turnout, considering it’s only Harry.

"Glad I don’t have to beg you to stay or anything," Louis gives me a small nudge. He really is so handsome.

"You'd have to get on your knees for that one," I tease him, chuckling to ease my hastening heartbeat.

"You'd have to get on your knees for that one," I tease him, chuckling to ease my hastening heartbeat.

"You'll have to take her on a date first, at least, Lou!" Harry suggests, proudly licking his lips. "Oh,
wait... I already did."

"That was not a date, Harry," I insist, feeling my unwelcome flush. "Even the fans have decided, remember?" I raise my eyebrows to make a point, though I struggle to hide my undeniable grin.

Harry mimics my expression, nearing me so slowly it’s painstaking. A repressed smirk causes the corners of his mouth to curl. "Maybe it wasn't a date..." Harry contemplates, taking that final step closer for no other reason than to whisper into my ear, "but let's think... was there really a fly?"

A shiver runs down my spine from the heat of Harry's breath against my jaw. My mind whips back to the afternoon when Harry and I went out to share a salad at that tiny café in London. It was the first time we were spotted in public alone together. It was the first time we discovered how much we truly are alike.

As much as I could resist the circumstance, I do remember the fly. I remember how Harry’s hand grazed over mine in the midst of our bonding, and — needless to say — how the media threw a field day in response to a single paparazzi picture taken at the right angle at the right time. Back then, however, Harry simply claimed he was swatting a fly. Now, I don’t know what to think anymore.

He could be just messing with me.

He's probably just messing with me.

"Hm..." Harry smirks, satisfied at how he's caught me. He then takes a single step back, turning to his bandmate. "Anyway... I should be heading to the gym now. I'll be back in an hour or so. Can I use your key, Louis? Mine's buried in my bag somewhere."

"Yeah, erm..." Louis rifles around in his front pockets. "Oh..."

Really.

Two minutes into the suite and we've already lost our key.

Or, Louis lost it, because it's Louis.

"Mate," Harry deadpans. "Seriously?"

"I don't-!"

"Maybe it's in your arse..." I pat Louis down from behind. "You arse." I chuckle, pulling the key card from Louis' back pocket. Louis attempts to make a grab at it, but I draw it away just in time, handing it to Harry instead.

Harry makes a clear point of thanking me in front of Louis, before releasing a deep chuckle. Keen as ever, he gazes down at the older lad. "See ya soon, eejit."

"Eejit?" Louis critiques.

"Just practicing my Irish slang. Niall’s teaching me," Harry grins, reaching for the door handle. "And Scarlet-?" He turns around, raising a single finger between us.

I lightly scoff out a laugh. "What do you want?"

Harry narrows his eyes, purely to tease. His index finger remains pointed, hovering right in front of my nose. "I want a sticker with Louis' face on it."
With that, he's gone.

Louis snorts, moving ahead of me to bolt the door shut. "What was that all about?"

"I have no idea," I shake my head, still baffled.

"No, I mean…" Louis saunters ahead, guiding me through the main area of the suite, "what exactly did Harry whisper to you?"

My palms clam up.

It's suddenly become a task to swallow and I can't really feel my tongue.

I follow Louis through his spacious suite; uneasy. I regret making that ridiculous joke the week before last. I regret using Harry to make Louis jealous at that party, because it wasn’t fair to either of them and I’m just as much to blame for Harry’s taunting joke of the same nature.

I’m just as much to blame for my own state of bloody shock.

But, no. It’s not like Louis and I have anything serious brewing between us. It's not like other people aren't allowed to flirt with me, and it’s certainly not like I have a thing for Harry.

Sweet, eccentric, seductive Harr- Seductive? No way.

I'm getting way too worked up over this.

I don't have a thing for Harry.

"What did he say, Scarlet?" Louis' voice echoes through my mind, pulling me from my thoughts.

We've stopped halfway down the suite corridor, barely having reached the bedroom. Louis chuckles once, but it's a strained one at that. I could assume that he's covering for whatever kind of jealousy he might be feeling, but then again, it's only Harry we're talking about.

Either way, I tell Louis the truth: "Harry kindly reminded me of all the publicity we got that one time."

Well, you know, the half-truth, because what else could I say in a situation like this?

"And that needed a whisper?" Louis persists.

"He was just trying to be cheeky," I roll my eyes, attempting to shake off such an unexpected arousal. "Did a number on you, looks like."

"I'm not the only one, looks like," Louis cocks his head matter-of-factly. "He left you speechless for a good ten seconds."

I gaze Louis over, trying to figure out what he wants; what he's trying to get out of me. "Sometimes I think too much," I tell him, folding my arms over my chest. "I was thinking."

Louis gazes me over just the same, examining my figure and my crossed arms. His steady stare
highlights the defensiveness of my stance, making my stomach tie itself in a knot. I uncross my arms, because there’s no way I'm getting paranoid over something as tame as this.

I part my lips, about to say something further, yet Louis heads me off.

"Oh, what does it matter?" he ultimately exhales. "C'mere."

Turning his back to me, Louis walks into the bedroom of the suite. I pause by the entrance, leaning against the white wood-framed doorway as Louis takes a seat on the bed closest to the window. He turns around once he realises I haven't followed him in.

"C'm'ere!" Louis voices, a small forgivable smile playing on his high cheek bones. "I'm not mad, it's just- it was just a bit curious, is all."

I release a silent sigh, dropping my bag by the doorway and padding softly across the carpet over to the lad. I sit on the bed right next to him, both of us with our backs to the entrance. The curtains have been drawn to either side of the full-length pane of glass before us, revealing a heightened view over the heart of Nottingham. There are cars moving along the busy streets and the remnants of this afternoon’s rain are dripping from the peaked rooftops.

Few green trees are scattered, visible in the near distance. It's a green that I'm almost, but not quite, familiar with. Similar to Harry's eyes, but not as intense. Not as compelling.

And there it is: Harry.

"I don't like Harry," I voice aloud. Plainly, just to clarify.

"I believe you," says Louis.

I study the lad as he continues to gaze out the window. My eyes roam along his delicate jawline and down his lean torso, taking in every inch and every curve of that beautiful body of his. On a whim, I reach forward, loosely trailing my fingertips over his firm thigh. "So, what if I did?"

Louis gives me a look. "…What?"

"What if I did have a hard-on for Harry Styles?" I attempt to keep a straight face at my words, though it’s proving to be a struggle. "Would you be jealous?"

Louis sees through my joke before I’m even done with it. "A hard-on, huh?"

I bite my lip, overdoing it on purpose. "So hard."

Just like that, the two of us break out laughing, failing to keep the straight faces we wore mere moments ago. We fall back onto the bed, giggling along with one another, until we end up laughing at each other’s laughs. Basking in comfort, we lie there, stretched out over the soft, feathered duvet for minutes on end. We stare past the stretch of ceiling as our giddy chuckles die down into soft, pleasant sighs.

Louis is the first to break our natural silence. "I heard, you know."

"Heard what?" I blink at the ceiling, grateful that he can’t see my stupored reaction. My heart beats furiously in my chest, thinking solely of what Harry whispered to me before he left for the gym — a whisper Louis would catch onto right away, as we’ve all joked about that stupid fly countless times before.
However, what Louis says isn't about Harry.

Surprisingly, it's something I had almost completely forgotten about.

"You're gonna be dating someone soon," Louis recalls, adding a quick 'for publicity,' almost as an afterthought.

Suddenly, I'm caught again, for an entirely different reason. "I didn't know you were updated with that."

"I am," Louis turns to look at me. "Heard it might be one of us."

I turn to him as well, unconsciously displaying a frown. "What do you mean, one of us…?"

"The lads," Louis tells me. "Heard you might be linked to One Direction in more ways than one, if you catch my drift."

"Oh my god..." I sit up to rest on my side, focussing all of my attention on the small-framed lad lying next to me. "You're joking, right?"

"I dunno much," Louis softly smiles, his toned body still relaxed atop the cool, white duvet. "I just know that our management teams are working together… trying to figure out a long-term plan, since we are touring around the world with you..." Louis raises a warm hand to rest over my already-flushed cheek. "If it makes you feel any better, we all said yes. We'll all publicly date you if we're asked."

I relax into Louis' touch, my heartbeat pulsing steadily. "That's just a bit flattering."

They all said yes.

Bloody hell.

That's an interesting piece of information, to say the least.

"So, you all know?" I continue after a lengthy pause. "Why wasn't I told any of this?"

"Well, nothing's set in stone yet. It's just an offer, right?" Louis considers, gently lowering his hand from my face. "We're taking it lightly, what with all the other shit we have going on in our lives."

"Yeah..." I release a sympathetic chuckle, furrowing my brow once more. "But... but, what if?"

"Scarlet..." Louis sits up himself, rolling me onto my back to warmly hover over top of my figure. "You're in the business now. There's no backing out here. You might have to pretend to like someone you have absolutely no interest in, or spend a day with an absolute stranger when you'd rather be shovelling shit! Trust me, I've been there!" Louis laughs his husky laugh, smiling down at me, kind as ever. "You've just got to be polite... do your job... and sext me while you're at it."

My laugh fills my lungs, shivering throughout my body — half from the temptation of Louis' body being on top of mine and half because he's always so damn clever. I bite my lip, smiling up at the lad without a word.

Louis grins intriguingly. "What?"

I blush, eyes flitting between his lips and the rest of his captivating features. "You're making me wanna kiss you..."
Louis' smile remains fixed on his face, eyes softly crinkling from my forward claim. "I wouldn't say no…"

I lick my lips, watching him near. His elbows press into the bed on my either side as my chest rises in anticipation. His full weight comes to rest on top of me and our eyes flutter closed.

Louis' lips graze hot and wet against my own. Our lips part, allowing our tongues slide heatedly against one another, wasting no time at all. We kiss, a tender embrace, but there's something weighing on my mind that's holding me back from fully losing myself in the moment.

"What if it is one of you?" I separate from Louis' lips to speak. "What if it's, like," he kisses me, "Niall," another kiss, "or someone?"

Louis laughs, beaming fondly at my inhibition, and he winks. "I'm sure he'd find a way to charm you."

Then, as if we're thinking the same thoughts, we go right back to snogging. Our hands roam mindlessly over each other's bodies, our lips never ceasing to stimulate as we're cradled by the plush hotel bed. I'm caught up in his taste, his scent, his sounds. The moment is euphoric and it's as if time has slowed entirely for us — until an alarm begins sounding from his mobile phone.

Louis groans, kissing down my neck before ultimately pulling away from me.

"What is it?" I ask him.

"I've got to have a quick shower," Louis says, climbing off the bed. "Can’t put it off any longer."

"Good," I sigh, having a stretch once I stand. "I'll probably be back before you're done."

"Where you off to?" Louis wonders.

I chuckle. It’s not abnormal for Louis to be a tad confused. I'm not one to really plan out my actions lately, or ever, really. Then again, outside of his band and his more-than-hectic career and lifestyle, neither is Louis.

"I…" I smirk, rounding back through the suite, "am getting Harry a sticker with your face on it."

The bell above the door chimes as I enter the corner store. I'm thankful the mid-March weather is kissed with a wintry chill so I'm forced to wear long sleeves. I grip onto the cuffs of my leather jacket, giving a nod to the shopkeeper who greets my entry.

I walk through the quaint shop, needing to stifle a laugh as I reach the magazine stand at the back. Littering the well-sorted display shelves are copies and issues of teen magazines featuring none other than One Direction. They’re on practically every cover, being the world-famous boyband they are.

I've grown to know their familiar faces so well these past four months. It's strange to believe it’s only been that short while since we were introduced, because, wow… what a rush these four months have been.

I release a huff of a breath, having to hold myself back from being drawn to the rock magazines to the left. It’s nothing short of magnetic. I automatically spot Zeppelin and Floyd, as expected. One of
the covers even showcases an article about how Blondie recorded their first demo in nineteen seventy-five — a demo which included a disco song that later became Heart of Glass.

But I’m not here for classic rock.

I have instructions to follow.

Sticking to my guns, I dive for the first teen magazine I see on the shelf. It goes without saying that all five boybanders are laminated, bright and photoshopped, over the vibrant front cover. I flip through the pages, unable to control my scowl towards shallow captions and nameless pop sensations; faces who could easily fade off the radar in the next year or two, especially in this day and age.

It takes a quick flip through the next three or four magazines before I finally find what I’m looking for.

A full sheet of stickers is stapled to the centrefold of the booklet — a One Direction sticker sheet, to be more exact.

Casually, I glance around the shop, acting as if I have nothing better to do than loiter and look around in boredom. Once I find I’m not being watched, I peel Louis' airbrushed face from the sheet and slip it into the right sleeve of my leather jacket without a second thought.

Satisfied, I fold the magazine closed and place it back onto the shelf once more. I make my way back through the aisles of the store. I’m mere steps from the front door when I’m stopped by the voice of an older man.

"Excuse me, miss?" the shopkeeper calls from behind his cash register.

My stomach leaps into my throat.

I slowly turn around, seemingly unaffected despite my hammering heart. "Sir…"

The shopkeeper peers at me, narrowing his eyes.

He asks me to come a bit closer.

I release the breath I was holding in, relaxing my shoulders into a soft slump. "Listen, I-"

"Is this you?" the man asks.

The question catches me entirely off guard. "Who?"

"This picture… here…" he holds out the daily Nottingham Post for me to see.

I step forward, taking a closer look at it.

The headlining article of the newspaper spotlights One Direction's current tour, going on to list all of its perks and details. Aside from the main photograph of the five lads on stage, there's another small image directly below it. It's a picture of myself, stood behind a microphone stand with retro recording equipment scattered in the background. It's from one of the few photoshoots I had done with my band, just before we met our headliners last November.

"That is me…” I chuckle, slightly blown away at the exposure. "Newspapers now, too?"

The man laughs. "Thought ya looked familiar!"
"Yeah, thanks…!" I grin warmly, pointing to the stack of issues by his side. "Mind if I grab an extra one of those?"

"So long as I can get a picture with ya, love!" the man's smile settles me, lulling my edgy nerves back down to a satisfied calm.

I have a small chat with the man, enjoying our humble conversation. We take a picture together just before I leave. I exit the shop with a smile as the bell chimes above the door once more.

The cool evening air breezes in numbing gusts, causing me to shiver. I zip up my leather jacket, chuckling to myself as I realise that I have a sticker of Louis’ face in my sleeve.

I shake my head in endearment, then resume walking down the Nottingham road.

It's not long before I'm back at the hotel and riding up the lift. I want nothing more than to continue the passionate, heated session that Louis and I were sharing earlier, before we were so hastily interrupted by that bloody phone alarm of his.

Really, it’s all I can think about.

I give a knock to our shared suite door as I fiddle with the zippers on my pockets. I lower my head in a bashful grin at the sound of the handle being turned.

"So, erm… I'm just gonna say it," I blush down at my boots. "I totally thought we'd be shagging tonight."

I look up to see green eyes, not blue.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

[Stealers Wheel - Stuck in the Middle with You (1972)]

[Read this chapter on Wattpad]

See the end of the chapter for more notes
"W-what?" Harry stares at me, hand still fixed on the door of our hotel suite. His expression has softened, pacifying the strong crease between his brows. I don't think I've seen him look this innocent since we first bonded at my flat.

"Sh-shagging!" I stutter, as Harry did. "Oh, god- I thought-"

"You thought we were gonna be shagging tonight," Harry repeats my words, saying the phrase more than asking it.

"No, Harry, I-"

"We could, I mean…"

"I thought you were-"

Louis interrupts our exchange by walking into the foyer. He's dressed in nothing but a plain white towel that barely covers his damp waist. His hair is slicked back, still soaking wet from his recent shower.

"-Louis!" I spit out, finally managing to finish my sentence.

"Who's shagging?" Louis asks aloud.

Harry glances between the two of us, not yet ready to say a further word.

"Are you two shagging?" Louis snorts.

"No!" I exclaim.

"We could be…" Harry mutters under his breath.

I groan, unable to get my reasoning across. "Harry- why are you even here? Weren't you going to the gym?"

"The gym was closed."

"Christ…" I exhale, fed up with the overall misunderstanding. "Listen, I thought he was you, Louis."

"You shagged Harry because you thought he was me…?" Louis knits his eyebrows together. "I'm a bit confused."

"Me too," says Harry.

"Ugh, I'm not shagging anyone! I mean-" I pinch the bridge of my nose, releasing a deep sigh. I close my eyes, trying to centre my thoughts. "I'm shagging you, Louis. I want to shag you. Fuck. That's what I want. That's all I want."

Louis stands with a hand on his waist; his hip cocked to one side. His petite body is toned and his skin is flushed and freshly damp. His light chest hair curls, soft and golden, over his brilliant tattoos and his thick bulge is just visible through the thin white towel that covers his waist.

It’s a task just to draw my eyes away from him.

"Wait, you thought I was Louis?" Harry asks me, finally catching on.
Now he gets it.

"Yes, Harry," I voice calmly.

"Oh..." the younger lad gradually clues in to everything that just happened, turning to his bandmate with raised brows. "Yeah, she really wants to shag you, Lou."

"Thank you," I chuckle, rolling my eyes.

Louis gives me an alluring smirk, sending a warm feeling to course through my chest. He rounds back to dress in the bedroom, leaving Harry and I alone in the foyer once more.

"You thought I was Louis..." Harry chuckles, mostly to himself.

I can hardly look him in the eyes. "I’m embarrassed."

"Don’t be."

"That’s easy for you to say."

"You only asked me for a shag, it’s-"

"I didn’t ask you for a shag, I-"

"When you thought I was Louis, all you did was ask for a shag," Harry maintains.

"I said I thought we’d be shagging tonight," I clarify, internally cringing at such repetition of my own brazen suggestion.

Harry patiently nods, tongue darting out to lick his lips.

"Not us," I hastily express. "I mean-"

"Louis," says Harry.

"Uh huh..." I gaze over his composed expression. "So, what’s your point?"

"You could have asked me for worse things," Harry shrugs. "That’s all I’m saying."

"Right..."

"Anyway, the offer's still on the table, Scarlet," Harry finishes.

I frown. "What offer?"

"Alright, you two! Dinner’s in twenty!" Louis rounds back into view, fully clothed this time. "Don't want to be late!"

"What offer?" I repeat to Harry, slightly more persistent now.

"Don't want to be late!" Harry mimics his friend, smirking as he turns around and leads him out the door.

I remain in the doorway for a heated moment, finally gathering enough sense to follow the two lads out into the corridor. The suite door shuts behind me and I hastily try to recall every aspect of our latest conversation — sorting through words and undertones, glances and gestures — trying to figure out exactly which offer Harry was referring to.
It’s not until we reach the lifts that Harry’s voice echoes through my memories, soft and low: "We could, I mean… We could be…"

I swallow thickly in revulsion, feeling my stomach nauseously hollow. *Harry's offer isn’t that we could shag, is it?*

It's possible.

Of course, it's possible.

Anything is possible.

It’s no secret that Harry is a natural charmer. He truly has the most unabashed, cheeky sense of humour, and it’s not like this is the first time that something like this has ever happened. On top of that, I wouldn't put it past Harry to be the type of guy to openly ask for a shag, either. He's a rather tactile being, isn't he?

With that said, I have a hard time believing someone like Harry would want to engage in something like that with someone like me. I’m involved with his best mate, and regardless, Harry and I are just friends. We're just friends. He’s not even into older women, and even if he was, his standards are probably set way higher than whatever I could dish out, anyway.

I don’t mean that.

I just mean- Harry’s got professional models falling for him all over the world, and I’m just me — a young woman far too fixated on classic rock and the retro lifestyle for having agreed to open for a boyband for eight straight months.

I wouldn’t change myself for the world.

During my entire time at the dinner table tonight, all I could think about was sex. I'm no stranger to allowing my mind to wander, but after all this time, it's getting ridiculous. We’re more than halfway through our English leg of the tour, and despite my professional life blossoming like a wildfire, my intimate life isn’t exactly turning out as well as I had anticipated.

The thing is, Louis and I haven't had any alone time since we began this tour. Whenever we’ve attempted any sort of intimacy, we’ve always been quickly interrupted, and the only relief I’m entitled to otherwise is when I'm alone in the shower… and even that has a time limit.

Sure, I could always opt for a frivolous one-night stand, but my recently skyrocketing career means I have to be a little more selective with who I take back to my hotel room every night. Regardless, I’m starting to fear that I’m past those wanton compulsions, anyway. Since Louis and I began fooling around, I have someone of top quality to compare people to… and compared to Louis Tomlinson, well… I have yet to find anyone else out there I reckon I’d be interested in.
Harry and I sit cross-legged on one of the hotel beds, talking about our day and sharing a laugh, while Louis is caught up playing video games in the living room of the suite, shouting profanities every so often. We’ve been like this since we returned from our group dinner: bellies full and jokes consistent. Our elaborate feast has since left me feeling drowsy, but my fatigue is easy to ignore when Harry is so charismatic and his wit is so captivating.

"You know," says Harry, "I thought Zayn had a bad memory."

I release a light laugh. "What are you talking about?"

Harry smiles. "It’s okay if it slipped your mind."

I give him a curious look. I have no idea what he’s on about and it shows.

"Something I wanted…?" Harry hints.

"Oh, yeah!" I chuckle, dazed. "I’d completely forgotten!"

If I wasn’t so bloody stunned when Harry answered our suite door instead of Louis, maybe I would have remembered.

I climb off the bed and pad over to where my leather jacket is thrown over the chair in the corner. I look back at Harry, patiently waiting on the bed. "Close your eyes," I smile, and he does.

I retrieve my jacket, then carefully peel away the small sticker of Louis’ face from my right-hand sleeve: the sticker I stole from that Nottingham corner store earlier this evening. I throw my jacket back over the chair, then turn around, keeping my hands folded behind my back.

"Eyes closed!" I giggle as I see Harry peeking on purpose. I stroll back over to the bed and sit down right next to the lad, much closer than I was before.

Harry's cheeks reach his lashes as he smiles with his eyes still shut. He's practically glowing, the sweet thing.

"You ask…" I raise my hand in front of his face, "…and I deliver." With my thumb, I press the sticker right in the centre of Harry's forehead, singing a quick "Ta daaa!" as I beam proudly at my work of art.

Harry opens his eyes, scrambling to peel the sticker off of his forehead. He looks down at the tiny version of Louis' face resting between his fingertips. "Scarlet! You did it!" Harry bursts into a fit of laughter, casting another glance down at the tiny boybander once again.

"So, you can tell me how great a job I did now or later," I feign conceit, only to tease.

"You," Harry throws his arms around me, "did a fantastic job, Scar."

I giggle, managing to wrap my arms around Harry's waist, despite the impossible hold he's already got on me.

"I've got something for you, too…” Harry murmurs into my shoulder.

"Do I have to close my eyes for this one?" I jest.

"Yeah, and we need some mood music," Harry wags his brows and begins placing big, wet kisses all over my cheek.
"Sloppy!" I crack up laughing, allowing Harry his moment before playfully shoving him off.

The two of us fall back onto the bed, relishing in our chuckles until they gradually die down. Even then, we’re barely able to look at each other without snorting out another laugh. That is, until we hear another loud "Shit!" coming straight from the living room.

"Why do you keep swearing, Lou?" I shout aloud.

"The other team scored on my net!" Louis shouts back.

"I haven't scored yet, mate! I'm only halfway there!" Harry pins me against the bed, looming over top of me as his long hair falls past his visage.

"Be anymore cheeky, Harold!" I shove him off yet again, physically unable to stop snickering. It’s only now do I notice how much my energy truly has drained since dinner. "So, I’m pretty tired," I sit up to face Harry once more. "Wanna go unwind or something? Take a load off?"

Harry's expression slowly darkens. "Is that an offer…?" His full lips have parted and his emerald eyes dart down to stare directly at my mouth.

"I-..." My eyes glaze over. It seems I’ve lost my ability to breathe. "I mean- no!" I fake a laugh, mumbling another cheeky retort in hopes to keep the mood light and friendly.

"Bedtime already?" Louis waltzes into the bedroom with a smile, unaware of anything that just happened.

Or, didn't happen.

"No way," I decline, needing to steer clear of the bedroom at a time like this. I rise to my feet, though Harry stays sat. "I’m a little wiped, but we should all watch a movie or something. Relax, you know?"

"There’s free porn on cable…” Louis suggests, tilting his head back towards the living room.

"Fuck off," I laugh, so drawn to him.

"That’s not a terrible suggestion," Harry spiritedly considers, making Louis emit a hearty laugh.

"A movie, lads…” I insist, unable to stop my smirk. "Adult themes are fine, but once someone flashes something, I’m gone."

We decide upon a historical war film; the furthest thing from porn we could stumble upon. I lounge on the couch between Louis and Harry; Louis’ hand on my thigh as we cuddle and Harry’s thigh pressed against mine.

Ten minutes in, and I can’t stop yawning.

Twenty minutes in, and I’m trying to focus on the facial features of the characters so my eyes won’t close.

Thirty minutes in, and I’m doing my best to absorb any little tidbit of the plot line to keep myself
My eyes flutter open as the credits are rolling. My head is rested against a chest that is slightly more muscular than the one I’m used to. He smells like laundry, fresh out of the washer, and it takes a moment for me to realise that I’ve dozed off — not on Louis, but on Harry.

"Sorry…" I sit up, sheepishly transitioning to the older lad out of instinct.

"It’s okay," Louis chuckles kindly, voice soft and gentle, "he’s my best friend."

Harry clears his throat. "Maybe we should all go to bed."

"Good idea," I agree, standing up and rounding into the bedroom with the two lads behind me. "Yours is the bed by the window, right? Louis and I are next to the toilet?"

"Erm… yeah," Harry purposely stifles a yawn.

"Tired, Scar?" Louis asks.

"I’m so wiped," I crawl into the bed furthest from the window as Harry settles himself in the bed next to ours.

Louis smiles as he removes his shirt and climbs into bed with me, lowering his voice so Harry won’t hear. "Not too wiped to fool around a bit, I hope?"

I glance at Harry under his covers, mere feet away from us. I don’t know how to answer his question.

Louis pulls the duvet over our bodies and we cuddle up close to each other, just like that. His feathered hair is messily tousled; a precious little half-asleep smile blessing his lips. I cascade a hand down his stubbled cheek, smiling at him uncontrollably. I wouldn’t half mind looking at him forever.

"No funny business," Harry pointedly reminds us from his side of the bedroom. "You’ve got company."

"You love it when I’m funny, Monkey," Louis giggles at his pet name — he bloody giggles. Then, he goes on chattering aloud, seemingly unable to stop blathering on about absolute nonsense.

The thing is, Louis has this pressing need to always have the last word. He’s loud and brassy and occasionally obnoxious. He’s sharp as a whip and it’s sometimes irritating how accurately he can see through people and situations, sparking his clever comebacks just like that, because it comes so naturally to him. Be that as it may, all of those things usually aren’t so terrible, considering I’ve pretty much accepted the fact that I’m sexually attracted to his voice.

Eventually, my drowsiness overpowers me and it’s reached the point where I’ve just about had enough. I can tell from Harry’s muffled groans from the bed next to ours that he’s most likely in the same boat.

"Shut up," I whisper, tugging on Louis’ fingertips.
But it's Louis.

So, he doesn't.

I lean over the talkative young man; my chest pressing against his. I kiss his lips, intending to force silence upon him, though he continues to mumble against my lips, even as he kisses me back.

My eyes roll behind my closed lids. I pull away from him, laying my head back against the cool feather pillow. I let out an exhausted sigh before trying one last thing: "Louis, shut up and kiss me."

And, wow.

Does he ever.

Heat radiates from Louis' body as he pulls me in close. His spontaneous advances light a fire in the pit of my stomach. He wets his thin lips, allowing them to slide across mine, creating that perfect, slick friction that drives me absolutely insane.

We're both incredibly sleepy; there's no hiding that. It's so nice to make out with Louis, especially when it's our first night in bed together, but Harry is so close and the rustle of our sheets as we kiss is enough to sense that something is going on over here.

Harry turns out the lights.

Oblivious to the events transpiring in the bed right next to him, he cheerfully reminds us that we all have to be up for seven in the morning tomorrow.

"That's a bit awkward," Harry jests with a sleepy chuckle. "I'll still be half-naked, walking around with a boner."

That's when, for the first time ever, I pause with my hand on Louis' chest and my lips brushing against his stubble, realising that, yes.

Harry also has a penis.

That gets hard.

And he touches himself.

And gets orgasms.

"I can hear you breathing," Harry voices in the darkened room, tearing me from my explicit thoughts of him.

"That's what humans do, Harry," Louis says, presumably bothered to hear his friend's voice while he's getting some action.

"It's like- horny breathing," Harry murmurs deeply.

"That's me," I apprehensively admit. "Sorry…"

"Shit…" I hear Harry hiss, practically inaudible. "Sorry, Scar…" he pauses, then he clears his throat before mumbling a quick: "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," Louis and I chime simultaneously.
Once the room is silent again, Louis rolls me onto my back, trailing his rough fingertips over the exposed skin by the hemline of my shirt. His hand slips down towards my waistband and I shiver at his cold touch, but even more so from my conscious hesitance.

"Wait," I whisper.

"You okay?" Louis seductively purrs against my lips.

I pause, sending Harry another glance. "We shouldn’t be doing this next to Harry. It’s not right."

Louis sighs.

"I’d like to…" I cuddle impossibly closer to him. "I just feel a little uncomfortable with Harry here… I’m sorry."

"No, it’s okay," Louis nuzzles his nose against mine.

"It’s not okay," I see through him. "You sighed."

"I didn’t sigh."

"Louis…"

"Okay…" Louis murmurs, squeezing my hip. "I sighed because I had some fun things planned for us… but don’t worry about it if you’re uncomfortable… it’s alright."

I gaze across at Harry one last time, resting my figure over Louis’ chest. It doesn’t take much for me to confirm that my decision is the one I’m sticking with, however reluctant I feel. "I’m sorry."

"Don’t be," says Louis, reminding me of a similar conversation from earlier this evening.

There is a moment of silence between us that seems to reverberate around the bedroom. It stirs something in me, in the same wrong way as hooking up next to Harry would. "We can make out…"

Louis smugly traces a palm over my hip to rest in the dip of my waist. "Can we do that?" he whispers huskily. "Don’t think we’ve ever tried…"

Louis’ hot breath traces my lips, a moment before they lock with his.

We kiss, tongues meeting at last. It soon becomes a struggle to resist running my hands over his fit, tight body. It soon becomes too much, trying to remain quiet as ever. Louis’ hands are under my shirt, caressing my bare back. His lips taste so nice and we need to stop this before it escalades into something far more heated. Our fronts press against one another’s and I start to question resisting him at all.

It’s late, so we kiss and then we don’t.

We’re exhausted, so we’re back at it and then we’re not.

The stop-and-go of the situation drives me insane. Louis is oozing arousal and I can’t help but want him and I’m certain Harry can hear everything. The entire predicament enough for me to pity everyone here, including myself.

We might as well just sleep.
It was the best feeling to wake up in Louis’ arms.

I was the most content I had been in a long while, simply lying there with him. My heart felt as if it were to rip out of my chest, there were butterflies fluttering around in my stomach, and my smile was corny as ever — all wide and goofy.

And, yeah.

It really was the best feeling ever.

Harry was the first to wake up: the sound of his stirring is what woke me. My eyes had yet to flutter open and my cheek was nestled against Louis’ bare chest. I seized my opportunity as Harry tread past the beds, towards the toilet.

"Nice boner, Styles," I voiced groggily, referring to the joke he made the night before. "Funny, I always thought it'd be a bit bigger."

"What?!" Harry reacted without a thought. He must have checked himself to see that I was only joking, since he then released a deep sigh. "Don't scare me like that. I'm proud of my size."

I chuckled at the smirk in his voice, yet once I lifted my head from Louis’ chest to send him an amused grin, he had already disappeared into the bathroom of the suite.

My expression fell, however slightly.

Once I caught onto his claim, I tried to convince myself that was just another one of his lascivious jokes.

Aiming to shake my uncomfortable thoughts, I rolled over, turning my back to my bedmate. Louis’ arm slipped around my waist once more, ultimately clearing my mind. His figure pleasantly cupped mine, leaving his steady breaths and the heartbeat in his warm chest as my only concerns.

Much to Keith and Niall’s exuberance, the calendar eventually falls upon St. Patrick’s Day.

It took just over an hour to drive down to Birmingham last night, after our second and final concert in Nottingham. Now that we’re here, our manager took it upon himself to organise a band meeting by renting out a small conference room in our local hotel.

Ainsley and Olivia have joined us for this one, in order to stay up to date with our schedules and all of the promotion we’re about to get into. We’ve all grown to enjoy the flow of touring, as we’ve comfortably adapted to the steady routine. When promotion is the focus, it’s rather full-fledged and our agendas aren’t always as liner as we might prefer. It’s always an exciting lifestyle, nonetheless.

Speaking of promotion:

"Tomorrow’s your day off, as is today, then you’ve got three shows here in Birmingham, a further day off for travel and promotion, then two final kickers in London to sum up the English leg of the tour," Mitch lists away, for our personal records. "After that, we’ve got Easter holidays — a full
seven days off, before one more gig at the O2 — then we’re onto the rest of the UK for a handful of more gigs."

"Man, that was a mouthful," Pete grins, "wanna say all that again, Mitch?"

"During those seven days," my manager continues with a chuckle, "you’ll be in the public eye. Do you remember us talking about dating, Scarlet?"

I blanche as the room’s attention turns to me. "Oh shit, is that gonna happen now?"

"Darling…” Mitch voices warningly.

"No, I mean who’s it gonna be? I’ve been waiting for this!” I bite my lower lip, watching our manager sort through a few papers in his hands. My heart thuds in my chest, simply anticipating the result.

I’m caught up in the uncertainty that it might turn out to be one of the lads in my band. The lot of us have all become more like siblings these past few years together, and although Ainsley denied my band’s involvement whatsoever, it’s still on my mind. That being said, Ainsley also suggested that my arrangement would be with someone much more famous than any of us, meaning it couldn’t be any of the lads; they’re just as new to the industry as I am.

Which leaves the door open to the other side of the spectrum:

There’s a high chance that the person I’m set up to date could turn out to be one of the One Direction lads, like Louis suggested. If so, I could definitely do that, as we all get along famously — mind the pun. We’re already on tour together and it would simply be like spending time with a close friend, aside from Louis, of course. In his case, our more-than-friendly interest could work as a blessing in disguise. God, we could really play that up for the media…

"Alright," Mitch finally looks up from his papers, "have you heard of a band called The Radiants?"

"Erm… yeah, actually," I voice, surprised to actually have knowledge of such a modern rock band.

"Good," says Mitch. "You’ve got a date scheduled with the drummer on the twenty-fifth of March — the first day of your seven-day break. That’s eight days from now."

"Whoa…” my pulse slows as I rest on the edge of my seat.

"Isn’t the drummer the hottest one?" Elijah voices suggestively.

"Now, now… I’m not here to rate boys with you lot," my manager smirks, unable to hide the twinkle in his eye.

"Right," I give Elijah a nudge. "Business first."

Mitch chuckles in an undertone. "Excited?"

"Just a bit," I press my lips together.

"Great, then here you go," Mitch lays out two pages in front of me. "Samuel Kitchen from Merseyside, born in nineteen eighty-nine… he's three years older than you. You'll be spending an afternoon in busy, people-filled, downtown London, where you’ll be driven to Playgolf by Northwick Park for a round in the batting cages. After that, you’ll share a short lunch at a nearby restaurant. From there, you’ll be photographed eating together, then finally sent home in separate
I lean back as all of the new information hits me at once. "That’s a plan, if I ever heard one."

"This is your only outing with Sam," my manager goes on to explain. "As we agreed before, we're not getting in too deep with any specific person, because of our upcoming world tour. Your upcoming status with Sam is only temporary, since we'll be far from England before we know it. Sound good?"

"Sounds easy enough," I admit with a shrug.

"Perfect... you just have to sign this paper, right here at the end," Mitch points to a marked line at the bottom of the page. "This explains everything I just told you about the agreement, only in business terms."

"Is this a contract?" I ask, sceptically intrigued.

"You are an artist under contract," Mitch reminds me.

Despite my sudden cold feet, I nod, gripping the pen in my hand and skimming the page over with my eyes. With a single breath, I scribble the ink across the page, singing the contract as I would an autograph. I drop the pen onto the table. "Done deal."

"Is that it, then?" Keith asks around. "Time to drink and celebrate?"

"Hold your Irish horses," Pete chides. "The man’s not done yet."

"Actually, that just about does it for today," Mitch says, handing out similar sets of papers between the four of us. "These are your schedules for the next couple of weeks. If you ever need me or have any more questions, I’m always a hotel room or a ring away."

"Thanks for the warning," Pete smirks.

"Shut up, Pete," I chuckle, shaking my head during a shared glance with Mitch. "He’s so mean."

"Ah, guess that means I’m not invited to your shenanigans tonight," Mitch mocks teasingly, making us all laugh. "I’m young and hip… why don’t we drink together?"

Elijah cracks up. "Mitchell, please. Don’t make me piss."

"I’m kidding, I’m kidding…" Mitch grins, playing up the circumstance for a laugh. "Kind of."

We all burst out again and Mitch chuckles along.

"Anyway, take today and tomorrow as your time to prepare yourselves for the break. Aside from Easter, we’ll be diving into a handful of promo week-long, between the twenty-fifth to the thirty-first… photoshoots included," Mitch says to us, then he looks at me. "You especially, Scarlet, with your first public date coming up right away. Now you just have to break the news to Harry."

"Harry?" I frown, entirely confused why Mitch continually insists on implying such a thing. "I'm literally hooking up with his best friend…"

"Wow..." Ainsley widens her eyes, brand new to such a forbidden fact.

"I thought Harry was the one who fancied you," Mitch wonders.
Ainsley and Olivia share an impossibly dumbfounded expression, making the lads of my band snicker.

I roll my eyes, not having it. "Mitch, you know I wrote a song about Louis."

At that, the girls lose their composure, probably not expecting to be exposed to so much classified information in such a short amount of time. I can only smile along as I shake my head. I don’t blame them.

"Oh, that's right," Mitch huffs out a laugh. "Well, regardless of who it is… break it to him softly."

I smirk to myself, understanding that my manager is only playing around. At the same time, I will agree that Louis can sometimes display a bit of jealousy for such a free-spirited person. It might sound a tad indecent, but something hot flickers in my chest just imagining the look on his face when he finds out.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, voting and all of your lovely comments :)  
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Chapter 17

Chapter Notes
Iggy Pop - The Passenger (1977)
Everyone is drunk.

The place is decorated in green — green tinsel, green garland, green food and green beer. Neon lights embody the interior, cloaking the lively guests in an emerald haze and— did I say emerald? I meant to say green.

"How’d you find this one?" I ask Harry, gazing around the spacious home.

"Niall rented it," says Harry, drink in hand.

"Course he did," I smile, taking a sip of my own.

"Are you digging the music?" Harry asks, pointing a finger up to the techno-like beats that boom from surrounding speakers, encouraging the partygoers to move their hips.

"I feel like I’ve time travelled into the future," I admit with a chuckle.

From the corner of my eye, I witness Louis stepping outside for a smoke. It’s been a lingering thought in the back of my mind that I’ve been wanting to get a little high tonight, though I haven’t got anything on myself. Now that I think of it, who better to ask than Louis?

"I’ll be right back," I tell Harry. "I wanna see if Louis’ got a toke. You’re not usually one to light up, are you?"

"Not usually, no," Harry smirks, gently swirling his drink around.

"Thought so," I chuckle, kindly placing a hand on his muscular bicep. "I’ll see you soon, Harry."

Harry winks. "See you when you’re stoned."

I feel tipsy and light as I pass through the crowded living room, sliding open the patio doors towards the back. I step out into the garden; the cool evening breeze an immediate contrast from the warm bodies inside.

Louis is stood among the crowded patio with a guy around his age. The lad is a few inches shorter than Louis himself, with shorter, darker hair and they seem to be getting on quite well. I walk over to the pair, only to be pulled in by Louis right away.

"Scarlet, this is my best mate, Nathan," Louis introduces us with an arm around my shoulders. His public display of affection makes me feel giddy.

I share a cordial handshake with Louis’ friend, though I question his title. "I thought Harry was your best mate, Lou."

Louis shares a laugh with the guy. "Nate and I’ve known each other since Donny; growing up and all. Harry’s my closest mate, you could say."

"Nice to meet you, Nathan," I smile along, taking a small sip of my drink. "We’re in Birmingham, though. Isn’t Doncaster, like, an hour and a half north of here?"
"Yeah, I’m visiting family just over in Wolverhampton," Nathan tells me casually, "since it’s a week before Easter holidays, y’know."

"Wolverhampton," I recall, "that’s where Liam’s from."

"Small world," Louis smiles, fond and calm.

"Wanna smoke a joint?" I ask Louis.

"So long as Nathan tells me what he thinks, now," Louis smirks suggestively.

"Of what?" Nathan asks.

"Of her…" Louis lets his arm slide from my shoulders to my waist. "How’s she, lad?"

Nathan laughs. I can tell that he’s a bit reluctant to answer, though he wouldn’t not respond to Louis. "I’ve only seen pictures before… but, man, she’s hot, Lou."

I feel my face heat up amid the cool evening air. I can’t help but grin. "Might wanna have this chat where I can’t hear you next time, lads," I suggest, amused.

"Funny, too," Nathan nods impressively, grinning.

"You haven’t heard her yet," Louis winks. We share a smirky glance as I take another sip of my drink.

"I always knew you were destined for something great," Nathan pats Louis on his back.

I huff a laugh, nearly inhaling my beverage at the irony. Louis and his band have consistently been top of the charts since I can remember, yet here is his childhood friend commending him even more so on the attractiveness of his friend with benefits. Life is great.

Without further wait, Louis pulls out a pre-rolled joint from a case in his pocket. He finds his lighter and he licks his lips and such actions shouldn’t seem as slow-motion as they do. Either he’s drunk or it’s me — or really, it’s all of us.

Louis sparks the joint and takes a hit.

"Naomi coming to this party?" Nathan asks aloud.

Louis shakes his head as he hands the joint off to me. "Niall said she’s busy with school. She’ll be at the next one, likely."

I take my toke, then pass the spliff to my left. "Niall’s girlfriend, or…?"

"They’re friends," says Louis.

"Niall’s got a lot of friends," Nathan jests, raising the joint to his lips.

"Since day one, man," Louis laughs heartily. "X Factor? You always knew where he was. You’d either hear his acoustic guitar, or see the crowd around him, whichever came first."

"Even aside from the contest, you were recognised a lot back then, hey?" Nathan says more than asks, sending the joint to Louis. "When you were first put into your band? That was wild stuff, man… like Beatlemania."
"Hey, Beatlemania is a sacred thing," I smirk along with my tease, but I mean it.

"The girl’s right," Louis’ eyes twinkle as he locks his gaze with mine. He turns the spliff between his fingers; a golden blur of a sight. "But yeah, that was unheard of. We hadn’t even done a record back then."

"What, you just did some live performances for the episodes of the show?" I ask him, needing to control my sticky words from slurring.

Louis nods as he takes a deep toke. He holds it in for a moment before blowing it out steadily, then he passes it to me. "Yeah, like, we did a few live recordings, then we were at the studio one day, doing a charity single with the other contestants — the top ten, I think — and there was this crowd of teenagers around the gates outside… and they were all there only for us; One Direction. We’d just been put into the band, like, two weeks earlier," Louis reminisces, dazed in his laughter. His thin lips twist as his tongue slips out to lick them. His blue eyes have gained a pretty pinkish glaze. Stoned.

"After that, I tried to use it to my advantage, right? Of course, being young and all. Not everyone recognised us, though."

"He’s gonna go into a story, now," Nathan informs me.

"I can tell," I smirk, lingering in the sensation of my following toke. I bask in half a hit more, then pass the spliff to my left again. By this point, it’s like clockwork.

"One time, this restaurant wouldn’t serve me alcohol because I’d forgotten my ID," Louis begins, right on cue as suggested. "So, I told our waiter to search my name on the internet and look at my age."

"Legend," Nathan laughs, shaking his head.

"So, I said: in the mean time, I’ll just have a glass of milk while you sort out my alcohol situation," Louis shares expressively, loving the attention. "He said: is soy milk okay? I said: is Monopoly money okay?"

The lot of us crack up, genuinely roaring with laughter.

"You stole that off the internet, ya twat," Nathan chuckles.

"Who cares? The lad sold me a beer after looking me up! It worked!" Louis howls, eyes watering and crinkling beautifully. "Nice guy, too. We were cool after that. Signed his apron."

My stomach burns, tingling in ripples as I laugh along with Louis’ recollections. His incendiary wit is addicting in all the right ways. I consider when I should tell him about the plan with Sam — it’s not the first time the thought has come up, as it’s only been a few hours since I found out — but we have yet to stumble upon the right moment. If there’s ever a right moment.

"Barry’s here," announces Louis, making Nathan and me turn around.

"Hey," Harry steadily grins at the older lad as he nears the three of us.

"Barry," Nathan laughs, greeting Harry. "Wasn’t it Larry last time?"

"No," Louis denies assuredly, "that’s the mixture of both our names. It’s a ship."

"Here for a toke, then, Harry?" I smile up at the younger lad as Louis and Nathan go on chatting once again.
Harry chuckles. "I'm just here for the aftermath of your tokes."

"My tokes, or-?"

"All of your tokes."

I press my lips together, tongue parched as ever. I take a drink. "Why did Louis call you Barry?"

Harry's cheeks glow. "He's got a lot of names for me."

I smile, feeling pleasant among my intoxication. "Like Monkey?"

"My mum sometimes calls me Monkey," Harry considers.

I chuckle. "Why did Louis call you Monkey, then?"

"Because he knows my mum calls me Monkey," Harry smirks.

I laugh, fiddling with my cup. "You're so cute."

Harry raises his brows, the corners of his lips curling upwards.

"Er- the two of you, I mean," I utter dumbly, stumbling over my words. "Not-"

Harry nods. "Not me, I know."

My face falls. "Harry…"

The younger lad sighs, tongue slipping out to lick across his plump lips. "Scarlet, I know you're not attracted to me, but you don't have to rub it in all the time."

I open my mouth to object, only to close it again, because that can't be right. Suddenly, I feel the need to argue with Harry. Of course, he's bloody attractive; he's the most popular celebrity on the face of the planet. I'm just not- no. I just can't- no way. I'm into Louis.

I'm bloody into Louis.

"Made a new mix while I was inside," Harry comments, once he sees that I'm far from being able to speak. He holds out his green cup for me to see. "It's strong."

"That's nice," I look it over.

"Have some," Harry insists.

I accept the cup from Harry, swirling it once before taking a sip and handing it back to him.

Harry takes a deeper sip, gaze fixated on mine.

My eyes flit to his a moment before they flicker away.

I'm mad.

Harry's drink is strong and I can feel Louis shooting us glances and everyone's drunk and I'm mad.

I'm mad because Mitch continues to imply that Harry and I have a thing when we don't have a thing. I'm mad because we're all stoned upon drunk and I like Louis and I want him very much and Harry looks good and I'm mad.
Despite the spring weather, Harry pushes up his sleeves. It always manages to slip my mind that he’s got quite an array of tattoos inked into his skin — less than Zayn, mind you, yet still more than Louis. It seems I’ve forgotten for the thirtieth time.

"So, Scarlet… here’s the deal," Harry nears me, stating his following words playfully, as if I would expect the opposite to be true. "I’m not gonna make a move on you tonight."

"Fine…" I scoff out a chuckle, however amused or confused. "I won’t make a move on you, either!"

Harry chuckles. "Good?"

"Bloody great," I declare.

The night drifted into the early hours and Keith and Niall’s Irish pride outshone anyone’s. We drank and we danced. We toked and we laughed.

Nobody made a move on anyone and Elijah got more action than any of us, flirting with a bearded acquaintance of the crew.

I didn’t end up telling a soul about my plan with Sam.

It just didn’t come up.

Our two bands gather in One Direction’s dressing room half an hour before we go on stage. Tonight is our first of two more concerts back at the London O2 before our week-long Easter break. Just after soundcheck, I told the boybanders my big news. They’ve all had something interesting to say about my situation, except for Louis, who still hasn’t said a word. I’m unsure whether that’s strange or expected.

"This is a big step for you," Harry remarks proudly.

"I didn’t know Mitch had it in him," I jest.

"The Radiants are actually really cool, Scar," Harry goes on, "you’ll have to introduce me!"

"Yeah," I beam in agreement. "If I have to date a stranger, at least it’s someone from a half-decent rock band."

"This is your first publicity stunt, isn't it?" Liam inquires, hovering around the refreshment table.

"It is," I smile over at him. "Have you all fake-dated for the paps before?"

"Not all of us," Liam says, picking up a slice of watermelon. "Zayn and I usually tend to have long-term girlfriends. We do have to play it up a bit for the fans, but they’re usually real relationships. Harry, Louis and Niall are more involved with the paparazzi, like you will be."
"They like t' keep me single," Niall says, accent strong as ever. "It's what the fans want. And if I do see a girl, it's definitely kept quiet."

"A lot flies under the radar," Louis speaks up for one of few times today; unusual behaviour for the biggest chatterbox of the lot. Still, he smirks as he continues. "The world can't know everything, right? We do have to have our own personal, private lives, or else we'd all go mad! Like, imagine how the fans would get if they found out I was smoking weed or watching porn… or shagging you."

I roll my eyes, smirking at the older lad. "Watching porn, Louis? That's a big one."

"I've got to have some type of visual stimulant," Louis banters, smirking back at me. "It's not like I'm gonna keep a fucking nudie mag in my bus bunk!"

"Language, Louis," one of the boys' security guards, Preston, warns from the dressing room doorway.

"You wank yourself in the bus bunks?!!" Zayn exclaims, horrified.

"Oh, come on, you all do it," Louis laughs calmly.

"I dunno, I prefer to do my wanking in a nice clean hotel room," Niall muses airily. "Light some candles…"

"I had a solid orgasm in my bunk just yesterday," Harry hums unaffectedly.

"Lads!" shouts Preston. "There are children in the hall!"

"Sorry, boss," chuckles Harry.

We all snicker silently for a moment, trying not to look at each other because we know we'll just start up again.

That's when Liam returns from the refreshment table with half a chunk of watermelon still in his hand. He sits on the couch next to Zayn. "Hotel room pay-per-view hardcore eighty-dollar porn," Liam kicks his feet up on the side table. "That's what I'm all about."

Preston slams the door shut, locking us in the dressing room behind himself. The lot of us burst out howling, leaning on each other for support while we practically cry our eyes out in laughter. Preston may be a protective father figure to the lads on the road, but just before the door fully closed, I could hear three words being muttered from the man's pursed lips:

"This goddamn boyband."

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I'm sat in the back of a black car. I gaze out of the window, watching as Samuel Kitchen, the drummer of the famed modern rock band, The Radiants, steps out of a similar car on the other side of the road. He walks up to the entrance of the outdoor sports facility, then he stops to wait at its front gates.

That's my cue.

I open the car door, stepping out gracefully in case I'm already having my picture taken. Samuel and
I have been instructed to act like we've already met and we’ve got to portray that image for this to work. I walk across the street, sending a smile to the musician as he spots me arriving.

"Hey, Scarlet," the drummer steps towards me, greeting me with a soft hug.

"Hi, Samuel," I smile up at him, returning his embrace.

"Sam's fine," he chuckles.

"Alright then, Sam?" I ask.

"Yeah, not too bad," he says in a Scouser accent almost exact to Pete’s. "Let's get this date started, shall we?"

Sam and I gather some bats and helmets, then navigate to a couple of unoccupied cages right next to each other. The two of us chat as we begin our first round of slow pitches, politely getting to know each other in a friendly sort of way. We're both in the same situation, so we might as well make light of it.

Sam is slightly taller than Pete, my tallest bandmate. He suits his height well: dressed in a plain white t-shirt, accented by a black leather jacket. His long, black skinny jeans fit to his lean figure as if they were tailored specifically to his shape and he looks great, I'm not gonna lie. Though, it feels like something is missing.

As well-mannered as I'm handling the event so far, it doesn't feel quite like Sam is dishing out as much. For the most part, it seems like his mind is elsewhere… which, honestly, it probably is.

I'm half the same.

We’ve barely had twenty pitches each by the time we’re spotted. A teenage girl and either her friend or sister hesitantly approach us, carefully asking if we are who they think we are. We smile and chat them, shortly before taking some photographs together and going back to our cages.

Checkmark for getting a date photo online.

We take our time pushing through the following round. I’m by no means good at swinging a bat in any sense. My muscles could be stronger and I'm far too impatient to line up my rotations correctly. While an average person might take about four swings to make contact with the ball, I'll take about eighteen. It doesn't bother me — I personally think it's hilarious — but Sam seems to be slightly annoyed at how terribly I'm failing.

We're about halfway through our designated time at the sporting location, when the drummer pauses to re-strap his batting gloves. He squints at a wooden sign post, planted just outside the chain link fencing that surrounds us.

"Nicole loves Harry Styles..." he reads aloud.

"What?" I laugh out loud.

"Someone carved it on this post," Sam crouches down, reading some of the etched inscriptions encompassing it.
I walk over to his side of the cage with the biggest grin, kneeling down next to him to read the words up close.

"Well, I don't know Nicole, but I do know that she loves Harry Styles," Sam jokes, causing me to laugh along. He points at another tiny carving engraved right next to it.

"1D," he reads. "Whatever that means."

"One Direction," I say, all too quickly. "It means One Direction."

"Oh… weird," Sam comments. "How'd you know?"

"Well, Harry Styles… 1D…" I hint loosely. "I kinda connected the two…"

"I have no idea who you're talking about," Sam claims and my stomach drops.

I'm digging myself in the deepest hole of embarrassment and I'm fully conscious of it. I highly doubt that Sam is being honest in his claims. Literally everyone has heard of Harry Styles, whether they've heard of him or not. Besides, Sam should have already established from my file that I'm opening for the damn boyband in the first place. The last thing I want to admit is that I've long fallen deep into the wardrobe, but there's no way of climbing out now.

"Harry Styles," I politely inform Sam, aiming to end the conversation before it starts. "He's a member of One Direction."

I don't want to get into it, I really don't.

I know the type of person he is.

I used to be that person.

Sam peers at me, narrowing his eyes into a frown. "Why would I know anything about One Direction…?"

And there it is.

I didn't say Sam would know anything about the group, yet he's taking offence already. Just the mere mention of the boybanders is sending him to react like a defensive child.

I understand where he's coming from. I used to be just as cynical as he’s coming off right now, I'll admit it. I'm very particular with the music I like and boybands fall very far from that category. I, too, used to scoff at the mere mention of anything to do with the popstars, but my past doesn't matter so much anymore. The lads and I have since grown to know each other and now, I can't stand to endure such negativity towards some really good friends of mine.

I take a moment to gather my bubbling emotions before setting up for our second to last round of pitches. From here on in, Sam and I focus on not talking so much anymore, since we now realise that we'll probably end up disagreeing. I can’t even say much about his lack of effort, for fear that he might get snotty towards me again. The only thing left to do is suck it up and smile for the cameras, so some shitty papers can get a story out of our pain perceived as pleasure.
It’s not all bad, mainly when we meet some nice fans along the way. Nearing the end of our outing, a few girls come up to us that are — to my mercy — fans of myself and One Direction. To make it even better, they don’t recognise Sam in the slightest.

Almost as if the teenagers have rehearsed it — which they very well might have — one of the girls asks me what happened to Harry.

"Harry?" I laugh, stomach stirring. "We're good friends."

"Weren't you dating him?" one of her friends asks me.

I smile to myself, shaking my head. It’s strange enough to be recognised in public, but it’s an entirely different level of weird for complete strangers to feel like they’re aware of personal aspects of my life.

It’s not their fault.

Once I began to gain a name for myself, Harry was the very first celebrity I was ever seen with in the public eye. The fans saw it as a date, but only because that’s what the media wanted them to believe. It’s as simple as that and wish I could tell the fans so, but it would totally blow my cover for today’s event, so I put it into other words:

"Harry and I went to a café once, because we didn't know there would be paps," I tell the girls and it’s the truth. "Bit of a mistake, I guess, since now everyone thinks we're dating… which-" I motion back towards Sam, "I'm kind of on a date right now."

"He's cute!" the first girl whispers to me, silent enough so the drummer won't hear.

"That's his best quality," I whisper back, wanting to say that his good looks are his only quality, yet firmly holding myself back.

The girls laugh along with my quip, before asking for pictures and the usual fun stuff. We all say our thank yous and goodbyes, then Sam and I finish up with our last round.

Regardless of the shit mood that Sam has placed me in today, all of our fan interactions have been positive ones. A fleeting moment for me can possibly mean a lifetime to someone else, so I always try to remember not to let one bad day determine someone's entire portrayal of me. It’s a task sometimes, but a very important one at that.

The two of us finish up our final round in the batting cages, though despite keeping quiet for the last few pitches, Sam just has to bring up One Direction again. While we're exiting the game area, he can’t help but mention how painful it was to have to listen to me chat with the fans about them.

"I am on tour with the lads, Samuel," I roll my eyes, stowing away my bat. "You can just say they're not your thing and be done with it."

"Yeah, they're really not," Sam repeats snappily. "I don't get why those little twelve year old girls waste their time."

I gape at his attitude. "You don't have to make a big deal over such a little thing."

"It is a big deal," Sam scoffs. "They're a shit fucking boyband; a disgrace to the music industry. I thought you said you were a rockstar; you should know that."

"It's not like they're spoiled rich kids that eat fancy food like tadpoles' assholes," I spit back at him.
"They're actually really genuine, down to earth guys... if you took a damn second to see it."

"They’re a fabricated pop product!" Sam laughs, like saying these things will convince me to side with him. "Their success is plastic and yours is real... at least, I thought so."

"That’s a terrible apology," I roll my eyes.

"It’s not an apology, it's an explanation."

"Well, it's a terrible one of those too."

My mobile vibrates in my pocket, but I'm too caught up in my argument to reach it in time. After winding down slightly, I retrieve my phone and check it to see that I've missed a call.

"Who is it?" Sam asks nosily.

I scoff out a laugh as I tell him the furthest thing from what he wants to hear: "Your favourite boyband member."

Needless to say, I didn't do lunch. Sam asked me about the second half of our date, reminding me that we have a contract to fulfil, but I gave it to him straight, saying: "Frankly, I don't give a shit. You've had a negative attitude since I got here and I physically can't be around you any longer. I'm not gonna pretend to smile while listening to your idiotic utter bullshit. I have somewhere to go."

Or something like that.

I climb into the car I arrived in, ringing back the number that called me earlier. My heart thuds in my chest and I can almost feel my ears fuming as the line rings in wait.

The phone stops ringing and a deep, raspy voice soothes me on the other end.

"Hey, Harry?" I purr into my mobile. "When do you want me over?"

Chapter End Notes

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Thank you so much for reading, voting and all of your lovely comments :)

A/N: The character of "Samuel Kitchen" was created well over a year before I decided that Samuel Larsen should be his portrayer. The similarities between the names completely weirded me out at first, too. I know. Before, I was honestly picturing a young George Harrison kind of type or something. Oh, George.

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Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

[ The Animals - Don’t Let Me Be Misunderstood (1965) ]

[Read this chapter on Wattpad]
My driver parks across the street.

I climb the familiar front steps and knock on the large wooden door. My heart hasn’t stopped pounding since I ditched Sam at the batting cages, but I can’t tell if it's because of my lingering fury or my currently knotted stomach. Why my stomach is in knots right now, I'm not entirely sure, but I'm here and that's that.

The door opens.

"Harry," I fall into the younger lad’s arms, closing my eyes as I rest my head on his chest.

"Hey, Scar," Harry hums warmly. "You alright?"

I smile up at him, keeping my arms locked around his waist. "Better already."

"Good," Harry smirks down at me, brushing a strand of hair away from my cheek. "I've got something to show you."

"Do you?" I shiver at his touch.

Harry nods, keeping his eyes locked with mine. "You'll have to come inside if you want to try it out, though. Do you want to?"

A ripple of intrigue courses through my body. "Yeah, I want to."

Harry locks the door behind me once I step inside. As I’m removing my shoes and my jacket, I happen to catch his lingering gaze. Harry leads me into his lounge, a familiar setting by now, and there it sits regally: a brand new massage chair.

I chuckle, flustered that Harry would introduce a massage chair in such an intriguing manner. I don’t know what I was expecting, but it wasn’t this. "Is this what you wanted to show me?"

"Yeah!" Harry joins me in admiring his chair. "It's brand new. Like it?"

"Yeah," I near the machine, looking it over. "When can I try it out?"

"In just a second," Harry smiles. "Would you like a beer?"

"Definitely," I return his expression, letting him pop off to the kitchen.

Harry reappears before I register that he’s gone, though he’s got three bottles in hand rather than two.

"Here, Scar," Harry cracks open one of the beers for me, placing the third on the table.

"Thanks, love," I return the sentiment with a smile, clinking the necks of our bottles together.

"Double-fisting, are we?"

"What?" Harry chuckles, bewildered.

"You’ve got two bottles for yourself," I clarify, gesturing to the third beer on the table.

"Oh," Harry grins bashfully. "No, that one's for Lou."

"Which Lou?" I ask, thinking also of our hair and make-up artist.
"This Lou!" calls a high, raspy voice behind me. I turn around to see Louis with his arms open and outstretched. I laugh out loud, going in for a hug. He kisses me quickly on the cheek as he pulls me in. "Hey, Scar."

"Hey, Louis," I gently pull away.

"What, Harry gets love and I get Louis?" he smirks.

I smirk back at him. "I could've called you filthy animal or something, but I didn't think that was appropriate."

"Filthy animal is always appropriate," Louis winks in return, his entire face lighting up. "So, what happened with that dude from The Radiants?"

"Oh, right," Harry recalls, "that was today."

"Yeah… turns out, he was a total prick," I roll my eyes at the two, not caring to remember any of this past hour’s events. "Sorry to say, but he talked a lot of shit about you lot. I couldn't handle it any longer."

Harry conveys his concern with a frown. "What did you do?"

I scoff, over it. "I cussed him out."

Louis barks out a laugh. "You're actually the best." He wraps me in another sudden hug, pulling away as quickly as he came in. "Good time to celebrate, yeah?"

I beam endearingly between the two lads. "Great time to celebrate."

It's only now, after standing up for them in public for the first time, that I realise how truly grateful I am to have One Direction in my life. It's strange, yet wonderful: they matter to me and they make me happy. Months ago, I could never imagine that a boyband of all things would fuel my happiness to such an extent, but I couldn’t feel more safe and secure.

This being said about the boybanders, rather than that asshole rockstar.

Oh, how the tables have turned.

Before I have a chance to say anything further, Louis takes it upon himself to leap practically three feet into the air, landing his bottom right onto his brand new massage chair.

"Louis!" Harry scolds. "You're gonna break the thing before we even plug it in!"

Louis sasses back at him, but I can barely hear his protests because of how hard I'm laughing.

That's Louis for you — always like a bull in a china shop.

Harry walks over to the wall and plugs in the chair for the older lad. He presses a couple of buttons on the handheld remote and the chair begins to vibrate right away.

Louis groans, closing his eyes as he leans his head back. "Oh, that's good…"

I smirk, taking a sip of my beer.

In a way, I’m somewhat turned on by Louis’ satisfied moans.
As Louis soaks up the feeling of his new massage chair, Harry rounds back to me, pacing slowly around my still figure. He pauses behind me, snaking his fingertips up my shoulder blades until his palms rest just above my collar bones. I tilt my head to the right, allowing Harry's warm breaths to cascade over the left side of my neck. 

Harry smirks, exhaling against my skin. He whispers into my ear so his bandmate won’t hear. "I could give you a massage..."

My eyes widen, immediately flicking up to stare at Louis still rested comfortably in the activated massage chair with his eyes closed. I let Harry work his hands over my tense shoulders, leaning back against his torso as he does so.

"You've got a talent, Styles..." I chuckle lightly, somewhat unnerved by my friend's advances, yet still thoroughly enjoying it.

Harry smirks back, still using that deep, rough voice of his. "I'm very good with my hands..."

It's not until now that I receive a terribly distracting message from my manager.


"Shit," I hiss, because this can’t be happening now. "Lads, I have to go."

"Where you off to?" Louis looks over at us.

I sigh. "I've gotta go see my manager."

"Don’t forget to zip up your jacket," Harry reminds me, letting his hands fall from my shoulders. "The sun has got his hat on."

I can’t help but smile at Harry being his cheesy self. I send a brief wave to the two lads as I open their door, disappointed that I have to cut things so short. "I’ll see you soon."

"Come back for the party!" Louis sings.

"Party?" I laugh.

"We bought something new," Louis tells me as if it's obvious. "We have to have a party for it."

"Sounds good," I shake my head at Louis’ admirable spontaneity. One last goodbye is uttered from my lips before I step out into the crisp, clouded March weather.

"It was under contract, Scarlet," Mitch stresses. "Legally, you couldn't just up and walk away."

"That's the thing," I state plainly. "I did."

My manager continues to lecture me as I shift uncomfortably in my cold metal chair in his London
office. As it turns out, I'm in serious trouble for ditching Sam midway through our fake date. Sometimes I say too many things, but it wasn't even me who brought this one on. Honest. No matter how I try to explain my reasoning, Mitch won’t seem to understand how unprofessional and idiotic Sam was behaving. I’m genuinely put off.

"This does not look good on anyone's record," Mitch goes on without letting up. "Especially with this being your first big publicity stunt."

"Listen…” I rest my forehead between my fingertips. "I understand what I did wasn't right — I do." Mitch scoffs. "Clearly you don't, because of what just happened."

"What just happened?!" I snap, annoyed and not even caring for the answer.

"We had two paparazzi waiting at the location you were supposed to go to, on top of a specific reservation at a high-end restaurant," Mitch spits. "We had people counting on you and did you show up?"

"Neither did Samuel Kitchen, did he?" I bite back.

"That's beside the point," Mitch disregards.

"Actually, it's not, because he's half of this mess, otherwise known as the reason I left," I raise my eyebrows, eerily hearing the Louis come out in me.

"I don't care how mad Samuel made you," Mitch spits, condescending as ever. "I don't care if he insulted your own family. You do not break a set-up that's written under contract."

I roll my eyes. "I really don't care right now."

"You have to care!" Mitch scoffs yet again. "This entire business depends on you caring!"

"I don't have to do anything, Mitchell!" I feel my eyes narrow as I retaliate in a vicious tone. "It’s my life, and yeah, I'm gonna do what it takes to further my career, but for me, that doesn’t mean putting up with ignorant assholes the whole way through! If I don't like something, I'm not gonna waste my time fucking dealing with it! Simple as that!"

"You're stubborn, Scarlet!"

"I get it."

"You're stubborn and you're ignorant," Mitch stands up behind his desk with fire in his eyes. "You've always been ignorant and you need to learn to suck it up."

"You're not my bloody father, alright?" I shout.

"Yeah?" Mitch fumes. "And where is he?"

Tears well up in my eyes as I glare at my manager.

A dawning look of realisation comes over the man’s face as he clues into what he just said. He has never spoken to me like that; he knows not to. He knows the harsh effect those words have on me. Before he can utter another word, however, I stand up out of my chair and storm right out of his office.

"Scarlet-!" I hear him yell back to me. "You know I didn't mean that!"
But it's too late.
I'm already out the door.

Sometimes I wish I was heartless, so I wouldn’t have to feel this pain.
The road rocks me in my seat as my driver transports me to Louis and Harry’s flat once more. I need a tissue, but that’s the least of my concerns; any constant wiping of my eyes wouldn’t help my gushing tears one bit.
I climb the familiar steps, again.
I knock on the wooden door, again.
Harry responds and Louis is nowhere to be seen and it’s too much like the time before. I fall into Harry’s arms, only to continue with such déja vu, and he holds me close. I don’t need to say a word; there was no hiding my sick expression if I tried.

Five minutes of tears, maybe ten.
I gushed into Harry’s chest, then we lay side-by-side on his bed in silence.
I summarised everything that I went through today, then his strong arms wrapped around me and his thumbs sculpted small, soothing circles into my back.
It was only natural.

"Thank you for letting me spill all over you," I express tenderly, once I’ve cooled down. "I appreciate how I can tell you anything. That’s… really great, Harry."
"We’ve gotten along since day one," Harry huffs a laugh, his vaguely musky scent drawing me in. "Seems only right."
"Have you been drinking?" I ask him, sensing a hint of alcohol on his breath.
"A bit," Harry chuckles deeply. "While you were out, Louis was making me go shot-for-shot."
I rest my head against his chest. "You have a say, you know."
"I always do," Harry murmurs, his lips pressed to the top of my head. "Can I ask you something, Scar?"
I nestle into his tear-stained plaid shirt. "Yeah."

"Your parents… I've never really heard you talk about them. Even when the lads and I make time to call or message or visit our families, it seems you always have something else to do," Harry says, all very carefully, as to not tread on broken ground. "What happened? Are they-…?" he fades off, not wanting to say it.

"They're not dead, if that's what you're wondering. They’re still in Cheshire, it's just-…" I sigh, numb to the truth that only Mitch and my bandmates know. "I'm sorry, Harry, I don't really want to get into it right now. As far as I'm concerned, I don't have a family."

Harry pulls away to look at me, then he gently kisses my forehead. "You have us," he tells me. "We say this to our fans, but we mean it with you, too — we're your family."

"Thank you," I pull him close and hug him tight.

"Anytime," he cuddles me in return. To rest with him is a sedative and he’s an expert. "You know, what you did today… most celebrities under contract would never have the balls to do that… to stand up for themselves and their friends like that. Then, even after the shit with Sam, to your own manager?" Harry commends me, seemingly impressed. "You're different, Scarlet."

I shift my head from his chest to his pillow, smiling at him softly. "I hope so."

Harry’s eyes paint over my face, taking in all of my features, and for once it doesn’t make me feel self-conscious in the slightest. He's here and he’s warm. His green eyes are like windows, lending me the privilege to read his thoughts, feel his emotions. My fists cling to his flannel shirt, though his touch causes my grip to loosen as he pets my hair soothingly with slow, soft strokes.

"At least the fans have something to pick apart during the break," I suppose, despite still being a fraction unsure. "Even though neither of us made it to the paps, we still managed a few fan selfies, right?"

"It’s more personal…” offers Harry, for one. He shrugs, readjusting our relaxed embrace. "I get what your manager was trying to do. High-quality pap photos sell more, but this way seems a little more authentic… undercover-like."

"Right," I brush off the matter, gradually smirking. "Not like our date."

"Biggest sham of a date I’ve ever been on," Harry teases with a grin, making me laugh any remainder of my tears away.

"Hey…” a soft voice comes from the doorway. "Are you okay?"

I pull away from Harry only slightly, giving Louis a gentle smile as he comes over to sit on the bed next to us. "I'm alright."

"What happened?" Louis soothes, noticing my puffy eyes.

"Nothing much," I tell him, huffing a bitter laugh. "Only, my manager’s just as much of an asshole as Sam."

"Shit…” Louis rests his hand on my leg as Harry rests against my back.

"It’s okay, I’m all cried out," I smile, shaking my head. "I’m ready to party."
"Good to hear," Louis gives my thigh a comforting squeeze. "Niall just got here, by the way, so anytime you kids wanna come down…"

"I'm only a year younger than you, Louis," I can’t help but smirk.

"Mentally?" Louis raises a brow, hoping to lighten the mood.

"Mentally, you're a toddler," I give off a chuckle, sitting up on Harry's bed. I turn to the younger lad. "Let's go downstairs. I really need a drink."

The three of us round back through the upstairs and follow Louis down the staircase. I sort out my tear stains in a foyer mirror, then we find Niall in the kitchen, sorting through the fridge.

"Massage chair party!" Niall bellows, pulling out a pair of unopened wine bottles from the fridge. He sets the bottles on the counter to rummage through the cabinets for some wine glasses. "How are ya, Scar?"

"I've been worse," I shrug with a smile, walking over to hug the blonde as a brief hello.

"Let's get y'a drink, darlin'," Niall warmly hugs me back, opting to pour me the first glass of wine. "Looks like ya need it."

"Thanks, Niall," I chuckle, gratefully accepting the drink from the lad.

"Beer me, Lou," Harry follows Louis in his stride to the fridge.

The older lad rifles through the cold shelves and tosses Harry a beer, then he grabs one for himself while he's at it. They crack their bottles open, share a cheers and take a drink.

"So, this is a tradition, now?" I assume, taking a sip from my own glass. "Someone drinks, then someone else drinks?"

"That's usually how it goes, yeah," Louis nods, sarcasm dripping from his cheeky tone.

"No, I mean-" I cut myself off, unable to hold in my charmed laugh. "Harry’s drinking whenever you’re drinking."

"Shot-for-shot!" Harry cheers his bottle against Louis’ and they drink again.

"Yeah, but that screws up my shot-for-shot rule with Harry," I take another sip of my wine in return.

"Why?"

"Because now, Harry is downing just as many drinks as Louis."

"So?"

"So, whenever Harry drinks, I’m obliged to drink, too."

"So?"

"So, when it comes down to it, all three of us are drinking as much as Louis."

"When you put it that way…” Harry trails off, blushing in realisation.

Niall and Louis share a look: smug and amused.
"You two have got roughly the same tolerance, haven’t you?" Louis estimates, pointing the neck of his bottle between Harry and me. We share a glance and nod, making Louis smirk. "Lightweights."

Niall cracks up, snickering to himself. "So, instead of Harry being the only one gettin’ entirely plastered, you’ll be gettin’ just as plastered, too."

"That’s something to look forward to…” I tease, making the lads chuckle in agreement. "Are you trying to get me indirectly wasted, Louis?"

"I’m not the only one, here," Louis raises his eyebrows, firmly defending his frivolous point. "Harry’s the other half of our shot-for-shot rule, don’t forget."

"Has it been renamed?" Harry asks Louis out of curiosity. "Is it the drink-for-drink rule now?"

"No," says Niall. "It’s always shot-for-shot."

I shake my head. "Drink-for-drink."

"Does it matter?" Louis gives off a raspy laugh, sending the lot of us a mischievous wink. "Either way, tonight everyone’s getting fucked."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, voting and all of your lovely comments :)  

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There hasn’t been a moment where I haven’t had a beer in my hand.

Harry and I stick with our drink-for-drink rule, even though I probably should have cut that umbilical cord after my fourth beer. Louis continues to insist that Harry should drink up and have another, even though he knows we’re both lightweights. Nonetheless, Harry naturally obliges because — well, it’s Louis.

There are no less than thirty people scattered around Harry and Louis’ flat as we party. Most of the faces I don’t recognise, other than the three boybanders in my midst. Everyone here is supposedly a personal friend of the lads, though I doubt any of them are as close-knit as the tour crew — tonight must be a downstairs-only party for a reason.

Louis is elsewhere, though he’s constantly on my mind. He’s wearing a low-cut black t-shirt and slim black jeans. His hair is shaggy and he’s noticeably grown out his scruff within the past few days. It’s a shame we can’t make out in front of the randoms.

We can flirt, we can dance, we can drink, but we can’t make out.

Shame.

At least, aside from my absolute toilet of a day, my current situation isn’t so terrible: it’s nice to have
a break from all of Louis’ cheeky comments and shameless advances I’ve grown so used to. Outside of casually flirting and occasionally hooking up, Louis and I have become quite good friends and now is as great a time as ever to let that flow.

It’s still a shame that we can’t make out.

The lads have set a twenty minute timer on the massage chair for the night, rotating people through the machine so everyone has a chance to try it out. Harry and I are among the few who have yet to sit in it. As I’m returning from the toilet, I catch the tall lad raising his eyebrows at me from across his flat, still holding true to his proposal of a massage from him, rather than the chair.

Harry crosses the room, weaving a line through his flat guests. I know exactly what he’s thinking.

I smirk as he nears me. "Not a chance."

"What?" Harry plays coy; a similar smirk in his eyes. "I was just gonna say… I can't wait to sit in our new chair, then not have time to use it!"

"Drink up, Styles, your jokes get better when you're drunk," I raise my glass to Harry, sending a number of chuckles to ripple throughout the group of people around us.

"See? Why is that?" Harry sighs. "Whenever I come up with a joke, I think it’s pretty good, but it usually turns out to be an eye-roller."

"Because you’re clever," I tell him. "When you’re not meaning to make a joke, you’re actually hilarious."

"Thanks a lot," Harry chuckles.

"*Times up!*" a dark-haired lad calls as he climbs out of the massage chair. "Who's next?"

"Scar, go next," Harry nudges me.

"Yeah, Scar, go next," Niall echoes from his seat on the couch.

"I'm getting a weird sense of déja vu right now…" I tease, earning the same sort of reaction as one of Harry’s own jokes. "Alright, I’ll have a go."

I climb into the large, black leather massage chair. I search around the sides of the chair for the remote control, but Harry manages to find it first.

"Here’s a run-down," Harry kneels beside me, showing me the elaborate device. "These are your controls. These buttons at the top are for *pzish*-positioning."

I smirk, hearing his syllables slur. "For what?"

"I’m drunk," Harry modestly grins. "The buttons down here are for speed and, erm…"

I watch as Harry pauses, a frown creasing between his brows.

"Then you have different modes," he randomly continues. "The-"
"Harry," I cut him off, making his wide, glassy eyes focus on mine. "We’re both a bit more-than-tipsy… and there’s way too much explaining going on when instead there could be massaging."

"Oh…” Harry pauses, sensing his lack of intuition. Though, rather than handing me the remote, he suggests something else. "How about we compromise?"

"With what?"

"Well, I was going to give you a massage-"

"Oh yeah, that stupid massage of yours…"

"-and you want to use the chair," Harry states, seemingly not hearing my remark. "So, how about we compromise? I’ll control the chair while you lay back and enjoy. Just, set your drink in its holder." Harry looks at me. We read one another’s expressions and he smirks. "It’s kind of like you agreeing on that stupid massage of mine, anyways."

I release a chuckle, definitely not blushing from such exposure. "Win-win situation."

"Exactly." Harry activates the chair: it starts vibrating and the mechanisms inside begin kneading along my spine.

I gasp. "Wow, warn me."

"Just tell me what to do."

"Okay-" I pause, attempting to direct him. "A little higher, maybe." Harry guides my massage, sending the mechanisms higher up my spine. "Right there?"

"No, wait… lower," I change my mind almost immediately. The kneading around my shoulder blades feels incredible, but a little lower would be perfect.

"Oh, I know…” Harry fiddles with the small device in his hands. "There, how’s that?"

The mechanisms in the chair lower and the vibrations reach the spot where my spine curves to meet my arse. I have to resist moaning out loud; the kneading of the chair sends me into a sensual daze.

"Wow," I close my eyes, resting my head back. "That's really good."

"Do you want it a bit harder?" Harry asks lowly.

"Fuck," I chuckle. "I don't even care. It's so good already."

Harry taps around a few of the buttons. "Kay, I'm gonna go a bit faster…"

"If I wasn't watchin' you two, I'd think ye's were havin' sex," Niall suddenly interrupts us, unintentionally sending his friends on the couch into a fit of laughter.

I instinctively roll my eyes at the lad. I feel my burning blush, though I don’t care much if it shows. Meanwhile, Harry simply smiles through the predicament, visibly just as embarrassed as I am.

The doorbell chimes.

"Harry — doorbell!" Louis' voice shouts across the flat. It sounds like he’s all the way in the kitchen, not even surprisingly. You could be within a kilometre’s radius and still be able to hear his infamous
Harry slowly turns to Niall. "Whose flat is this?"

"Yours?" Niall cocks his head in confusion.

Harry rises, walking towards the foyer. "I’ll get it."

The lot of us share a few looks, somewhat tripped out by Harry’s ambivalence.

"What’s he on?" Niall asks.

I shake my head. "We’re pretty drunk, is what he’s on."

"We?" Niall raises a brow.

"Shot-for-shot," I explain.

"Ah, drink-for-drink," Niall winks, because we had it reversed when it was first mentioned. "Y’know, they’ve only had the place a few months, Louis and Harry. Probably only stayed here a few nights, with all the touring we’ve done. I wouldn’t be surprised if he did forget it’s his rental."

An ill sensation settles in the pit of my stomach, realising this is the only place I know of Louis and Harry’s. I try to understand how this flat can feel familiar to me, yet not to Harry, but I can’t. "I’m sure he knows his own place, Niall."

"I dunno," Niall chuckles, raising his brows. "It gets pretty crazy out there. We have our houses, but with our flats and hotels, we’re constantly moving — we have been for years."

I can only distantly hum in response, the kneading against the base of my spine dulling in pulse, before Harry smoothly returns to our group with four simple words:

"Look who I found."

Harry appears with his arm around a tall, slim girl who’s not much shorter than himself. Her mess of pink hair is tied up in a loose ponytail which falls just above her shoulders. She’s fit and stylish in a mod-punk sort of fashion, and her silver nose ring compliments the array of mismatched piercings that covers both of her ears.

Apparently, the girl already knows Niall, as they greet each other enthusiastically. She introduces herself to the rest of the group as Naomi, going around the circle briefly to learn everyone else’s names. When she gets to me, I send her a wave and a smile, despite staying seated.

"I’m Scarlet. I would get up and say hi, but- you know," I laugh, gesturing to the massage chair I’m sat in.

"Totally understandable," Naomi chuckles, "as long as I get to try that thing out after you! Is anyone going next?"

The small group, including Harry, murmurs a mutual no.

"Sweet!" Naomi cheers. "Whenever you’re done."

I give off a shrug, sharing a momentary glance with Harry. "Actually, I can finish now if you wanna climb in?"
The girl beams. "Hell yeah."

We change positions and Naomi gets settled in a matter of seconds, easily adapting with how to use the remote.

"So, Harry-" Niall casually voices to his bandmate, "did you actually forget this was your flat?"

Harry’s dimples give him away before he can even admit it. "Yeah, I did."

"Wow," I huff.

"Erm- anyway, Naomi’s here!" Harry announces to the group in the lounge. "Would anyone like another round of drinks?"

A few of us accept. I’m obliged to, since Harry's grabbing one for himself, too. The lad grins as he slips his way though his party guests, returning in no time with refills for everyone. He sits right next to me once we all have our drinks sorted.

There are a few people loitering in the foyer. A group around the size of ours is hovering in the kitchen with Louis, plus some other randoms are scattered in between. The music is radiating off the walls, bleeding through pieces of conversations I can only catch fragments of. It's an older pop-punk song that's playing — Louis' choice for sure — and if I listen close enough I can just hear the gorgeous bastard's voice yelling from all the way in the kitchen. For a second, I think maybe it's just me and I'm only fantasising the sounds because of how drunk I've become. Then, I shake my head and remember that it's Louis I'm hearing, and there's never a time where he's not as loud as ever.

"Hey, Naomi…?" Niall voices out of the blue, raising his empty beer to the light. "Can ye get me another bottle?"

Naomi raises her hands in protest, sat comfortably in the massage chair. "Mate, you just had your chance with Harry."

Niall chuckles. "C’m’on, darlin’…"

"No!" Naomi can’t help but chuckle in return. "Get it yourself!"

"If I said please, maybe would ya get me a bottle…?" Niall attempts to convince her with his charm.

The girl rolls her eyes, unable to help but smirk. "I swear, Horan, if you ask me one more time I'm gonna come over there and spank you."

"Naomi…?"

"What?"

"When ya come over here to spank me, can ya bring me another bottle?"

Laughter echoes around the lounge, all due to Niall’s cheeky wit. Even Naomi has to commend him on that one — she actually gets up to go fetch that drink for him, peering around the group and pointing everyone in the face before she leaves: "Nobody steal my seat or I'll make chop salad out of your special parts."

As Naomi spins around and heads to the kitchen, I lean into Harry’s side, speaking in a whisper. "Who’s the girl?"

"Naomi," Harry murmurs back to me. "We’ve known her for ages. We met her through The X
Factor, years ago."

I focus in thought. "She was on The X Factor?"

"Kind of..." Harry chuckles, still keeping his voice low. "She made it to bootcamp, but no further than that. Back then, Niall was crazy popular. He always had a guitar on him and was surrounded by nearly all of the contestants every single day." Harry smiles, shaking his head. His dimples poke into his cheeks. "Naomi was always there and they became really good friends. Like, they were together more often than not and she was at all the parties. She was eliminated the same day One Direction was formed, but since then, they've always kept in touch and we've all become pretty good friends."

"That's the cutest story ever," I bump into Harry playfully, earning a cheeky shove back. "So, are any of you, like... you know... involved?" I ask in an undertone, unsure if I even want to know at this point, but he responds right away.

"No, not with Naomi," Harry laughs in a whisper. He takes a sip of his beer, unknowingly raising my security with his simple answer. "I've always thought she and Niall might have a thing. I dunno, maybe it's just me..."

"Really? I wouldn't have guessed!" I smirk at the sight of Naomi bringing Niall a newly opened bottle of beer, playfully nagging at him as she sits back in the massage chair.

"Like I said, maybe it's just me..." Harry chuckles deeply, looking at me. "Anyway, you drunk yet?"

I send him an obvious expression, raising my brows. "You would know, Harry."

As if he would forget that we have the same tolerance. I lick my lips, still staring at him.

"Quite tipsy then, huh?" he winks, hinting at his mutual tipsiness. He clinks his bottle against my own. "Finish up and I'll get you another."

Normally, I would protest. However, it's been a whirlwind of a day and all I want to do is get shit-faced and forget every single bit of it. Or, at least, have one night where I can shut out the world and simply focus on the lads and alcohol and music and partying and-

"Yeah, I'll have another beer," I raise my own bottle to my lips, still a third full, and chug it down my throat. I allow my dizziness to numb me until I can barely feel it as the final drops trickle past my tongue. I lower the empty bottle, handing it to Harry. "Thank you."

Harry stares at me in humoured disbelief. "Thought I'd have to convince you!"

"Not today," I huff, chuckling bitterly. I somehow find myself half-watching and half-spacing-out as Harry downs the rest of his own drink.

The younger lad stands up with our two empty bottles in a single grasp. Gently, he takes one of my hands in his other. "Come with me."

A dazzling rush washes over me as Harry helps lift me out of my seat. I feel floaty and dazed and I accidentally lean on him for support. Harry doesn't seem to mind; he leads me through his semi-crowded flat with his arm securely around my shoulders.

We pass by countless people, all drinking and socialising and having a laugh. The volume steadily rises as we stroll through his flat, resulting in a full blast of chatter once we enter the kitchen.

We spot Louis right away. He’s surrounded by a large group of about eight or nine people, all
packed into his sizeable kitchen space, chatting and laughing and- doing shots?

"Louis!" Harry chides as we near the lad.

"Harry!" Louis sets his large bottle of alcohol on the kitchen counter, pushing past a few people to greet us with hugs. "Hey, Scar!"

"Hey, Lou!" I sing, hugging him back.

"Lou, y' didn't tell us you were doing shots," Harry protests once I pull away from Louis. He sounds a touch disappointed.

"Oh, fuck!" Louis cranes his head back, squeezing his eyes shut. "I completely forgot about our shot-for-shot rule!"

I chuckle. "How?"

"I don’t know!" Louis stresses.

Harry fondly shakes his head. "Louis…"

"It’s okay!" Louis beams, showing off a handsome set of straight teeth. "How many have y’ had?"

"Five beers each, going for our sixth," Harry tells him carefully, "but I’m not doing shots."

I place a hand on Harry’s chest, casually gazing up at him. "We can do two shots and be done with it…” I suggest lightly, my words positively flowing from my lips. "Those are the rules, after all…”

"Listen to the pretty girl, Harry…” Louis smirks straight at me. "She sounds like she knows a thing or two."

A ripple of electricity floods through my body, sending sparks to ignite my very core. Louis looks just as irresistible as he did when the party started, if not more so. It’s as if he knows one of my weaknesses is when he dresses in all black, because I’m starting to believe he did that on purpose tonight.

I give Louis a look and he stares right back at me, blue eyes shimmering darkly. The kitchen lights reflect bright halos around his tipsy, dilated pupils. A smirk curves into the corner of his mouth, reminding me just how much I want to kiss along that scruff of his and run my fingers through his feathered, shaggy hair.

Unable to do much with his guests surrounding us, Louis simply sends me a wink. My breath catches in my lungs as he turns his gaze to Harry instead. "So, I’ve had five beers and one shot. If you both take two shots as I take my shot right now, we’ll all be even."

"Two shots?" Harry emphasises. "Lou, I barely wanted one."

I smirk up at Harry and pinch his side. "He’s trying to get you drunk."

Curiously, Harry peers down at me, a hint of a smirk tracing his full lips. "Maybe he’s trying to get you drunk."

I laugh out loud, realising the underlying truth of the situation. "Louis, you’re trying to get everyone drunk! You’re feeding everyone- what is that?"

Louis sends a glance to his nearly-empty bottle of booze. "I don’t even know."
"Exactly!" I chuckle, making Louis bark out a hearty laugh, along with a number of others in the kitchen.

"Hey, did you know-?" a tall girl with blonde hair pipes up above the group. "People who laugh at your jokes are more likely to like you and want to have sex with you."

"Is that true?" I inquire keenly, smiling over at her.

"Totally," the blonde girl gives me a chuckle. "I read it online, it has to be true."

Louis snatches his bottle of alcohol from the counter. Standing tall, he yells out to the crowd: "Everyone wants to have sex with me!"

A roar of cheers floods through the entire flat, echoing all the way to the lounge and back. Louis resumes his work, keeping himself busy by lining up shot glasses and pouring drinks for everyone who asks. Once the bottle has emptied, Louis turns around with two shots in hand, handing one to Harry first, despite his temperate protests.

"Everyone’s getting fucked…" Harry mutters Louis’ previous words under his breath. He tries to hide his smile, yet his dimples peek through his cheeks, illuminated by his soft blush.

"That's what I said…” Louis smirks at Harry just the same, then he hands me a shot of my own. "To time off," Louis dictates to the group, raising his own shot in the air, "to good friends and great parties."

I lift my shot glass in unison, tossing back the liquid in one smooth swig along with everyone else. The harsh burn makes its way down my throat, lighting my torso on fire as it fills my stomach. Harry seems to be taking it just as well as I am, displaying a sour look on his face as he sets his tiny glass back on the counter.

My head spins.

Harry was so nice to me today. He let me cry into his chest and blather on about nothing. Well, not entirely nothing, but regardless, he didn't need to do that. I feel so annoying… and annoyed… and sick to my stomach, trying not to think about how my manager treated me today with the awful things he said.

I don’t know what will happen tomorrow. I know less what will happen the day after that. I'm in deep and I know it and I can't help but dwell. I take a deep breath, attempting to calm myself among the blur of the active room, but it’s no use.

Louis converses with a pair of lads, claiming how he's growing his stubble out more than he ever has before. Normally, I would step in and say something. However, if I talked to Louis about his stubble in a state like this, I seriously doubt I could resist him a single second longer.

One of Louis' friends punches him lightly over his bicep. "You look like Ryan Gosling's older brother that beats the shit out of him."

"Or Ryan Gosling's prison mate that pounds the shit out of him," the other lad riles up his mate, sending both of them to laugh until they're red in the face. I can't help but chuckle silently at the lads and Louis, as he snaps back at them hilariously, only making them laugh even harder.

I'm drunk.

My vision trails back to Harry, still stood next to me. He seems to be fading out in other people's
conversations, though he's not really taking part. Without even having to ask, I know he's on the same inebriated level as I am. It's interesting, that little connection we have. It makes me feel safe, knowing that Harry is viewing our world through the same foggy lens.

My tear stains have since dried from his shirt, erasing any evidence of our heart-to-heart mere hours ago, but the emotions are still there. His plaid flannel is rolled up over his forearms, exposing the few tattoos that are scattered over his wrists. The inked sketches are light and somehow thoughtful. A large anchor is settled at the base of his wrist, surrounded by a lock and a key and some other complementing etched doodles. His visible tattoos are quite similar to Louis', in a sense. I can't deny that they're alike in many ways.

Harry.

It feels strange saying this, but he truly is very pretty. His hair is pushed back past his ears, exposing his firm jaw line, cutting and contrasting away from his plump, soft lips. His shirt is buttoned fairly low, but only low enough to see the very tips of his sparrow wings stretching upwards to grace his thick collar bones.

And his legs.

He’s got lovely, lean thighs and I can barely tell if his dark jeans are actually being worn by him or if they're painted on, they're so tight. And there goes that little voice in the back of my head, reminding me that my favourite boys are the tall ones with long legs and small bums. And there goes that other voice telling myself to shut the hell up because it's literally Harry we're talking about here.

Now, he's looking at me.

And he's saying my name.

But- so is Louis.

Louis is calling my name.

"Sorry- what?" I give my head a disoriented shake, gazing back and forth between the two boybanders. My heart thuds in my chest as they simply stare.

"Bit drunk, are we?" Louis laughs, eyes crinkling at the sides. Harry goes to say something, yet Louis heads him off. "Come take your second shots — both of you — before I drink them myself!"

"Thanks, Lou," I chuckle, floating over to Louis as he pours our final drinks. My face feels hot, but I'm unsure whether it's because I'm drunk or because of how much I'm bloody blushing. Either way, I'm around two of my favourite people and I'm happy and that's all that matters.

Harry and I tap our shot glasses together, both smirking at how neither one of us protested this time. We toss them back and drink their contents and slam them on the counter, all in one quick breath.

Louis smiles at Harry and me, clearing away our shot glasses. "That should get you loosened up."

"I think I was loosened up two drinks ago," I laugh and Harry chuckles in agreement.

"Good," Louis smirks, licking his lips, "maybe you can help Harold on the dance floor."

I grin, warming up to the older lad. "Why don’t you help us out on the dance floor?"

Louis chuckles, lowering his voice just for me. "I’ve got some friends here I haven’t seen for ages. I
still wanna catch up with a few and I think I’m still playing bartender."

I exhale, aiming not to appear as let down as I feel. I nod, forging a smile. "Have fun with your friends."

Louis takes my hand in his, giving me a light squeeze, before growing involved in yet another spirited conversation with half of the kitchen group.

Among a dazed blur, Harry nears me slowly, clearly on the same level as I am. He clears his throat: gravelly and deep. "You’re a bit fucked, yeah?"

I shrug, ultimately breaking my gaze from Louis to respond to Harry. "So are you."

The younger lad nods, green eyes steady and solid as he slides a hand past my waist. I shiver as he lowers his cheek to mine, lips grazing my ear as he whispers:

"Come dance with me."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, voting and all of your lovely comments :) 

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Harry leads me out of the kitchen — past Louis, past Louis’ friends, past nameless faces and endless chatter — until we reach the lounge, where we find Niall and the pink-haired Naomi drinking amongst a large crowd of people, just as they were before. Except this time, rather than sitting and drinking, most of them are standing around conversing and moving to the music.

Other than one fellow who’s practically passed out in the black leather massage chair with his drink still in hand, but that was expected.

“Tunes!” Niall nods us over to himself and Naomi, as the classic *Hotel California* by the Eagles pumps through Harry and Louis’ impressive sound system.

I smile up at Harry as we near his bandmate. "You’ve been playing good music all night."

Harry smiles down at me. "Have I?"

“*Come dance with us!*” Naomi grins, pulling both myself and Harry towards herself and Niall.

I laugh, still only swaying to the groove of the music. "I can’t dance."

"How can y’ not dance?" Niall wonders. "Y’ look great on stage."

I shrug aimlessly. "Yeah, well, that’s on stage."
“I did the tango with a girl who didn’t know how to dance once,” Harry says to us all a bit loudly. I can tell he’s leading up to another one of his corny jokes. I watch him intently with a huge smile plastered over my face. “She didn’t know how to follow. I did a left turn while she did a right. I never saw her again.”

The three of us burst out laughing, but only at how horribly cheesy Harry’s joke was.

“Terrible!” Niall laughs out loud, taking a swig of his beer. “Terrible, mate, but so damn funny!”

"It’s not mine," Harry beams, shaking his head at Niall. He then lowers his gaze to mine. “If you dunno how to dance, Scar, then why’d you say you’d dance with me?”

“You’re different,” I casually claim, mirroring what he said to me earlier today.

Harry stares down at me, supposedly mulling over his thoughts. His brow creases in the centre as he brings his lower lip into his mouth. I’ve never seen such dark eyes with so much light in them. “I’m teaching you how to dance,” he plainly states.

Before I have a chance to respond, Harry is focused on his phone in his hands. He fiddles with his sound system controls and turns up the bass. The previous song fades as a slower, funkier and — I swallow a lump down my throat — sexier beat floods through the numerous speakers that surround the room.

The entire party makes suggestive cheers and catcalls as they hear the classic groove of Let’s Get It On by Marvin Gaye. I crack up laughing, needing to focus on holding it in because I’m almost about to piss myself.

Harry tucks his phone back into his pocket, smirking as he holds a hand out to me. “C’mere.”

I positively beam, sending a glance to Niall and Naomi, both dancing excessively seductive for a laugh. Then, I look back to Harry himself, still with that expectant look all over his face.

“Go on, then, Scar!” Niall boasts. He nudges me in Harry’s direction, sensing my hesitation.

I smirk, having no choice but to accept Harry’s hand. My voice comes out in an uncertain waver. "I’m only doing this because Niall said so."

Harry grins handsomely. His hands are large and he pulls me in. "I’ll believe that."

I shake my head, smiling to myself. "Don’t..." I chuckle silently. "It’s horse shit."

I place my hands over Harry’s chest.

I try not to think of Louis, but he’s there.

Harry places his hands on my waist.

I’ve never danced with Louis before.

“Go t’ the beat,” Harry gently slurs, his face a few inches above mine. “Y’ can lean on me if y’ want.”

I smile up at Harry’s visage. Our eyes remain locked as we move to the intimate rhythm of the music. I can feel how drunk I’ve become; my vision trailing as my eyes try to focus on the words that flow from his lips. I feel like I’m bathing in the music, the sexual song is putting me in such a trance.
“Just move your feet like mine… and your hips…” Harry trails off, smoothly moving along with me.
“*There you go...*”

I follow Harry’s instructions, resting against his chest and torso. “Am I doing okay?”

“*Very okay...*” Harry murmurs so quietly, in such a deep tone, that I can barely hear his praise.

We move against each other without a sound. There’s no need to say anything further, because there’s nothing more to be said. The music and our movements alone are enough to send us both into a daze. We feel each other sway to the beat and we’re drunk and nothing else matters.

Until I get a tap on my shoulder.

I turn my head, not moving away from Harry just yet.

I’m not sure who I expected, but I wasn’t expecting Naomi.

“Have some,” the pink-haired girl grins, holding out a small silver flask for me to take as she clings onto the front of Niall’s t-shirt.

I look up at Harry, still holding true to our deal. "Only if Harry has some."

Naomi spiritedly agrees and Harry wordlessly accepts the flask from her. He raises the metal canister to his lips — green eyes never leaving mine as he holds our gaze — and takes a deep swig of the alcohol within.

“Fuck…” I mouth, not even sure if any sound left my lips.

“Shot f’ shot…” Harry slowly drags the mouth of the flask across my lower lip.

I nod, allowing him to tilt the canister upwards, letting him practically feed me a shot as I carefully sip the harsh liquid. I soon hum in protest, letting Harry know to release the flask from my lips, and he does, kindly handing Naomi back her flask.

“Thanks s’much, Naomi,” I tell her. "You’re cool.”

“No worries,” the colourful girl smiles back at me. Her eyes flutter closed as she dances along with Niall.

The song pulses in slow, sensual beats, seemingly flowing in half-time.

I’m so distracted. I’m so satisfied to be where I am right now with such wonderful company. I don’t care if we’re being watched or questioned or judged. I don’t care if it’s true that he’s not into older women. I’m older and content.

Somehow, movement soon surrounds us and there are more shot glasses being passed around the lounge, yet Louis is nowhere to be seen.

And I can’t even think of doing more shots in a state like this.

I can’t even think about Louis when I’m pressed against sweet, sexy and familiar like this.
The vintage funk song soon ends, allowing my rhythm to slow against Harry’s figure. Another tune subsequently fades through the speakers, kicking in with Robert Plant’s crystal clear rasp of a voice — gorgeously striking and rousingly demanding — paired with an equally as classic and in-your-face guitar riff.

Harry suddenly moans. “Fucking love this song.”

“Love it so much y’ have t’ moan at it?” I smirk, feeling my lips numb in my drunk state.

Harry simply chuckles among his light blush. He nods his head languidly and I know he’s just as out of it as I am.


“Lads is right. They’re all babes,” Naomi grins, swaying to the groove of the song. “No question. I’d kiss them.”

“Same,” I chuckle, watching as Naomi raises her hands in the air. She’s a blur and I need to rest my head on Harry’s chest for support.

“You’d kiss them?” Harry’s raspy voice echoes deeply throughout his chest, making me pull away to nod at him with a slow smirk. The younger lad licks his lips. “Would you kiss me?”

If my body wasn’t numb already, it is now. My entire heart bursts from my chest, my brain fires off a million explosions all at once and I don’t think I can breathe. Really, I don’t think I can breathe.

My eyes are wide as I stare up at Harry in disbelief.

But I say: “Yes.”

Or, maybe it was a whisper.

I’m so drunk, it’s a task only to focus on my vision or my speech. It’s been an absolute shit hole of a day — a roller coaster of expectation and disappointment — and it’s all resulted to this. No matter how my brain attempts to wire and re-wire itself, it all amounts to one burning desire:

I would totally and completely kiss Harry right now.

God, that’s fucking weird, but I want it.

“Let’s go t’ my room…” Harry gently hooks a finger beneath my chin, tilting my head upwards to look at me. He caresses my chin with his thumb, smiling down at my expression with fond, glazed, sleep-ridden eyes.

We say goodnight to Niall and Naomi.

Niall seems bewildered at the very least, though he still manages to tease Harry and me as we leave, laughing out a comical: “Ya got a catch, Styles! Better treat ‘er right!”

Naomi, on the other hand, sends Harry a stern expression. "You, be nice to her."
Niall laughs knowingly, beaming ahead at the girl in his arms. "Harry’s the nicest person in the world."

We turn our backs to the pair with uncontrollable grins, weaving our way through the party, towards the staircase. We take our first few steps upstairs, then Harry slips my hand into his, not caring who sees us. Which isn’t the best idea in the world. It shouldn’t have been an idea at all, considering the amount of people here tonight. We’re only supposed to be friends and that matters — it matters quite a bit — but it also doesn’t matter at all, because we’re drunk and we’re bound to make thousands of mistakes right now, so we could honestly care less.

Thankful that this is a downstairs-only party, Harry and I pad up the empty staircase leading to his second floor corridor. The noise considerably dims as we rise, although a steady pulse of distant music can still be heard, muffled through the floor below us.

“Go left,” Harry directs me once we reach the top.

“I know where your room is, Harry,” I chuckle, distracted by how his large hand completely engulfs mine. We guide each other down the corridor, then I pull him through his doorway and into his bedroom.

Without further wait, Harry presses me back into his door, biting his slack lip as it shuts behind us. Resting his forehead against mine, he trails a hand up the side of my waist. "We’re in here again."

I loop my fingers in his belt, drawing his hips closer. "We’re alone again."

Harry’s hot breath radiates over my mouth. "You said yes."

"Yeah," I breathe, staring down at his lips and nothing else.

"You said you’d kiss me," Harry clarifies, a murmured slur.

Wordlessly, I nod.

His face is a blur as it nears mine, but I bring my lips to his neck instead, making him moan out loud — a breathless: "Oh my god."

I kiss along the side of his neck, smiling into his sweet skin, but before I can go any further, Harry takes a step back.

“You’re staying the night, yeah?” he slurs hopefully.

"'Course," I smirk up at him.

“Kay- j’st a sec,” Harry drunkenly moves to the lamp on his bedside table, switching it on and illuminating his room in a soft glow. He opens and closes a few of his drawers before he finds what he’s looking for, then he walks back over to where I remain stood. “Here,” he holds out one of his own tank tops and a fresh pair of his grey boxer shorts for me to take, both neatly folded in his hands. “You’ll be comfy.”

“Thank you, Harry,” I smile up at the younger lad, accepting his clothing. Younger, I realise. Two years isn’t much of a difference, but it’s an intriguing one, I’ll admit that.

“Let’s change,” Harry returns my endeared smile. “I won’t look, I promise.”

I can’t help but sigh, biting my lip to stifle my sickly-sweet, shit-eating grin. I’m so damn fond over
my so-called-friend, it’s disgusting. Despite being one of the most famous people in the entire world, Harry has become such a familiarity to me, simply existing in my life as his real self. Since we’ve known each other both in and out of the spotlight, we’ve gradually grown closer, and his fame has become a trait that rarely seems to often register. Because it’s not a boybander I’m dealing with anymore, nor a popular celebrity — it’s him.

I want him.

So, I chuckle and say: "Okay."

My lips are numb from our previous shots. I’m light-headed and tickled pink from being so drunk, but simultaneously, if I were to go to the toilet right now, I believe I’d end up passing out in there for the night.

Upon agreement, Harry and I turn our backs to each other and strip off our clothes, tossing them to the floor between us. Some stumbles can be heard from his side of the room, along with a few of my own as I drunkenly slip my legs into his boxers, but we manage. Once I pull Harry’s tank top over myself, I can’t help but giggle at his entire outfit fitting a bit loose, though I wouldn’t dream of complaining.

“Are y’ done?” I ask aloud once I’m fully clothed.

“Yeah, are you?” Harry questions back.

“Yeah,” I turn around and my breath catches in my throat.

Harry is simply dressed in a loose, black Pink Floyd t-shirt from the *Dark Side of the Moon* album, prism and all. His legs are bare, save for a pair of tight-fitting boxer-briefs, and I really didn’t expect to be presented with so much skin so soon.

Harry chuckles at how I’m looking at him, yet I can tell that he’s checking me out in the exact same way, for whatever reason. It’s not like I’m wearing his underwear or anything.

Then, he yawns.

Then, I yawn right after him because that sort of thing is bloody addictive.

We near each other, automatically coming to rest in a hug. I settle against his chest and he rests his chin on top of my head. As if he couldn't get any sweeter, he gazes down at me without a further thought to kiss softly over my temple.

“*Come t’ bed,*” Harry whispers in his deepest, huskiest voice.

Constant pulsing ripples shiver throughout my entire body.

I never thought I’d be hearing *that* from him.

We migrate over to his bed, pulling down his covers before climbing in right away. Harry’s soft smile doesn’t falter as we tuck his blankets over our bodies. It feels so familiar, being here with him like this, it’s almost scary. To think, just a few hours ago I was in the exact same position with the exact same person. Although, then, I was bawling my eyes out into his fully-clothed chest and we were stretched out atop his bed covers. Now, we’re tucked well under his sheets and I’m way less sad and far more wasted.

And I’m wearing his underclothes.
And his bare skin is touching mine.

I release a deep sigh of pure comfort, resting an arm over Harry’s waist and cuddling up against him. We lie on our sides, facing each other, as Harry snuggles up impossibly closer to me.

He raises a hand to my forehead, brushing a few loose strands of hair out of my eyes to tuck them behind my ear. He smiles at me contently, endlessly looking back and forth between my eyes and my lips, but even I can see that he’s having trouble keeping his eyes open.

“Maybe we should kiss a little…” Harry sleepily wets his lips.

“Mhmm,” I agree, closing my eyes, smiling even more as I slide my legs between his. “Don’t fall asleep…”

“You don’t fall asleep…” Harry brings my hand to his lips, kissing my skin softly before tangling my fingers with his own.

My eyes flutter behind my closed lids as I roll onto my back. The bed sheets are tangled uncomfortably between my feet. I try and kick them off, only to feel a heavy weight lying across my abdomen, restricting my movements.

I pause, suddenly registering that I’m not in my own bed.

I spent the night at Louis and Harry’s flat, I hazily remember, head going for a spin. Which means I went to bed with-

“Harry?!?” I whisper groggily. My voice slightly cracks as I adjust to waking up.

Harry remains passed out next to me with his arm draped heavily across my torso. His eyes are delicately closed and his lips are relaxed into a soft pout. My immediate thoughts consist of guilt-ridden regrets — this is wrong, this is all so wrong — mostly because Louis and I went to such lengths trying to spend a single night together, meanwhile Harry and I just so happened to conk out cuddling like it’s nothing.

So, so wrong.

I rack my brain, trying to piece together everything that happened last night. I was drunk — really, really drunk, with many thanks to Louis playing bartender — but I didn’t really lose it until Naomi gave Harry and me those extra shots while we were dancing. That’s when my thoughts became fuzzy as hell.

Then, I clue in.

And I remember.

Last night, Harry and I planned to go upstairs and kiss — that was the plan — however, we were both so unbelievably intoxicated that we just ended up crashing instead. I massage my scalp, propping myself up in Harry’s bed to focus, though it only triggers the soft throbbing of my inevitable hangover.

Was that all that happened?
No, we definitely kissed.

Or, I kissed him.

Or- wait, that’s right, I only kissed his neck.

Fuck, how the fuck did I manage to get myself here? I gaze down at Harry, still asleep beside me with his arm locked around my waist. His curls are long and his lips are plump and his skin is pretty and he started mess.

It’s Harry’s fault that I’m in bed with him, I know that for sure. It’s Harry’s fault that we got drunk as fuck and actually agreed to make out with each other and it’s Harry’s fault that we passed out before we could even fucking kiss. It’s Harry’s fault that I’m madly hungover and my head feels like it swallowed a swarm of bees and it’s Harry goddamn Styles’ fault that I’ve been built up all night without even getting a single ounce of fucking release.

You could say I’m a bit tense.

I shift myself from Harry’s grasp, letting his arm fall comfortably into the space where I once was. I re-tuck his blankets around him, silently climbing out of his bed. As I gently tread across his room, I nearly stumble over our clothing from last night, strewn all across the floor. Without a sound, I exit Harry’s room and close his door behind me.

I make my way downstairs.

Step by step, my most recent memories continue to flood back to me like a distant cinematic reel, no matter how I try to bend my thoughts. I feel sick, considering our wasted intentions. I feel sick, thinking of our drunk desperations and the wanton things we said.

It wasn’t right.

Not an ounce of it was right.

“I need my peach drink!” I hear Louis yelling before I even reach the last step of the staircase. “How am I supposed to wake up without my peach drink?!”

“Fuck that, what about food?” Niall comes into view, sat on the lounge couch. To my surprise he’s next to Naomi, who also apparently stayed the night.

Naomi giggles, cracking open a fresh water bottle. “If there’s no food, we’ll just have to eat you.”

The lounge is messier than I’ve ever seen it — beer bottles and empty cups are scattered over almost every surface — though, it’s not so bad, considering the decent-sized house party that transpired down here a mere few hours ago.

“Harry needs to wake up,” Louis runs his fingers back through his hair, supposedly giving up on the kitchen as he enters the lounge. “I’m dying for eggs.”

“World famous boyband member can’t even cook himself some eggs…” I smirk, joining the three in the lounge. “I can see the headlines now...”

“Scar, you’re up!” Louis smiles sleepily. Assuming he recalls where I spent my evening, his eyes flicker with a hint of envy. “Harry didn’t tire you out, did he?”

“Yeah, what base did ya get to last night?” Niall winks.
“No base,” I roll my eyes, taking a seat in the idle massage chair.

“First base at least, then,” Niall hints, sending a look over to Louis who returns it knowingly.

“There wasn’t even a playing field,” I shift in my seat and glance down at myself, suddenly realising how much of a discredit I am, since I’m wearing the lad’s goddamn underclothes, but I still hold tight to my truth.

“I dunno, girl… he seemed pretty keen on you last night,” Naomi sings teasingly, but I simply shrug those memories away.

"Everyone was wasted last night," I maintain.

Louis tips his invisible cap. "You’re welcome."

I laugh, but the dripping guilt lingers.

I can’t deny that Niall and Naomi saw quite a show last night, so it’s up to them if they choose to believe me or not. At least, Harry and I were alone once we went upstairs, which I’m thankful for… but what’s going to happen when he wakes up?

God, I’m fucked.

My mobile suddenly vibrates on the lounge table. I didn’t even realise I left it down here last night. I pick it up with a frown, skimming over an unsettling and — I hate to admit it, but — much expected message from my manager.

Mitch: My office for a talk. 12pm. Be on time.

Okay, now I’m fucked.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, voting and all of your lovely comments :)  

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"You're going to want to sit down," is the first thing my manager says as I enter his modern London office. He motions for me to take a seat in front of his large metal desk, so I do, not saying a word just yet. He leans forward with both hands clasped together, riddled with a stern expression. "How was your day off?"

I'm caught off guard by his question.

I wouldn't have felt so sick on my way over if I'd reckoned my manager was inviting me over for a chat.

"I'm sorry, but I really don't wanna talk about it," I stare at the older man before me. "Can you just tell me what this is about?"
My manager nods. "Straight forward, alright."

I can tell Mitch is antsy. He fiddles with the clock on his desk, rearranging his basket of pens like it's a priority to do so. He plays for time without getting to the point right away.

Then, he clears his throat.

"Normally, I would yell at you. I hope you know that. However, we've clearly already been through that," Mitch watches me intently.

I readjust myself in my seat.

"What you did was wrong. You broke a contract and that is a huge offence on your part, Scarlet. That can never happen again, do you understand?"

I lower my head, uttering a lame: "Yes."

"We've given you some breathing space this time because of a certain change in events, but if you do something like that even one more time, further action will have to be taken," Mitch raises his eyebrows in disapproval. "I do hate to say it, but that's how this business goes."

"Sure, I understand," I nod, taking a deep breath, "but what's this change in events?"

Mitch runs a hand across his brow, visibly attempting to lower his level of stress. After a long pause, he manages to speak. "It turns out that Samuel Kitchen is a recovering addict."

My heart skips a beat and not in a good way. "What the fuck?!"

"I'm so sorry, Scar," Mitch swallows deeply. "I would say we should've done our research and looked into him further, but honestly, even his own team just found out."

"What do you mean, addict, Mitch?" I press on, still gaping in front of the man.

"Samuel was a regular user of cocaine," Mitch informs me bluntly. "He's been in private recovery and going through withdrawal for the past few days. That's probably why he was so on edge during your date yesterday."

"I went out with a coke addict," I fall back into my seat, slumping in pure bewilderment. "Great."

"That still gave you no right to break a legal contract," Mitch raises his eyebrows.

I roll my eyes. "Seriously? I-"

"However," Mitch continues, cutting me off, "I'm saying that as your manager. I've had a lot of time to think about it and, as a human being, I see your intent. I believe everything you said about the lad, and I honestly don't blame you for feeling the urge to walk out."

I take another deep breath, blinking at the man before me, before uttering a small: "Thank you."

"I had no right to talk to you like I did," Mitch admits, looking me straight in the eye with an honest, forgiving expression. "I'm sorry, Scarlet. My emotions were running high and it was completely unprofessional."

I nod, lowering my eyes to look at the ground. "Me too. I was being cocky and rude and that wasn't right. I'm sorry, too."
Mitch stands up, holding out a single hand. I smile softly and rise out of my seat, accepting my manager’s apology by giving his hand a civil shake.

"We have six days left of our break, including today," Mitch continues once we both sit back down. "For the most part, you and your band will be joined at the hip. For the record, we won’t be seeing the One Direction boys until our next tour date."

"What?" my face suddenly falls. "Why?"

"Consider it a lesson learned," my manager abides by his word. "I know you were with them last night, I got your message."

"What?" I hiss, immediately checking my phone to find that there was a message — or, make that two — both sent around three in the morning.

My stomach flips in shame.

Maybe more happened last night than I previously thought.

I look back to my manager. "What’ll we be doing for the rest of the week, then?"

"Promotion — lots and lots of promotion," he tells me, clearly having a plan. "You have a second full day off to yourselves once you leave here; Ainsley and Olivia have you covered in the media. Tomorrow and the two days following will consist of a live-stream interview, two radio interviews and a studio interview, plus a full, updated photoshoot, band and all. Your last two days are free for Easter holidays."

"That doesn't seem so bad," I shrug. "Why can't I visit the lads in-between?"

"I know you, Scarlet. I know you can easily get caught up in something without focussing on more important things on hand," Mitch says, making me blush with guilt. I know he's right. "You'll be seeing them again in less than a week. Just, for now, we need promotion to be our priority. Besides, they do have their own publicity to focus on."

I nod meekly, though I wish this wasn't the case. So much has been left unresolved with Harry today, not to mention Louis and the others, if I'm being honest with myself. Everything would be so much easier if I could see them — simply talk to them in person — but I know that won't be happening until our tour resumes back here in London.

"Anyway," Mitch pipes up once more, drawing me away from my conscience. "You have some fans outside who are dying to meet you. Go say hello."

I leave Mitch's office.

Although I'm slightly let down that I’ll be without the lads for the next few days, I'm blanketed with a mild sense of resolve. I ride the office lift down the building and exit through the front doors of the office, where a large group of about fifteen teenagers waits.

"Scarlet! Can we please take a picture?"

"My friend Emily loves you! She's from Wales!"
"Scarlet, are you friends with Liam?"

"How tall is Zayn in real life?"

"Are you single, Scarlet?"

Tens of questions are thrown at me, all at once from every angle, the moment I step outside. I don't know where to look first, or even why the teenagers are getting so worked up over me. Their voices and advances barely subside until I stand tall, ultimately raising my voice over the hectic group.

"Everyone, I wanna meet all of you!" I chuckle aloud. "Just relax… I won't bite."

"Can we take a picture?" a girl beside me politely asks, as the chatter subsides.

I happily oblige, smiling for her selfie. I continue in a similar fashion with a handful of fans, until I'm asked about the lads again.

"When was the last time you saw One Direction?" a shorter girl asks me, once we've taken a picture together.

"This morning," I admit, earning countless squeals from the group of teens surrounding me.

"Oh my god!"

"They're here!"

"You mean they're in London?!"

I laugh, shaking my head, intending to settle the group once more. "They're at their homes. We all had a couple days off, now we just have work to do."

"You know where they live?!"

"You went to their house?!"

I cease to resist my uncontrollable smile. "A few of us hung out for a bit."

"Oh my god, this morning?!" a tall girl lights up from the back of the group, causing all of the others to press on in agreement.

"Yeah, this morning," I admit with a laugh.

"Did you see Harry this morning?!" a young girl with curly locks breathes. "Holy shit, what did he look like?!"

I look up at the sky, trying not to smile as much as I am, though I continue to fail. "He looked very asleep."

Half of the group breaks out in adorable sighs of adoration, while the other half erupts with questions and comments about what sleepy Harry is like, not forgetting to mention how I'm the luckiest person in the world and did I actually see him sleeping with my own eyes?

I can't help but laugh as I give the group a slow nod, watching their expressions drastically change, as if in slow motion. If only they knew who I ended up in bed with last night.

And woke up next to this morning.
Wearing his underwear.

I love the world.

I allow my grin to subside into an easy smile as I take more pictures and meet more fans. I sign one guy's shirt, then kiss a girl on her cheek for her selfie, just before I look down at the youngest fan of the group.

"You like One Direction, too?" I ask her and she nods enthusiastically. "Who's your favourite?"

"I like Louis," she smiles, visibly blushing.

I beam along with the girl. "Louis is my favourite, too!"

I get down on one knee, posing beside the small girl so her older sister can take a picture of us together. As I'm standing up, another girl asks me to sign her magazine.

"I thought you liked Harry?" she wonders, clearly aware of the rumours in the media no less than three months ago.

I chuckle lightly, not agreeing to her question, yet not entirely denying it either. "Harry's a cheeseball."

Even now, in front of all of these fans, I can't ignore such an addicting flush.

It's a feeling that I've grown to both despise and shamefully adore.

I'm in so deep.

For well over twenty minutes, I continue to chat with the group of fans about touring and music, but mainly about One Direction.

We talk about what they're like, how they behave without cameras, how they smell and what kind of hugs they give. We talk about how they've practically taken over my life, for better and for worse, and how the fans feel the same. Despite the lingering fog of my hangover, I feel so at peace, conversing about the boyband so casually. It's one of the most liberating moments I've experienced in a while.

Touring with someone is one thing — being a fan is another.

As much as I could deny it, I can feel myself coming out as a fan of the boyband I could once barely stomach.

I'm the biggest hypocrite I've ever been.

I return to my own flat around noon.
A small single bedroom apartment in central London is my home, decorated with art and posters and way too many Christmas lights. It's humble, but it works. It’s barely three months old, but it’s entirely my domain. I have never felt more at home anywhere than I do here.

Except for maybe on stage, but that's an entirely different world in itself.

I take a seat on my couch, truly needing a rest after a day like today. I pull out my mobile and check my messages for the first time this afternoon. Among a few others, I have two unread messages from Harry and one from Niall.

I decide to check Harry's first, as I naturally would.

**Harry:** *Woke up and you were gone.*

**Harry:** *You missed my amazing breakfast!*

I smile to myself, typing out a reply before realising that I haven't eaten anything today. My stomach growls, as if on cue, but I continue to focus on my mobile.

**Me:** *I had to go visit my manager.*

**Me:** *I'll tell you why later.*

I navigate back to my messages and check what Niall said. It’s a message from an hour ago, asking if he can pass my number onto Naomi — we got along last night and he reckons we could be good friends.

I send him a message back, teasing him that he didn't need to ask — it should have been a given.

I slip my mobile into my pocket, rounding into my kitchen. I turn an element on my stove to medium, then place a frying pan atop its burner. I set out to prepare my first meal of the day, but I'm distracted by my phone ringing in my pocket.

It's Harry.

I put him on speakerphone, so I can go about hands free. "Hey, H."

"Hey, what's new?" Harry's deep voice cracks through the room.

"Just making some breakfast," I open my fridge. "Haven’t eaten all day."

"Breakfast?" Harry laughs out loud. "It’s lunch time!"

"I know, I missed out on yours," I laugh in return. Fetching two eggs, oil, an onion and a green pepper, I decide to make myself a simple omelette. "What are you up to?"

"Lying in bed," is all he says.

I nearly drop the knife I pick up, placing it carefully on the counter as I steady myself. "Yeah?"

"Yeah..." he chuckles huskily. His voice is made deeper from the distortion of my speakerphone. "On a scale from one to drunk, how drunk were we last night?"

"Drunk," I laugh, peeling the onion before starting to chop it. "Very drunk, weren't we?"

"I think my hangover speaks for itself," I can hear the smirk in his voice. "How about you?"
"I'm about to pop about sixty painkillers by the time I finish eating," I laugh, drying off my knife and moving onto the green pepper.

"Thanks for reminding me," Harry groans, clearly in a similar state. "I got some shit news today, you know."

"What was that?" I frown, moving towards my stove. I coat the pan with oil, then toss in the onion and pepper.

Harry clears his throat. "We won't be seeing you until The O2."

I crack both eggs into the pan, stirring them before letting them fry along with the onion and pepper, as I stand alone with my thoughts. "Yeah, my manager told me today. That's kind of shit."

"It is," Harry agrees.

I toss my eggshells into the bin. "Where's Louis?"

"He's downstairs, cleaning up a bit," I can hear Harry moving around in his bed slightly. "Niall and Naomi left not too long ago."

"She's cool, I like Naomi," I smile, pulling out a plate for myself. "Wanna hear something funny?"

"I always do."

"She thinks you're keen on me."

There is a long pause on Harry's end, before he gives me a simple reply: "Of course, I'm keen on you."

My throat suddenly feels very dry. "Harry... you mean you-?"

"Yeah-?" Harry yells over his end, clearly away from his phone. "Alright, one minute!" he shouts again, moments before returning. "Sorry, Scar. Lou needs some help downstairs. I should go."

"Okay..." my brows furrow in uncertainty, "see you in London."

I can hear the smile in his voice as our conversation ends. "See you in London."

I lock my phone, letting it sit on the table as I flip my eggs in the pan.

My thoughts are blank, until they're everything at once.

Harry couldn't have meant keen in that way. Keen is a very broad word, after all. People can be keen on sports, for god’s sake. People can be keen on bloody needlepoint. Harry must have simply meant that we're really close friends... which we are. The only reason we got ourselves into that situation last night is because we were both extremely drunk and wired — that's all.

Really, really, really drunk and wired.

Because there’s absolutely, positively no way that Harry Styles has an actual, real-life crush on me.
No way.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, voting and all of your lovely comments :)

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"We're live in five!"

The crew around me adjusts the lights and reflective panels that face me, fine-tuning their equipment to suitable angles for my fast approaching interview. I chew on my lip, perched in the centre of the suite couch, as a few men and women move efficiently around me.

I really wish my band were here.

I always seem to get butterflies in my stomach — regardless if I'm about to go on stage to perform for thousands, or if I'm simply sat in a rented out hotel suite, waiting for an interview to begin. It's the wait that gets to me — the constant push and pull of anticipation, the endless wonder of what may or may not happen. It's the feeling in my gut that draws me in — that addictive, sick sort of sensation that I can't help but enjoy every single time.

It makes me feel alive.

"Are you ready, Scarlet?" asks a woman with headphones around her neck, sending a glance down to the clipboard in her hand.

I give her a nod, quickly fixing my hair in the reflection of the screen. "Always."

She nods in return, backing towards the other men in the room. "You're live as soon as the connection starts."
The small crew watches me as the room goes silent.

The live-stream screen flickers, then I’m met with the image of the infamous Landon Webber, confidently grinning at me through our connection.

"Scarlet Ryder — hello!" he greets me as an audience happily cheers from his end.

"Hi!" I sing, heart going for a pump already.

Landon grins wildly. "Welcome to the show!"

"Thank you!" I vividly beam. "You look lovely."

" Barely a hello and she's already trying to take me home," Landon comments to his audience, making all of us share a laugh. "So- you're in London right now?"

"Yes!"

"And you're on tour with One Direction."

"I am!" I can’t help but ridiculously smile.

Landon goes silent for a moment, playing up such a fact by gaping at me in bewilderment through our video connection. His audience laughs in suspense as Landon pretends to snap out of it, shaking his head to continue with our conversation. "Can I say- you're on the road with five rowdy boys… that must be quite an adventure."

"That, plus my band has three boys as well, so… eight boys," I add pointedly. "Oh, and their live band has four lads, too, so… twelve."

"Twelve boys!" Landon repeats, entirely blown away. "A proper dozen! Did they come in an egg box, or-?"

"They did."

"No shortage in fart jokes, I assume?"

I laugh out loud, still managing to play coy. "I have a pretty cheeky sense of humour myself, so we all get along just fine."

Landon cheekily lowers his voice for his next question: "Do you have a favourite?"

"Favourite boyband member?" I ask him, lightly humoured.

"Favourite ice cream flavour, favourite eighties tune… of course, favourite boyband member!" he looks out at his audience, earning laughter from the lot of them as I simply blush in response.

"I can't choose," I lie, naturally thinking of Louis. "They're all my favourite."

"Mhmm," Landon hums in disbelief, loud enough for his audience to hear and react to.

I shake my head, eyes lighting up like twinkling stars. I’m so aware that I’m being watched. "What are you on about?"

"Let's just say I've heard otherwise," Landon raises his eyebrows in mock-innocence. "Maybe the name Harry Styles rings some bells?"
I roll my eyes, still grinning like mad.

A weight in my chest deflates, because I should have seen this coming.

It always does.

"Harry and I are good friends," I tell my famed interviewer, like I've told so many others. It's practically reflexive for me to say it by now, but that doesn't make it any less true.

"You're telling me you've never kissed," Landon plainly states.

His entire audience goes silent, waiting for my answer.

I laugh out loud, immediately flashing back to the other night in Harry's room at the massage chair party. He took my hand so naturally, as I did his. I can't seem to shake how roughly he pushed me against his door, gazing into my eyes with more lust than I've seen from him ever in my life. The sweet skin of his neck was tempting, hot and smooth against my lips as I-

"Maybe like a peck on the cheek hello, but that's common with anyone," I shrug with a smile, uneasy to my core. I'm in the middle of a live televised interview and I still can't shake that damn party.

"Mhmm," Landon repeats, sending the audience to chuckle at my embarrassment yet again. "A peck on the cheek hello and a snog on the lips goodbye. Anyway!" Landon pauses for a moment, unable to stop chuckling at his own joke. His live audience go mental and even I can't help but break out chuckling at his endearing behaviour. After some time, Landon finally grins back into our live-stream connection, exchanging contact with me once again. "So, Scarlet! You continue your tour, when?"

"In just under a week, actually! Our UK leg of the tour kicks off at London’s O2 on April Fool’s Day… then, from there, we’ll be moving on to play a handful of shows in Scotland, Ireland and Wales,” I explain, still worked up from Landon’s shameless sense of humour, but I save face. "Next month, we’re off to Europe until May, and as for North America, we fly over in June and we’re there until August… then, Australia and New Zealand in September! I can’t wait!"

"Well!" Landon claps his hands together in summary. "I wish you luck on everything you have planned this year! I'm sure the world will love you, Miss Ryder!"

"You're too kind," I tilt my head endearingly.

So much has happened already and it's only just begun.

Landon beams into our shared connection one last time. "Scarlet, thank you so much for being on the show today, it was lovely talking with you! I might just have to stop by one of your gigs at the London O2!"

"Thanks a million, Landon!" I smile into the small screen, beaming with all of my teeth. "Love ya!"

"Scarlet is all over the internet and her band’s EP can be found in just about any music store near you!" Landon enthusiastically yells out to his audience, before traditionally finishing off with: "Scarlet Ryder, everyone!"

I beam once more, waving into the live-stream camera. The audience claps and cheers and I continue to smile until our connection is broken.

"Alright!" I lean back against the couch, kicking my feet upon the lounge table. "That was fun!"
"No time for resting, love," a tall, young bald man in a suit motions for me to get up. "You have a radio interview in an hour and we want you to be early. Mitchell is meeting you there; he had some things to sort out before hand."

Only out of duty do I oblige, rising from the comfortable couch. I pass through the doors of the hotel suite, to be guided down the corridor by a few members of the small live-stream crew. Today’s schedule would seem so much smoother if my band were here, but for the time being, especially with everything that’s going on in the media, Mitch claims it’s best to temporarily market me as a solo act. I guess.

"You like him, don't you?"

I am live on the air with Mary van der Meer at Spector FM and the question has been asked yet again. I take it as I always do, with a laugh and a roll of my eyes — never answering the same way twice, yet still holding tight to my personal truth.

"It's Harry," I say this time, shrugging with a smile.

"Is that your answer for everything?" Mary grins, checking her list on her desk.

"Sure, let's go with that," I chuckle sparingly.

"So, if I asked who your celebrity crush was...?" Mary cheekily attempts.

"I would say... Jimi Hendrix, today," I ultimately decide with a wink.

"Today?" Mary repeats, the corners of her mouth turning upwards.

I chuckle endearingly. "My celebrity crushes change all the time; it's nearly impossible to choose only one. If I could, I would!"

Mary laughs, stunning as ever, tucking her long blonde hair behind her ears. She's one of the regulars at the radio station, being in her late thirties. I've heard her name before, most likely from skimming through channels in the city. It's a trip, being a guest on her show today — there was a time when I regarded people like her as more famous than myself.

Not to mention, the infamous Landon Webber earlier this afternoon.

So, here I am: live on the air, talking about my possible relationship with the Harry Styles from the world's number one boyband, One Direction.

Who I'm on tour with.

Around the globe.

My life is a dream in a dream.

"You're listening to Spector 108.1 FM. London's favourite radio station playing music to make you feel good," Mary recaps into her suspended microphone. "We'll back with more Scarlet Ryder after the break."
One of my own songs fades into the background as Mary mutes our microphones for the short break. The radio host removes her headphones and goes for a quick toilet run, while I hang my headphones around my neck. Knowing we only have a few minutes before we're back on the air, I glance over my mobile before the presenter returns.

Surprisingly, there is only one message in my inbox.

Even more surprisingly, it's from Louis.

I bite my lip, deciding it’s best to wait to message him back — or even look at the message itself — until after my interview.

I smirk to myself.

I have plenty of time for distractions once I'm out of here.

Two minutes is more than enough time to allow the mind to wander.

My thoughts race through possibilities of what Louis might have said — if he mentioned Harry, if his intent was good or bad. I left him on a questionable note and we haven’t spoken since.

If I have any reassurance, it’s that Harry and Niall seemed like the same old lads they’ve always been, regardless of our mutual hangovers. However, they weren't the ones who got jealous over who I ended up in bed with that night.

Definitely not Harry, that’s for sure.

An ill feeling sinks its way into my stomach.

Mary reclaims her seat in front of me as my current single comes to an end. She straps her headphones around her head, then flicks a few buttons, before the large ON AIR sign lights up over the studio doorway. Sending me a bright grin, she dictates clearly into her suspended microphone: "That was Scarlet Ryder's brand new single, off her band’s latest EP. You can find her online and she’s in the studio with us today! Welcome back, Scarlet!"

"Thanks, Mary," I smile politely, slipping my headphones back over my ears.

My mind continues to flood with Louis and only Louis.

"So, you're on tour with One Direction as we speak!" the woman's face lights up at her own mention of the boyband. "That must be quite a task."

"It does get busy and we rarely have time off… but really, it’s all so worth it and I wouldn't trade any of it for the world," I blush, thinking of how close I've become with the lads in such a short amount of time.

"Do you have any advice that you like to follow?" Mary asks, leaning towards me, over her desk. "As far as your life and career go?"

"Yeah, actually, I have this motto I like to think about…” I recall, moistening my lips and furrowing my brow. "I think it's an old proverb or something. It's always stuck with me."
"Let's hear it then!" Mary grins, waving a hand for me to continue.

I clear my throat, gathering my thoughts as I lean towards my microphone. "Work for a cause, not for applause. Live life to express, not to impress. Don't strive to make your presence noticed, just make your absence felt," I smile up at Mary once I finish the proverb. "That's it."

"That's quite something," Mary comments kindly.

"Thanks," I smile in return. "I think about it all the time. For me, those words are just always there."

I play with one of the rings on my fingers, aiming to pull myself completely into the present moment and out of my distracted daydreams. The thing is, I’m not just distracted by any old diversion: I’m distracted by the world’s favourite boyband and the cheeky, gorgeous lads that make it up. Because of them, I’m here. Also because of them, I’m forced to find a way to somehow focus — and they’re making it so difficult. They’re wonderful, but it’s becoming too much.

"So," Mary gazes across at me, settling in, "what is the cause that you work for?"

I laugh before I admit it.

Then, I laugh again.

"I wanna bring the good stuff back — the gems, the genuine warmth… all the goodness of the oldies. Everything was so much more real back then and I fell in love from the start. I want people to relish in that same good feeling. That feeling of — not just hearing a decent song, but — hearing a bloody great song that you just can’t ignore. Sorry, erm- am I allowed to curse?" I pause, glancing up at the illuminated ON AIR sign over the studio doorway.

"Not really, but we’ll let that slide," Mary chuckles, motioning for me to continue.

"Alright, well… the thing is, music affects everyone differently," I simply state, mind falling back into the present moment. "If I can help someone think in a different light, or give even one person a positive experience from my band’s music and lyrics, I’m satisfied. If I can contribute my own splash of sunshine to someone’s life, even in the slightest, I’m happy. It’s addicting and I love doing it. I love making people feel good. That’s what it’s all about."

"Well, you've made me feel good, just from hearing you say all of that! I think you've done your job," Mary laughs, making me chuckle as well. "You continue your tour with One Direction in a few days, is that correct?"

"That's right!" I sing happily. "Then, we’re off to Europe and the rest of the world in another month."

"That's incredible, Scarlet, I really do wish the best for you," Mary smiles warmly. "It's been a pleasure having you in the studio today. You're welcome back any time!"

"Thank you, it was great being here," I beam across at the host. "Thanks for having me!"

"That was Scarlet Ryder, opening act for world-famous British-Irish boyband, One Direction," Mary signs me off, continuing to narrate the rest of her show. "This next track is for all those die-hard pop fans out there. Have a wonderful afternoon!"

The beginning of One Direction’s latest single begins playing through the sound system as I remove my headphones for the last time. Mary and I thank each other, shaking each other’s hands and taking a picture for online promotion before I leave. I exit the small recording section of the studio, exiting
to the lobby, where I meet my manager.

"All done for the day!" Mitch beams at me, spiritedly bumping my fist with his own. "It's not so bad without the boys now, is it?"

"I'm surviving," I roll my eyes, giving him a smirk.

"Exactly what I need you to do," he jokes, walking alongside me. We pass reception and exit the studio, where a long black car is parked out front, waiting for us both. "We're riding together and you're getting dropped off first."

"Home already?" I wonder. It's been quite a day, but I also feel like I could take on so much more.

"Home already," Mitch repeats with a smile. He opens the back door of the car and we both climb in.

I fasten my buckle as our driver revs the engine. "You know, today was easier than I thought."

"It's not so bad once we have a routine going," Mitch agrees, buckling himself in.

I hum in agreement, pulling out my mobile.

The car begins to roll as I navigate to my inbox — I need to know what Louis messaged me earlier.

And there he is.

**Louis:** *You look great today*

A massive sigh escapes my lungs.

If anyone knows how to put a smile on my face, it's Louis.

I'm beyond relieved that he seems past what happened as a result of the massage chair party, but mostly, I'm just flattered. Louis obviously doesn't know what I look like today, but his forward nerve is enough for me to smile down at my phone, fingers swiftly tapping across my screen as I message him back.

**Me:** *How do you know?*

Pleasantly, I sigh, gazing out of the car window at the passing buildings to bide my waiting time, though Louis messages back almost immediately.

**Louis:** *You look great every day :)*

An electric feeling bubbles its way through my figure, making me beam more than I have all day. My cheeks flush amid the cool interior of the car and there's no way to control it. There have been way too many implications towards Harry today and, with a few simple words, Louis has already made it all worthwhile.

I don't care why he's being so nice to me after where I ended up with his bandmate the night before last. I don't want to spoil his good mood, but I also don't want to spoil where we're headed. Because it's when Louis appears out of nowhere, sending me into pools of feelings like now, that I fall even deeper into such hot-blooded fondness over him.

**Me:** *Please, I bet you look just as good ;)*
I didn't mean to make my smiley face wink, but it works just the same.

**Louis:** *Not as good as you make me feel…*

My heartbeat rises to my throat.

I look around, completely aware of my surroundings, as I take a moment to breathe. I look out of the window again, then to Mitch sat next to me, who seems entirely distracted by his own mobile and paperwork in his lap.

Gradually, I navigate back to my phone, stifling my profuse grin.

I message Louis back, entirely curious for his response.

**Me:** *How good do I make you feel?*

It's not like Louis Tomlinson is sexting me. It's three in the afternoon. I scroll through our previous messages, chest rising in wait, until a new suggestion filters through.

**Louis:** *Ask my hard cock*

My hands drop to my lap and everything becomes numb.

That's it.

Louis Tomlinson is sexting me.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, voting and all of your lovely comments :)  

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I can’t get to my flat fast enough.
I scramble for my keys and kick off my shoes, heading straight for my bedroom. Laying back onto my soft pillows, I make myself comfortable against my headboard, before finally unlocking my phone.

If Louis Tomlinson wants sexting, sexting is what Louis Tomlinson is going to get.

   Me: Are you touching yourself?

I shift over my bedsheets, staring at my screen. I prepare to wait for Louis' words to appear, but he's quick to respond without missing a beat.

   Louis: I'm teasing myself, thinking of you touching me

   Me: I wanna touch you

   Me: I'm taking my shirt off

As soon as I send the message, I sit up and strip off my shirt, just as I claimed. I could always bullshit Louis and simply use my words without actually doing anything, though it would feel too weird, too false.

Plus, it’s more intriguing this way.

Much more bloody intriguing.

   Louis: Getting naked for me?

   Me: Want me to?

   Louis: Fuck yeah i do

I smirk to myself as I sit up again, this time slipping off my jeans. Once more, I lay back, down to my bra and knickers, before navigating back to Louis' messages with a grin that I don’t care to hide.

   Louis: What are u wearing?

   Me: Not much

I chuckle to myself at Louis' classic line, only to bite my lip at his next one.

   Louis: Touch your tits for me babe

I groan out loud, following Louis’ exact instructions. Sliding a hand over my bra, I softly massage my breasts, while my phone rests in my free hand.

   Me: Feels so good, love...

   Me: Get a hand around yourself for me

   Louis: One step ahead of you ;)

I crane my head back, practically melting into the pillows that surround me. It’s a wonder, how Louis can be so cheeky, yet so sexy, at the same time. He always manages to drive me insane.

   Me: Lol shut up and wank yourself
I smirk as I message him back, slowly trailing my free hand down my bare body to trail by the waist of my knickers.

**Louis:** Feisty aren't we?

**Me:** You like it

**Louis:** Id like it more if you were fingering urself

I laugh out loud, but only from such arousal.

**Me:** Who said I wasn't already?

**Louis:** Fuck

My grin lights up my entire face, simply imagining what Louis is up to at this very moment — where he is, what he looks like, what position he’s gotten himself into…

**Me:** What are you wearing babe?

**Louis:** Just in me boxers

**Louis:** Topless

I sigh out loud, needing to release such built-up anticipation. For a split second, I consider taking a pause, wondering what kind of security might be monitoring Louis’ messages, because he’s bound to be one of the most protected celebrities around. Then, I realise how little I care.

Either way, it doesn’t matter, because it’s Louis.

Gorgeous, hilarious, confident Louis.

**Me:** I'm kissing down your chest and stomach…

**Me:** Licking lower…

I slip my free hand past the waistband of my knickers, feeling myself to the image of Louis doing the same to his own body. My phone buzzes in my other hand, sending me to genuinely moan as I read his new message over and again.

**Louis:** Making me wank so fucking hard babe

I swallow thickly. The words coming from Louis’ fingertips stir something in me that I can’t suppress. It’s gotten to the point where it’s not even a want anymore, to have him pounding and panting and sweating over me — it truly is a need.

**Me:** Spit on your cock

**Louis:** Yeah

I allow my eyes to flutter shut, focussing purely on how good I’m making myself feel with a single hand and Louis’ filthy words. My free thumb flits over my phone, quickly typing out exactly what I want Louis to do, while I vividly imagine every moment of it.

**Me:** Get it nice and wet for me
Me: *Pretend it's my mouth*

Louis: *God yeah*

Louis messages back almost instantly, before-

Louis: *Fcuk im gonna come*

Louis' heinous misspelling shows me that he's speaking the truth, as if that isn’t the hottest thing in the world. I let my hands fall limp, not bothering to touch myself any longer now that Louis is done, though not really minding, either.

I helped Louis reach his peak with a few simple words and that's sexy enough in itself.

London is gonna be a shit show.

"It's not my fault," I stress.

"Then, why did you go on air by yourself?" Pete retorts harshly. "Twice?"

"I was doing what I was told to do," I insistently claim.

"Maybe you should’ve caused a fuss, like you do with everything else you’re offered," Pete makes a point and sticks with it.

My eyes narrow, struck in repulsion. "Maybe I’m trying to do my job for once."

"Maybe you wanna be the star," Pete suggests cynically and the others don’t protest. "If you wanted us as a back-up band, you should have just said so in the first place."

"Jesus fucking Christ…"

"Hey," Mitch scolds me, turning to my band. "This was not Scarlet’s idea."

"Fucking obviously…"

"Hey!" Mitch gives me a stern frown. "I'm trying to stand up for you, here."

I shake my head, rolling my eyes.

I don’t apologise, because I’m not sorry.

"Listen, lads," Mitch turns his attention back to my band, once I don’t reply. "The media have their spotlight set on our frontwoman and I’m just rolling with it."

"Yeah, but that’s where you, as our manager, use that spotlight to promote our whole band," Pete counters rather logically, for someone who’s being an idiot.

My glance towards Mitch tells him exactly that.

Yet, our manager simply shrugs. "Maybe I’m just as new to this as you are."
"Wow," Pete scoffs, turning away.

"I’m talking about this A-lister lifestyle," Mitch dramatises. "This-"

I chuckle. "We’re not exactly A-lister."

"Yes, but you understand," Mitch disregards passionately. "This is huge. This boyband is huge."

Elijah gives off a tired sigh. "Mitchell, how’s this? I’ll tell the bassist to lay off you, if you promise to not keep secrets from us anymore."

"The bassist writes your songs, you know," Pete chides.

"So do I," I roll my eyes.

"Anything to add, Keith?" Mitch skips to our guitarist for a quick resolve.

Keith raises his palms in protest. "I’m not part of this."

Elijah releases a huff of impatience. "Mitch?"

"Yes, Elijah?" Mitch finally gets back to him.

"Promise?" Elijah raises his brows.

Mitch emits a deep sigh, readjusting his suit. "Okay, look. I agree that temporarily marketing Scarlet on her own was a test that went well, yet could have gone better. From now on, the entire band will be included in everything to my power, according with what the media wants."

Pete and Elijah begin to break out in another round of objections, until Mitch speaks up again:

"I’ll do as much as anyone in my position can do," Mitch tells the four of us, making himself clear. "However, you must understand that if there’s an instance where the media are truly asking for only one of you — whatever the case — I’ll put in a full-band suggestion, but I won’t start a riot."

Elijah gives off a dubious shrug. "Good enough."

"I can only do what I can do," Mitch maintains.

Pete huffs a loud sigh. "Sure."

I remain silent as my band voices their consent. There’s no point in arguing with Mitch, because he’ll find a way to go around most of the questions, as usual. There’s no use getting into anything further now that we’ve all cooled down.

"I’m surprised no one mentioned Samuel Kitchen," Keith realises, once we’ve found our resolve.

"That’s so true," I recall, thinking back to both of my interviews.

"Nobody cares, because Harry’s Harry," Elijah casually states.

"That’s also true," I fairly admit.

Pete raises a hand among our murmurs.

"Yes, Pete?" Mitch asks him.
Pete points a thumb in my direction. "She’s got two, now."

"What?" Mitch frowns.

Pete clears his throat. "When can I get a fake girlfriend?"

Finally, our week-long promotional break comes to an end and I have yet to see a single boybander. I keep myself busy in One Direction’s dressing room, fiddling with the lid of a water bottle I grabbed from their refreshment table, shortly before soundcheck.

Then, I hear him.

"I asked for a model in my dressing room, but you'll do."

My head whips around and my vision immediately flies to the door. My grin is enormous and I could honestly care less. "Louis!"

"Hey, love..." Louis greets me with a hug the moment I reach him. "Didn't think I'd be seeing you until vocal warm-ups!"

"I couldn't miss our reunion," I tease, still held in his embrace.

"I'm glad," Louis smirks down at me, eyes warm and lips pink. "I had fun messaging you the other day, if you don't mind me saying."

"Me too..." I pull away from him, though only to get a better view of his delicate facial features. "You're quite sexy."

"You're quite sexy..." Louis grins back at me, making me giggle in endearment.

"Hey, Lou...?" Harry unexpectedly joins us in the otherwise empty room. "You're sexy."

"Yeah?" Louis smirks, pulling away from me to warm up to his younger bandmate. "You're sex on legs... sex on a stick!"

Harry sends me a goofy smirk before responding to Louis. "Is the stick my giant penis? 'Cause I'll have to agree."

I burst out laughing. Oh, Harry. I have no idea if he's telling the truth or not, but judging from the way Louis is reacting, he could be. This isn’t the first time Harry has ever made a joke about being well endowed, that's for sure.

"Where've you been, Scar?" Harry grins, walking over and wrapping his arms around me in a big hug. "Staying home these past few days?"

"Yeah, tons of promo," I give Harry a squeeze, "but other than that, staying home."

"Miss my comfy bed, don't you?" Harry smirks, rubbing a hand over my back.

"What the fuck?" Louis utters in an undertone.
"It is a comfy bed," I pleasantly return Harry's smile.

"Hold on..." Louis murmurs, though he goes ignored.

"You should come over to stay again some time," Harry suggests, lowering his already-deep voice.

I chuckle, gently pulling away from the taller lad. "That's a given."

"Okay, really..." Louis voices aloud for once. "What is going on?"

"What?" Harry looks at Louis in innocence.

"Are you really talking about fucking in front of me?" Louis' voice noticeably rises in volume.

"Whoa, what the hell are you on about, Lou?" Harry furrows his brows, clearly at a loss.

"You said nothing happened," Louis tells Harry, as if he knows exactly what we're talking about.

"Nothing happened," Harry maintains.

"C'mon... seriously?" Louis tilts his head, seemingly seeing through us. "You two hooked up that night."

I frowned at Louis, confused as ever. "No, we didn't."

"Yes, you did," he argues.

"No, we fucking didn't, Lou," Harry's presses, practically forcing his truth across.

"Then, you kissed, at least," Louis rolls his eyes, stuck in his own beliefs. "You must have. I got you both fucking wasted. Honestly, just tell me the truth."

Harry stares at his mate with pure fatigue. "My lips have never once touched Scarlet's lips."

Louis raises his eyebrows, glimpsing between the two of us. "You two hooked up that night."

"Niall is an idiot," Harry plainly states.

So, Harry and I are friends. Despite getting hammered and almost making a mistake, no mistake was made. Yet now, as much as I continue to deny the rumour, it's not only Mitch and the media who insist that something must be going on with Harry — it's Louis, too.

With no thanks to Niall.

"Niall's memory is terrible..." Louis reluctantly agrees. "He's like a goldfish."

"That's not fair!" Niall bellows, passing security by the door of the dressing room.

"Yes, it is," Harry firmly protests.

"Wait, are we fighting?" Niall glances around at us. Seemingly, he's without a care in the world, although it's clear that he can sense our agitation. "What's going on?"

"You're telling everyone I hooked up with Harry," I confront him.

Niall shrugs. "Well, ya did."
"Fuck," I huff out a laugh, finding the whole situation much too ridiculous to even deal with.

Harry emits a deep sigh, having to spell it out for his bandmate. "Niall, nothing happened."

Niall barks out a laugh. "Well, ya sure made it seem like something happened!"

Louis and Niall raise their eyebrows, sharing a knowing look of mutual agreement. I glance between the two lads, releasing a heavy breath similar to Harry's, before setting the matter straight.

"Louis," I utter firmly, looking between his wide-set eyes, "stop believing things just because Niall wants you to. And Niall?" I glare at the Irishman, clearly cut off in his claims. "You didn't see anything happen. So, stop pretending you did."

"Whoa, testy Scar…" Niall chuckles in a slightly lower tone.

"I have a reason to be testy," I tell him simply, backing off now that the weight has lifted. "If anything happened between me and Harry, I wouldn't try to hide it. That's all I'm saying."

"Thank you, Scar… neither would I… glad you feel the same…" Harry slowly rambles, before decidedly looking to his mates. "Lads, I appreciate that you care enough to get into mine and Scarlet's business… but please, stop trying to get into mine and Scarlet's business!" Harry huffs a short, stress-relieving breath. "Lou, I didn't kiss her and you know it. Even if I did, it wouldn't be a secret, anyway."

I lightly chuckle. "I guess everything’s pretty transparent around here?"

Harry shrugs, gesturing between me and Louis. "I mean, most of the crew already know about you two."

"The crew already know about you two," Niall snickers, glancing between Louis and Harry.

"Quit it, Niall," Harry drawls, supposedly done with fruitless rumours for the day. Once more, he turns to me, tall and kind. "You okay, Scar?"

"Yeah," I finally relax into his arms, feeling the stress leave my body as I give him a humble hug. "Thanks, Harry."

I sigh into the younger lad’s familiar chest.

If I have anything to be thankful for, aside from this daydream of a fantasy life, it’s Harry Styles. He’s one of the kindest, most genuine people I’ve ever had the pleasure of meeting. He’s the balance of his band and he’s Louis’ best friend. One time, we got drunk and I kissed his neck and I didn’t quite hate it.

Yet, every benefit has its setback.

Whatever Louis and I are is enough for a conversation piece, and being involved with him is an entirely groovy, yet entirely obvious thing. Not only is he a celebrity, but he’s a popular, charming and very expressive celebrity, too.
I’m more than fine with our touring crew knowing about us — they’re all sworn to secrecy, as part of their jobs — but with all of these rumours involving Harry these days, I’m starting to wonder what they might think of me.

Which is weird, because I usually wouldn’t care.

I shouldn’t care.

"Fuck, I'm sorry," Louis opens his arms, letting me smoothly transition from Harry's embrace into his own. "I'm an arse. I just—... Whatever, I should’ve believed you."

"Yeah, me too," Niall admits. "I shouldn't have assumed things."

"I appreciate it, lads…” I smirk softly into Louis’ lean chest, watching the others smile back at us.

Then, we hear two more people enter the room.

"Someone put glue in my hat today…” Liam audibly murmurs to Zayn, as they join us in their dressing room. "I still don't know who it was…"

Louis stifles a grin, pulling away from our hug to chat aside with Zayn. The lads snicker in private, whispering quick comments to one another every other moment, all while managing to stifle what should be massive grins.

I can’t even help but Giggle to myself.

At least we know who ruined Liam’s hat.

"Ready for London again, everyone?" Liam enthusiastically asks the lot of us.

"Hell yeah!" I voice, ready as ever.

"Get ya butt on stage, then!" Zayn chuckles, relaxing next to Louis, who, even at his distance, sends me a cheeky wink. "Your band’s about to go on for soundcheck."

"If you wanted me to leave, you could have just said so, Zayn," I smirk, playing up my coy act.

"No way… don’t do it, Scar…” Zayn jokes, making Louis laugh a husky laugh as he pretends to well up. "Don’t leave…”

"Okay, don't wet yourself, now," I chuckle at the pair, satisfied over anything that we finally got some time together. "I'll see you at vocal warm-ups, but you should know that I'll be watching your show tonight," I tell the boyband, gazing around at all five of them. "Be there."

Harry chuckles. "When are we not?"

"Oh, just make it a good one," I practically beam, exiting the dressing room and immediately turning for the stage.

One thing that I really like about our hair and make-up artist is that she’s always down for a concert.
Louise and I rest by the side of the stage in VIP as One Direction performs to a crowd of twenty-thousand fans. We chat on and off, but we're mostly in our own separate worlds. I've had a long day and an even longer opening performance and it feels wonderful, being able to relax and enjoy my favourite boyband.

Not like they have any competition, in my books.

Halfway through the show, Louis unexpectedly runs over to our side of the stage, leaning over the railing that separates us.

"Take a picture of me!" he mouths, beaming down at me, of all people.

"What?!" I can barely hear him over the sudden uproar of screaming fans.

"A picture!" Louis mouths again, this time miming the action of taking a photograph.

I shake my head, laughing as I pull out my mobile. I try not to think about how hundreds of eyes are probably on us, as I line up my shot and take a quick photo of Louis being absolutely adorable as usual — sticking his tongue out and all.

God, I like him.

"You look good!" Louis mouths once I'm done, a charming smirk playing in his twinkling eyes.

"Louis-…?!" I voice back, hardly believing what I just heard.

"You heard me!" Louis yells this time, before running wildly back to his four bandmates in the middle of the stage.

"What was that all about?" Louise wonders, as the cheers around us die down into muffled squeals.

"I like him a lot..." I whisper, smiling down at the new image of Louis on my mobile.

"You've got to hide that, darling," Louise whispers back, only loud enough for me to hear. "People might start to think things they shouldn't."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, voting and all of your lovely comments :)  

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Chapter Notes
A/N: This is the latest chapter re-write. Enjoy :) 

I told Louise that I understood, but I didn’t entirely mean it.

Yes, I realise that shit would hit the fan if word got out about Louis and me. I’ve got to hide our involvement, because it’s my job. I’ve got to hide most of my personal relationships, because it’s my job. However, simultaneously, it’s not a huge priority of mine.

I know I should do the right thing. I know I should zip my lip and pretend we're all friends living in a friendly world doing friendly things that friendly friends do.

But it’s not like that.

It never was.

I just don’t understand why I’m allowed to socialise with Harry in public, yet when it comes to Louis, we can barely high five.

Maybe if I was initially spotted with my actual crush, things would have turned out differently.

We flew from London to Glasgow the night of our first concert back on tour. Between morning’s promotion and evening’s soundcheck — this time, actually including my full band — we’re all allotted some free time in the beautiful country of Scotland.

So, I took Niall’s advice and decided to message Naomi.

A conversation turns into a phone call, which turns into a laptop video chat. It’s not long before Naomi turns our conversation to the massage chair party and how we met — specifically, certain things that happened shortly after we met. Obviously not forgetting to throw in a broken record mention of my current situation with Harry.

Obviously.

"So, what's going on with you two?" a smirk forms on Naomi's lips as soon as she mentions the younger lad. "Are you, like, a thing now?"

I brush off the matter for what feels like the hundredth time: "We’re just friends."

"No, you look at him as just a friend," Naomi corrects me.

I chuckle. "I’m his friend too, Naomi."

"You can’t even say that," she huffs out a laugh.
My brows reflexively furrow. "Why not?"

"Scarlet," she looks at me seriously, "he said he wanted to kiss you."

"Actually, he asked if I would kiss him," I correct her, finding it best to ignore the fact that any of it even happened.

"You're acting as if that's such a difference," Naomi claims.

"It is," I state.

Naomi rolls her eyes, laughing. "The offer was still there!"

"That doesn't even count!" I laugh out loud.

"How does it not count?!" Naomi looks at me incredulously. I can tell she's not accepting a single word I'm saying, but I really don't care.

"We were drunk!" I stress, casually trying to make a point.

Naomi smiles along with me deliberately. It takes her a moment to form her thoughts before speaking again. "Were you sober the first time you and Louis kissed?"

I swallow thickly. "That's irrelevant."

"No way," she voices enthusiastically. "You're not getting off that easily."

"Naomi, please."

"Were you?"

I sigh, wanting to bury my face in my hands.

For a moment, I wonder if my laptop screen has frozen, but Naomi continues to stare.

"We were drinking at a bar," I reluctantly utter.

"I fucking knew it!" Naomi beams as bright as a beacon.

I sip from my water to hide my inevitable blush. "I don’t see how that proves anything."

"Fair enough…" Naomi nods understandingly. "Let’s put it this way, then: would you still have kissed Louis if you were both sober that night?"

"Once I found the nerve?" I chuckle at the idea. "Fuck yeah."

Naomi stalls for a moment, curiously looking at me. "What if you didn’t find the nerve?"

I let out a deep breath, distantly mulling over the idea.

I end up with a shrug.

"I dunno…" I tell her, pausing in vulnerable thought, "but it's not like we didn't have a little… push the first time, you know?"

"I don’t know."
"Zayn kind of talked us into kissing in the alley."

"Interesting..." Naomi emphasises, picking up on my choice of words almost immediately. "So- are you saying you might agree to kiss Harry if someone... gave you a push?"

"Oh my god," I close my eyes, both laughing to myself and genuinely wanting to disappear. Naomi beams twice as bright, if that was even possible. "Yes!"

"No, that is not a yes," I catch on immediately.

"Why not?"

"I'm obviously into Louis."

"Yeah, you are," Naomi smirks knowingly. "Doesn't mean you can't... you know... explore your options..."

"Oh my god."

"I'm just saying!"

"I can hear what you're saying."

Naomi laughs, grinning into her camera. "Why are you so fixed on Lou, anyway?"

I shake my head, blushing before I admit the fact. "I never knew I could feel something like this..."

Naomi raises her brows. "I thought you were just shagging."

"I mean, yeah, of course..." I shrug nonchalantly, "but he's... amazing."

"I know," Naomi nods, yet she still asks why.

"He's sweet and kind, and hilarious and so clever... and gorgeous, fuck."

"Yeah, but- why do you like him?"

I feel myself smile, still barely able to understand it myself, but I don't mind. "When we talk, it's like... we know something. I dunno how to explain it. There's always this underlying something between us. We predict our intent, but we surprise each other. We understand where we're going, yet we have no idea. It's like knowing and not knowing. Something magnetic."

"That's beautiful," Naomi tilts her head in endearment. "You should turn that into a song."

"Wow," I breathe.

I already did.

Naomi positively grins at my obvious reaction. "You really like him..."

"Shut up!" I laugh.

"Okay, I will," Naomi keeps her smirk to herself, "but I'm just really curious as to what your ideal guy might look like, because from how you come off — like, with your band's image, how you dress, literally everything — you don't seem like the type to associate with many boybands."
I genuinely chuckle, because she’s so right. "What do you want?"

Naomi winks. "A basic blueprint."

"Fine," I smirk. "I dunno where to start… a musician would be nice."

"Physical qualities," Naomi reminds me.

"Oh, yeah," I chuckle, entirely put on the spot. "Let’s see… tall, with long legs… nice, small bum…"

"Love it."

"…a nice smile… and, erm… pretty eyes," I summarise my description with coy satisfaction.

Naomi smirks. "Would you like his hair long or short?"

"The longer the better…" I give her a wink.

"That’s what she said," Naomi wags her brows and we immediately break out into a round of laughter. Once our chuckles subside, she firmly gives me a look through her screen. "You do realise your description is literally Harry."

I bark out a single loud laugh. "No, it’s not."

"Tall, long legs, small bum, nice smile, pretty eyes," Naomi lists off. "Harry."

"Come off it…" I chuckle calmly, ignoring any fraction of a possibility that she might be right. "Not like it completely matters, anyway. Louis’ the most drop-dead gorgeous being I’ve ever seen and he only fits, like, a third of those qualities."

"You and your Louis…" Naomi teases.

"What do you have against Louis?"

"Nothing, he’s an amazing person."

"See?!" I beam instinctively. "That’s what I said."

"But you and Harry were totally gonna make out that night."

Deflating at the repeated reminder, I release a heavy sigh. "We were so wasted."

"I don’t care," Naomi casually states. "Would you kiss him now?"

"Fuck…" A familiar warmth spreads in the pit of my stomach, simply imagining what it could be like to kiss Harry — how new and exciting it would all be, how incredible it could feel — but also how he’s such a great friend and how we’ve come so far without sharing any of those kinds of feelings.

Louis being his best friend is only the cherry on top.

Finally, I look up at the pink-haired girl on my laptop screen. "It’s weird."

Naomi proudly smirks. "You’re saying it’s weird, yet you’re not saying you wouldn’t."

A blush creeps its way up my neck, flushing my cheeks with unwanted heat. "I really hate you right now…"
"Embrace it," Naomi tries to keep a straight face, yet she ends up laughing out loud, falling back onto her bed with a comfortable plop.

"I dunno, Naomi… I dunno if I'd kiss him…" I groan in frustration, shifting over the covers of my own hotel room bed. "Then, there's always the question if he would kiss me."

"He would," Naomi responds immediately. "He likes you."

I scoff reflexively, shaking my head. "This isn’t some kind of April Fool’s joke, is it?"

"That was yesterday."

"Shit," I realise, already losing track of my hectic schedule. "That’s why Zayn and Louis fucked up Liam’s hat yesterday."

"Cool," Naomi passively comments. "You’re ignoring the fact that Harry likes you."

I open my mouth to defend both Harry and myself, yet end up furrowing my brow at the thought. It’s strange, but the option is out there. It’s not like there haven’t been questionable moments where Harry and I may or may not have kissed. He’s even suggested it himself, once or twice.

With that said, none of that really matters, because he’s Harry: he’s a known charmer, and aside from simply being his winning self, he’s also Harry Styles.

I wouldn’t doubt he has royal blood heating over him.

He could have anyone in the world.

"He doesn't like me," I tell Naomi, but more so I can hear it out loud.

"Scarlet…” Naomi sits up, staring at me with a straight, deadpanned expression.

"What?" I sit up as well. "He doesn't see me like that."

Naomi rolls her eyes, breathing in a deep sigh to steady herself. "Look, I've known Harry longer than you have. I know what he's like and it's obvious he has a huge thing for you. Drunk or not."

"If Harry had a thing for me, he would tell me," I insist.

"No, he wouldn't!" Naomi emphasises laughingly. "Harry's too nice for his own good and you know it."

"That’s true," I fairly admit, "but we’re quite close and he’s had more than enough opportunities-"

"Wow," Naomi drawls.

"-to tell me anything he pleases, so if he had a fucking crush on me, I would have found out by now," I decidedly spit out, sounding far more unpleasant than my original intent, but decidedly getting her to see my point.

"Believe what you want," is all she says.

I give her a smile, bitter yet satisfied. "I always do."
Between Glasgow and Belfast, we’re scheduled a day off for travel time and more promotion. Once we’ve boarded our flight and reached the skies, we find comfort in our seats. We keep our voices to ourselves as we bond over the success of our last three Scottish shows in a row — likewise, halfway to our destination, once we’ve moved onto more personal topics.

"As easily as I make friends, I just as easily push them away."

"It’s not like you got into a fight," Pete reasons.

"No, but we had a major disagreement," I honestly admit. "Naomi’s fun and all, but she always wants to talk about Harry."

"So?"

"Harry’s my friend and she always insists that we’re more," I explain, gazing out at endless blue skies. "It’s getting tiring, having to repeat myself all the time."

"Just tell her you don’t see him like that."

"I did… she knows…" I sigh, pausing in reluctance. "She just strongly wants to believe that Harry’s into me… and I can’t tell her enough how ridiculous she sounds."

"Oh my god, Scarlet, are you literally fucking with me?!" Elijah finally cracks, managing to keep his voice low, considering our public flight. "If one of Harry Styles’ friends is telling you that he’s into you, you don’t just sit there and compost that bloody information. You use that information to your benefit… and second-handedly mine, when you decide that I deserve some details."

"This is exactly what I’m talking about."

Keith chuckles at the lot of us. "Yer not into Harry, Scar?"

I sigh for a full three seconds, internally calming myself before my whisper becomes a scream. "Has everyone forgotten about Louis?!"

Pete raises a single finger. "I haven’t."

"I like Louis — he’s a card, y’ know?" Keith offers thoughtfully. "Maybe Harry’s into ya, maybe he’s not. Either way, Naomi’s just tryin’ to help ya, Scar."

"I appreciate that she’s trying to help me, I really do," I tell Keith, however loosely. "I just don’t see it."

"Are you still friends?" Elijah wonders.

"We hardly know each other, right?" I shrug, mulling over my tangled thoughts. "Once we got off the topic of Harry, we were fine… but as soon as he was mentioned again, there was that immediate implication."

"Maybe Naomi likes Harry," Pete suggests.

"I don’t think Harry's the one who she's into," I chuckle, thinking back to her mutual comfort with Niall the first night we met. Not to mention, Harry's assumption that there might be something more going on between the two.
Pete hums. "She’s not into Louis, is she?"

"I don’t think so."

"You are."

"I could talk about him for hours and still not touch the surface of how beautiful he is," I simply state.

"Glad we got that sorted," Pete laughs, making me warmly smile.

"Careful who ye trust, eh, Scar?" Keith pipes up once more, relaxed in his airline seat. "I know ya like Naomi and all, but remember: if she'll talk to you about other people, she can just as easily talk to other people about you."

I frown at my guitarist's sudden advice. "What does that have to do with anything, Keith?"

"Just sayin'," he shrugs. "It seems she likes t' chat, if ya know what I mean."

"Yeah," I scoff a silent laugh, "when the topic is Harry..."

"Sure... that, too... but ye've not had many close friends outside o’ the music business," Keith watches me carefully. "Yer a selective person and rock ’n’ roll was your social circle... but that seems to be fading, as of recent. Just lookin’ out for ya is all."

I chew on my lower lip, knowing he’s right.

After all of this time, I never took a moment to realise that my career and my social circle are one in the same. Despite the change of scene night after night, despite our constant travel and vast exploration and forging of new friendships, it’s always seemed to turn out that my friends are my co-workers.

Such a fault is where I’m exactly like certain people I’d much rather forget.

I’m even more of a hypocrite than I previously thought.

"Thanks, Keith..." I gradually acknowledge the concerned efforts of my eldest bandmate, "but Naomi's close with One Direction. If she was a bad seed, they would have ditched her back at bootcamp."

Pete nods, shrugging amongst the others. "Point well made."

After four straight concerts in Belfast, we fall upon our day off to travel from Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland itself. Eventually, our two-hour drive comes to an end and we manage to reach actual civilisation in Keith’s hometown of Dublin.

Elijah’s the only one — this time — who needed to be woken up.

We adapted to our daily travel regimen weeks ago, but we’re still thankful for traditional tour bus naps on occasion. At first, our nights were hazy and our mornings dragged to pieces, but our resting hours have since blended with our tour schedule and I can’t complain.
Or, I can.

We’ve been stuck in a work-focussed groove since we returned from Easter holidays. It’s been March since I can remember, yet we’re already a third through the month of April.

"We need to party," I voice my swirling thoughts as we’re stepping off our tour bus. "One of us is gonna go insane."

Pete smirks. "It’s gonna be 'Lij."

Elijah tisks. "You’re such a knob."

"Don’t worry, band," Keith voices, before anyone else is close enough to hear us. "I’ll run out and grab us something to roll."

"Bless, Keith," I chuckle, watching as Pete and Elijah share a brotherly high-five.

A few hotel employees meet us by the hotel entrance upon our arrival. They unload our bags from the tour bus’ large undercarriage unit, while we stop and say hello to a few fans scattered around the hotel drive.

There seem to be more fans than usual, which we soon learn is because One Direction have yet to arrive. Although they’re here for our headliners, the fans sweetly ask the four of us for pictures and kindly hold back from any mention of gossip the entire time.

This must be in with the long list of reasons why Keith and Niall are so fond of their country.

We share our goodbyes as we walk inside the hotel, towards the lifts. Upon reaching our designated floor, the lift door opens to reveal a burly security guard. Once he verifies that we are who we are, he leads us down the lengthy corridor towards another large guard, waiting by one of our hotel rooms alongside a much smaller companion.

I light up the very moment I see him. "Hey!"

"Hey!" Louis immediately draws me into an affectionate hug.

"The fans said you were still on the road!" I tell him, soaking in his comfort.

"Ah, we entered through the exit," Louis chuckles. "We needed some privacy, today."

"Clever," I rub his back, knowing how mental it can get for the lads sometimes.

"How are you, Lou?" Elijah beams once we pull apart. "Feels like we haven't seen you since yesterday!"

"Yeah, do I know you…?" Louis chuckles endearingly, playing along with Elijah’s wit. "Why do you all look familiar…?"

Pete laughs along with the others, spirited by Louis’ positive energy. "How have you been, man?!

"Great!" Louis barks expressively. "Head’s buzzing… ears are ringing… all that fun shit!"

"What?"

"Me hearing’s way off."
Elijah pouts at the pretty lad. "Really?"

"Oh, yeah… I’ve had mad headaches for over a month now, ever since our last show in Liverpool…" Louis voices mock-seriously, though my band doesn’t seem to catch on. "I think I’m going slightly deaf… tinnitus… something like that."

"Are y’ serious, lad?" Keith frowns.

"Our fans are always very loud," Louis sarcastically maintains, "especially the Scousers," he sends Pete a cheeky wink.

Pete frowns, still concerned despite Louis’ punchline. "Have you been, like, diagnosed or anything yet?"

"He’s joking," I blush among my smirk.

"Don’t listen to her, I’m not joking," Louis wraps a hand around my entire mouth, making my sudden laughter muffle into his warm skin. "It’s the Scousers."

I grab Louis’ hand and pry it away from my grinning lips. "Maybe it’s you."

"Tinnitus can lead to deafness if it's not treated properly, mate," Keith watches Louis with care, despite our shared laughter. "Ya sure yer only jokin’?"

"Totally," Louis continues to chuckle, eyes crinkling brightly as I release his hand. "Thanks, man."

My beam remains vivid as I watch Louis go on to share further banter with Pete and Keith.

Louis has always been friendly with my band, much to my infinite fondness. It makes me happy to know that they all get along, since my band is the closest thing I have to a family. Watching them interact only makes me appreciate Louis’ charm that much more.

It’s like when you bring a boyfriend home for the first time and he just really hits it off with everyone closest to your heart. And you get that warm, proud feeling of intimacy and accomplishment. And you start to wonder why you ever doubted him in the first place.

Elijah’s eyes dart back and forth as he watches me watch Louis. "Oh, no…"

"What?" I voice in an undertone.

Elijah shakes his head, tisking.

"What?!" I hiss this time.

Elijah cautiously raises his eyebrows. "I know that look…"

"Shut up…" I push him away.
Chapter Notes

[The Kinks - Tired of Waiting for You]

[Wattpad Link]
“This one night when I was playing bongos on stage...”

“What a great way to start a story,” Pete laughs, interrupting Elijah. He grabs a slice of pizza from the backstage refreshment table, going over to sit in a free chair.

One of the best things about performing in arenas – other than obviously performing in arenas – is that we are always supplied with fresh food before and after we go on stage. Right now, we’ve just finished our second Nottingham gig of the tour, playing a show to yet another sold-out crowd of roughly ten thousand people. Although it’s only our second time back here this year, each show just keeps getting better and better.

“I was just gonna say, they had some signs for us in the audience a few weeks ago,” Elijah continues. “I just can’t remember where we were.”

“Neither do I,” Pete says with a mouthful of food. “Wanna hear what I do know?”

“What?”

“This pizza is better than an orgasm,” Pete pointedly takes another huge bite, letting the cheese stretch obscenely from his mouth as he grins.

“Clearly you’ve not had any good dick.”

I stare at the boy with wide eyes, "Elijah!"

“What!” Elijah laughs, knowing just what.

“No filter!” I scold.

“Never,” he smiles devilishly, flicking on the flatscreen television suspended on the wall to watch various sports as the lads often do.

“Actually, you know what? I think it was Birmingham,” Pete considers out loud, still working on his slice of pizza. “Or maybe it was Manchester. Either way, we’ll be back again tomorrow and the day after.”

“Feels like we’re going in circles,” I laugh, going to join Elijah on the sizeable couch.

“Hey, Scar, is this true?” Keith looks up at me from his mobile.

“What’s up?” I ask, draping my arm comfortably around my drummer’s shoulders.

“Harry has a girlfriend?”


“Says here that he does,” Keith’s gaze goes back to his phone.
“Is this another April Fools joke?” my amused expression begins to fade.

“That was so two weeks ago,” Elijah hums, still engrossed in his sports.

“I don’t think it’s a joke,” Keith continues. “It looks legit.”

“Who is she?” I remove my arm from Elijah, turning around to frown at Keith.

“Search for yourself, I can’t be bothered,” Keith locks his phone and places it back in his pocket, then walks over to get some pizza for himself.

I pull out my own phone, going to Twitter right away and searching “harry styles girlfriend” to find out the actual truth about these rumours. That’s what they are right now: rumours. Until they are proven otherwise, that is. I put all my attention on my phone as hundreds of results all come up at once; more continuing to update even as I’m scrolling through.

Her name is Amelia Kovalev and judging from the pictures posted of her she is undoubtedly very pretty. She’s a brunette and she’s definitely taller than me and way skinnier than me and fuck. There is no reason I should be comparing myself to a girl like this, but no matter what I always do. That’s just how it goes.

She doesn’t seem like Harry’s type. Judging from the clothes she wears and the expressions on her face, it doesn’t look like they would have much in common, if anything at all. But maybe that’s just me being an ignorant prick as usual.

I release a sigh once I’ve had enough, “I thought Harry told me everything...”

Pete comes to sit next to Elijah and I, “Do you talk to Harry about being close with Louis?”

“Well- no...” I admit, really thinking about it. “We’ll just refer to him casually if anything.”

“Exactly,” Pete says. “So why should Harry tell you about other girls he’s with?”

Fuck, he’s right.

Shit, even Louis could be seeing other girls for all I know. None of us are attached. But then again, we’re all very close and I would probably know if something was up. Not to mention, we’re all on a world tour together so it’s not like we have much privacy or free time to sneak around anyway.

But there’s always that option.

“Sorry if that sounded harsh,” Pete goes on when I don’t respond. “I didn’t mean it to, but you get what I’m saying, right?”

“Yeah,” I nod my head, putting away my phone for good. “I do.”

And Naomi said he liked me, I scoff internally.

“He’s got a girlfriend.”

It’s our third of eight days off before we go to Europe. We’ve just recently completed our last show
of the UK leg of the tour, finishing off with a bang in Manchester before the break, and it couldn’t have gone better. One Direction even brought me on stage with them during the finale, along with my band, and we all had a fucking blast. I honestly can’t wait for the rest of the tour to begin. It’s gonna be a nice change to get out of this country for once.

Naomi is over at my flat again, helping me pack for my next full month in Europe. It was a bit tense with her at first, knowing we didn’t end on the greatest note last time we saw each other, but as the day went on we practically forgot about everything and we’re getting on like we’ve known each other for ages.

As for Harry and his new girlfriend, I’ve only just brought it up.

“I heard about that,” Naomi says, responding to the news. “She’s a model.”

“Perfect,” I throw a rolled up t-shirt into my suitcase.

“What?” Naomi asks offensively.

“What?” I repeat.

“Why are you getting so worked up over it?” she delicately works on folding pairs of my jeans. “I thought you were keen on Louis?”

“Keen,” I scoff at the word, remembering how Harry used it the last time we talked on the phone. “Yeah, I am.”

“What is it then?”

I rest with another band shirt in my hands, “Harry just used to be so open with me, and now-” I swallow, distraught. “It’s like something changed.”

“Maybe something did change,” Naomi also pauses with her folding to look at me. “Maybe he got over you.”

“He was never into me!” I collapse onto my bed in frustration.

“You know I’m always going to disagree with you on that one, Scar,” Naomi shrugs, placing another pair of my jeans on top of the pile in my suitcase. “Maybe you weren’t picking up what he was putting down and he had enough and decided it was time to move on.”

I keep my gaze on the girl but I don’t continue packing just yet, “Can we not talk about Harry anymore, please?”

“Alright, alright,” Naomi chuckles softly, sitting beside me to take a break. “Hey, wanna go get some lunch? I’ve got a few extra dollars to spend.”

“Yeah,” I smile at the girl, really needing a walk outside right about now. “That sounds great.”

Naomi and I ended up dining at an outdoor patio of a restaurant quite similar in style to the café where Harry and I shared our first outing together. She got a burger while I opted for a bowl of chicken linguine and we’ve just been getting to know each other ever since.

“So what do you do?” I ask her, spinning my fork around in my bowl of noodles.

“What do you mean, what do I do?”
I laugh, not wanting to have meant it in quite that way, “I mean, like, do you work? Or go to school?”

“Yeah, I go to school. I study design,” Naomi grins. “Like, architecture.”

“Oh wow, so blueprints and all that shit?”

“And all that shit...” Naomi repeats with a laugh. “Yeah, I like it.”

“That’s awesome, Nai,” I take a large forkful of food as she takes a bite of hers. “Isn’t that expensive, though? How do you afford it?”

“I help out at the library on weekends,” she says. “Sorting books and marking inventory and whatnot. It’s also a good place to help keep my mind focussed on my education, if you know what I mean.”

“And that’s enough?” I give her a confused look. “Does it pay that well?”

“Well...” a blush begins to form upon Naomi’s cheeks. “I supply as much as I can. But I do have a little help. I mean, a lot of help,” her face glows almost as pink as her messy hair.

“What do you mean, help?” I continue to stare at the girl.

“Like, it’s really expensive and it’s nearly impossible to get a job without a degree; especially one that I like, like a career, you know?” she rambles on. “And-”

“Naomi...”

“Niall is helping me,” she admits suddenly.

“Niall is paying for you to go to school?!” I would be lying if I said my jaw didn’t drop.

“When you put it like that it’s so-” she buries her face in her hands. “I wouldn’t be able to afford it if he didn’t. And he knows how much architecture means to me... I do put as much time and money into it as I can, I swear. I just need that extra kick...”

“Holy shit, that’s so nice of him,” I say, entirely stunned.

“I know, he’s a fucking saint,” she gushes. “Just don’t tell anyone, okay? You’re the only one that knows.”

“Not even the boys?”

“Well, the boys know, but you’re the only other person that even has a clue,” she laughs. I can tell she’s slightly embarrassed, but it warms my heart to know that she trusts me enough this early on in our friendship to tell me something as personal as that.

“I promise I won’t say a word, love,” I smile, downing another forkful of food before speaking with my mouth full. “Niall must really like you,” I mumble, nearly dropping a noodle.

“Yeah, we’re really close,” she tries to hide her smile.

“Nothing more?” I inquire.

“Is this Confessions 101, or what?” Naomi jokes, rolling her eyes and not entirely looking at me.
“Avoiding the subject,” I tease her. “I see...”

Naomi groans, taking a mouthful of her burger before she continues.

“Okay. So here’s the thing,” she swallows her food, placing the burger back on its plate. “Niall and I have always been mates. Since day one of bootcamp he was always there, and we’ve only grown closer since. I can easily consider him my best friend and I’m obviously one of his.”

“Is that it?”

“Basically,” she says. “But, um. We made out once.”

“Holy fucking shit!” I yell out loud, nearly knocking over my drink. It’s already way too late to remember to keep my voice down and people are already starting to stare. “Are you a serious?!” I choke. “Are you two a thing, or?”

“No way,” she chuckles, cheeks still as pink as ever. “It was at a party last year and we were both drunk. We’ve talked about it. Only in passing, as a joke or whatever, but... I dunno.”

“You dunno what?”

“I kinda like him, right? But not enough to actually date him. At least, I don’t think so. I’m not sure. We’re friends.”

“But you kissed him!” I persist enthusiastically.

“And I wouldn’t mind doing it again,” she giggles in a whisper.

“Naomi, oh my god! I wanna scream!” I lean towards her in my seat, physically wanting to drag her to Niall right here in this moment. “You have to get on that!”

“Oh, so you get mad at me when we talk about you and Harry possibly being more than friends, but when it’s on me you’re all gung ho for it!”

“That is so different.”

“How?!” Naomi also leans forward, whispering to me so the people around us can’t hear. “Don’t even try to tell me nothing happened that night. I saw you two.”

“Nothing happened!” I laugh.

“You’re as bad as he is,” she leans back in her seat.

“You’ve talked to Harry about it?”

“I’m not saying a thing.”

“Scarlet Ryder, hi!” a man suddenly appears next to us with a backpack and camera in hand.

“Hi, how are you?” I smile politely, turning my attention to him.

“Good, thanks! Thought you’d be with Harry Styles on a day like today,” he chuckles warmly. “Going to find him right now, actually.”

“Are you a journalist?” I ask.
“No, I’m just a photographer,” he raises his camera as proof.

Harry’s here, my heart speeds up. He must be close, considering the man is on foot. I know I’m kind of angry with him but this is way too convenient to pass up.

“I’ll pose for your picture if you tell me where he is,” I offer, knowing photographers and paparazzi get paid nearly three times as much if a celebrity actually poses for their picture, as opposed to simply catching them in action. Even getting accidental eye contact pays twice the amount.

“He’s just walking around London with his girlfriend right now, they’re only a couple blocks away,” the man says. “Trafalgar Square if I’ve been told so.”

I feel a pang of annoyance hit me at the word girlfriend, but I agree and say thank you. I get Naomi to pose for the picture with me, both of us pulling funny faces and making it look like we’re having the absolute best time.

Which we are.

Aside from the fucking girlfriend shenanigans, of course.

The man leaves and Naomi and I go back to chatting as we were. I could always text Harry and ask him what’s going on but I’m not that weak. He’s my friend after all and it’s not like I own him. He can do whatever the fuck he wants. I really don’t give a shit.

Okay, maybe I do give a little bit of a shit, but I’ve decided I’m not going to give him my time of day if I can help it.

Harry can spill the beans when he’s ready.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, voting and all of your lovely comments :)

Read “Tangerine” on Wattpad for quicker updates!

@Scarlet_Ryder || #tangerinefanfiction
The whole ignoring Harry thing didn’t go exactly as planned.

As it turns out, Harry is much better at the silent treatment than I am. He got me to crack as soon as we met up in Paris. That’s not to say he mentioned anything about his supposed girlfriend, however. He skimmed right past the topic as if it didn’t even exist.

It’s not like I confronted him about it, but there were definite implications.
If Harry wants to tell me what’s going on, he can. I’m not going to waste my time rooting around in his business when it doesn’t even involve me. I’ve got enough of Louis’ business to root around in anyway, if you’re picking up what I’m putting down.

Although I’m quite preoccupied with Louis Tomlinson and all his charm, there’s still this constant thought nagging at the back of my mind that’s always there no matter how hard I try to ignore it.

*Why would Harry bring me to his room to kiss me if he had a girlfriend?*

Did the relationship begin after the fact? Could it really be that recent? Would Harry actually ask a girl out within a month of knowing her?

Something just doesn’t feel right.

It’s weird. I’ve never really seen the lads flirt or be attached to girls in public other than myself. I can’t tell if it’s jealousy I’m feeling or like the world has suddenly opened up and I’m finally realising just how small I truly am. Who am I to them? Who was I to feel like I was their only one? I’m stupid and selfish and way too empty to deserve any of what they gave me. I feel like an idiot.

But then I think of Louis, as I always do. And I can’t help but smile.

That’s the thing. My brain is all dark except for this bright light shining down with a little Louis sitting in the middle. He has saved me in more ways than one and if I feel like he won’t again then I’m the most foolish person to ever exist.

“You okay, love?” Liam joins me in the hotel suite. “It’s a bit quiet in here.”

“Yeah, thanks,” I continue to focus my attention outside the large scenery window, still drifting in my thoughts. My eyes scan over the centuries old buildings of Belgium, really taking in how different they are from anywhere in the UK. Everything here is different than what I’m used to, but in the most refreshing way possible.

It’s day three of our European leg of the tour. We’ve already done two shows in France and are currently in Antwerp, Belgium for the day. Things seem to be going by so quickly lately but it’s probably just because of our rigorous schedule and lack of time off.

“Are you sure you’re good?” Liam joins me by the wide hotel window. “You seem a bit distant lately. Other than being on stage, where you’re flawless as always. That’s not to say you’re not always a star, it’s just-”

“Liam, you’re really bad at this,” I chuckle, cutting the lad off but also visibly calming him down.

“Sorry,” he laughs nervously. “Maybe I can just ask what’s up?”

“Yeah, it’s- ...stupid,” I finish pathetically.

“I bet it’s not,” Liam replies simply, looking at me with awaiting eyes.

“Alright, well. I’ve just been feeling a bit off,” I shrug. “Maybe a little pissed, I dunno.”

“Why’s that?”

“Honestly?” I sigh. “Harry and I haven’t really talked since he’s got his new girlfriend. It’s weird now that he’s dating someone, and-”
“Wait, you haven’t even talked to Harry about it?” Liam frowns at me. “I thought you two told each other everything.”

“I thought so too,” I sigh, turning my attention back to the vast outdoor view.

Liam studies me curiously, “You do know they’re not actually dating, right?”

I whip around to face the boy, “Liam, what are you talking about?”

“Harry and Amelia barely know each other,” he laughs. “It’s just another fake relationship for the media, love. No need to fret.”

“Oh my god, are you serious?”

“Yeah, why else do you think he would date a European model? To promote the start of our European tour, of course,” Liam chuckles as if it was obvious.

“I feel so stupid,” I squeeze my eyes shut, genuinely wanting to teleport as far away from here as possible. “I’ve been mad at him this whole time for no reason.”

“Don’t feel stupid!” Liam continues to laugh softly. “The knob should’ve told you by now. I’ve no idea why he hasn’t brought it up already.”

“Who’s a knob?” a deep voice asks cheerily from the doorway. I turn around to see Harry Styles entering the room with a swagger in his step as he joins us.

“You’re a knob,” I move over to him. “You knob.”

I wrap him in a hug for the first time in what feels like a very long time. He returns it with bliss, letting me rest my head against his chest as we always fit.

“Why am I a knob?” he chuckles quietly.

“Well first, you never told me about your girlfriend,” I pull away to list off on my fingers. “And second, you never told me you didn’t actually have a girlfriend.”

“Oh!” Harry laughs with both of his dimples on display. “It was just for show. I thought that was obvious.”

He’s right, I should’ve known.

I smirk in embarrassment, “Apparently not.”

It’s true, Harry gets thrown around a lot for the papers. He’s pretty much everyone’s scapegoat if the band needs a sudden uprise in the media, so it’s no surprise that it happened again. I just wish he would’ve told me the truth sooner. At least then I wouldn’t have made such an idiot of myself.

“So what did you do after Trafalgar Square?” I ask him simply out of curiosity.

“How did you know we were at Trafalgar Square?” Harry questions.

“It’s a smaller world than you think,” I smirk at him but only receive a questionable look in response, so I make myself clear. “A pap came along and said you were there.”

“Sounds about right,” Harry chuckles finally. “We got some drinks at a tavern after. Got a bit tipsy but made it a night.”
“Mate, I can see that,” Liam suddenly interrupts us, looking at his phone.

“See what?” Harry asks.

“There are pictures.”

“Of course there are, Li,” Harry says, not caring to look at any. I guess it’s the norm for him, to have hundreds of photographs taken of himself each day that he doesn’t bother checking them out anymore.

“No, I mean-” Liam pauses, holding his mobile out to us. “Just look.”

Harry furrows his brow, taking Liam’s phone from his hands. His expression drops, finally understanding what Liam means.

“Oh...” Harry murmurs. “Wow.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Liam concedes.

Harry hands me Liam’s phone without even having to ask. I look down at it to find out what the two are on about and, oh. They weren’t kidding.

A number of not-so-attractive pictures of drunk Harry and Amelia have surfaced into the internet world, littering Twitter and Tumblr and other gossip websites with lasting images of their well-intoxicated night.

I look up at Harry, trying not to laugh, “Don’t worry, Harry, I’ll still be your friend.”

“Thanks, Scar,” he blushes dejectedly.

“She’s lying, Styles,” Liam smirks, taking his phone back from me, while all Harry does is cover his face with his large hands in shame.

“Hey, it’s alright, Harry. No one’s seen it...” I try to maintain my straight face but I end up chuckling out loud. “Who am I kidding? It’s the internet. People are probably laughing as we speak.”

Harry suddenly barks out a laugh, shoving me aside playfully, “Shut up, Scarlet.”

I hand Liam back his phone, ruffling Harry’s hair to raise his mood. I know he’s let down because of the unfortunate pictures that were released of him, but it’s Harry.

Even in his least attractive state he is still prettier than ever.

“Gonna get high in Amsterdam with me, babe?”

I’m not sure when Louis and I started calling each other babe on the regular but it’s become a thing I can’t ignore. That’s not to say I don’t call the other boys cute pet names every day — it’s only natural — but with Louis it’s so much more than that. It stirs a feeling in my stomach that I just can’t control.

“You know we only have one day there,” I tell him, walking around my hotel room bed.
“And the one day there you’re taken, I know, I know,” he says, alluding to the fact that I’ll be clubbing for a public event tomorrow evening.

I move closer to him, pressing my hand to the curve of his waist.

“Very much taken...” I whisper softly.

“Zayn and Liam are gonna be dancing with you all night...” Louis’ voice cracks at my unexpected advances.

“Yes,” I press my chest against his, looking up to watch his lips. “They are.”

“Can’t drink too much, though,” Louis raises his hand to trail across my collar bones. “We’re in Germany right after.”

“I can handle myself, daddy,” I roll my eyes, smirking as I turn away.

“Oh, fuck,” I hear Louis suddenly whisper to himself, trying to mask it by clearing his throat.

I frown, slowly rounding back to the boy, “Louis...?”

“Uh, yeah?”

“Lou, did you actually get...” my voice lowers unintentionally, “-turned on by that?”

“I... um...”

“Daddy?” I look up at him with innocent eyes.

“Shit,” I can physically see Louis’ knees go weak.

“No fucking way,” I smirk to myself. “You do not have a daddy kink.”

“I... I honestly don’t know,” Louis grips me by my waist, pulling me closer to him once more. “Maybe it’s just you,” he lowers his head to press his lips against my neck. “You turn me on,” he kisses just under my ear, “so,” another kiss, “much.”

Louis’ breaths are hot and moist against my skin, making me shiver with anticipation. I moan at his touch, parting my lips before bringing them into my mouth to moisten them. Both of my hands grip onto his muscular hips, pulling him in so our bodies are aligned. I can feel Louis’ growing bulge pressing against me in the slightest, most intriguing way.

“Kiss me,” I whisper, craning my neck back to let Louis have his way with me.

“With pleasure,” Louis suddenly pulls me in by the back of my neck and presses his lips against mine.

I can feel Louis’ smirk pressed tight against my own as he breathes in deeply, exhaling with pure passion. I move my lips against his, feeling his stubble scratch across my mouth and chin. I sigh deeply, falling into open-mouthed kisses as our heads tilt to match each other.

Until his tongue meets mine. Sliding slick and wet against my own. Massaging and keening and sparking this electricity that I’ve only ever felt with Louis.

“Bed,” he commands, pulling away only to speak before connecting our lips once more.
“No,” I tug on his jumper, lowering myself to my knees and pulling him down with me. “Here’s fine.”

Lust flickers in Louis’ smirking eyes as he gets to his knees and lays back on the carpeted floor, pulling me on top of him without hesitation. I place a hand on his chest and an arm on the floor, balancing myself as I straddle his hips. I lean forward, gently tracing Louis’ lush lips with a single finger before falling over to kiss them again.

Usually I would be against even sitting on hotel floors. But this is a four star establishment we’re talking about. And our position is so kinky — lips and limbs tangled, the weight of my body over the heat of his, both of us sprawled across the floor when there’s a bed no more than five feet away — we’re more turned on than either of us ever expected to be.

Both of Louis’ hands go to my ass, pulling me in and pushing me away heatedly as I hum into his mouth. I let him work me against, creating a friction between my crotch and his restricted bulge that sets me on fire. It gets me going just to know that I’m the one Louis is grinding up on.

I’m the one that’s getting him hard.

We’re in Belgium right now and are headed for The Netherlands early tomorrow. It’s only a two-hour drive at most from Antwerp to Amsterdam, so time isn’t something we have to keep too close of an eye on. We do have a specific schedule, but that’s expected as always.

Essentially, we have time.

Time for me to restrict Louis’ movements and pin his arms by his side.

Time for Louis to break free of my grasps and run his hands all over my body.

Time for me to bring my lips to his neck, kissing and sucking lower.

Lower.

Lower.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, voting and all of your lovely comments :)  

Read "Tangerine" on Wattpad for quicker updates!

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“I’m gonna wear my best heels tonight,” Zayn flaunts himself around his large hotel suite. “Gonna get all pretty for Liam.”

“You would,” I chuckle, shaking my head at Zayn’s ridiculous sense of humour.

I drag the stick of black eyeliner across the top of my left lid, fanning it out at the end to match my right. I take a step back and look at myself in the mirror before adding another touch of dark mascara to my lashes. I end up satisfied with my appearance; bleach blonde hair swept to the side, smokey black eyes and ruby red lips to match my attire.

I’m wearing a vintage-looking flapper style dress, shocking red in hue and tailored as if it was meant to fit my body like a glove. The dress is covered in sequins with small cap sleeves to top my shoulders.

I don’t want to sound cocky, but I can’t stop looking at myself.

“Red suits you, Scar,” Zayn smiles, sitting on the corner of his suite bed to tie up his shoes. “The colour of envy.”

I chuckle at that, “You’ve been drinking, haven’t you?”
“Nope.”

“You’re sober?” I inquire.

“Sober as a squirrel.”

“ Weirdo,” I smirk, rounding back to the mirror for another glance at my figure.

“Scarlet, come here so I can take a picture of you,” Zayn says from behind me.

“Why do you want a picture of me?”

“So I can send it to Harry,” Zayn smirks as he snaps a picture of me the second I turn around to face him.

“You’re not sending shit to Harry!” I run back to Zayn, landing on the bed beside him and scrambling to get his phone from his grasp.

“Too late!” Zayn keeps one hand working on his mobile while the other one keeps me at a distance.

“Sent.”

“ Fuck you! What did you do?” I pout, hitting the lad against his chest to make him show me his phone.

Zayn rolls his eyes, reluctantly handing me his device. At least it’s not an unflattering picture. Actually, it’s kind of nice. But the message that he sent along with it isn’t as...

Well.

**Zayn: Another one for ur wank bank xxx**

“Why do you always have to insist that Harry and I are a thing, you fucker?” I roll my eyes jokingly.

“It’s funny,” Zayn chuckles, leaning back on his bed. “I like to tease you.”

“He responded,” I stare at the screen before the boy beside me even notices.

**Harry: Thanks Zayn.**

I look at Zayn skeptically, “You mentioned a wank bank and all he can say is thanks?”

“There’s more,” Zayn lowers his voice as another text gets sent to his phone. I peer over his shoulder to read what Harry said, my breath catching in my throat as I read his response.

**Harry: She looks great.**

I stare at the message. I don’t say a thing. I simply stare.

“He likes you,” Zayn says after a moment, making me suddenly scoff.

“Anyone can say I look great without liking me, Zayn. I know I look great,” I flip my hair mockingly.

“Come off it. You and Harry flirt all the time.”

“Harry and I do not flirt!” I laugh at the boy.
“Yeah, okay,” Zayn says, not believing me in the slightest.
I laugh out loud, “What the fuck are you saying?!”
“Show me your phone,” he says simply.
“What?”
“Show me your phone!” he lets out a laugh this time.
“Fuck,” I chuckle, “take it.”
I toss Zayn my mobile. He works on it for a moment, assumingly going through mine and Harry’s
text messages.
“I really have nothing to hide,” I confirm, genuinely amused by this point.
Zayn finishes looking at what he needs to, then hands my mobile back to me with an expression I
can’t read.
“Yeah,” he looks at me, “that’s definitely flirting, babe.”
“ZAYN!” I shout suddenly. “Fuck that! Where?!”
He simply laughs, standing up off of his bed, “Try looking in the open your eyes department.”
I watch him as he reaches the mirror, fixing his quiff with a few pinches of his fingertips.
"I don't like Harry,” I insist.
But I think of the boy with his smile, his tattoos, his charm and his dumb wit, and fuck it. Maybe I
like him a little, but it's not enough to have any trouble denying it.
“Oh yeah, where is he?”
“I dunno,” Zayn says with his phone to his ear, apparently reaching Liam’s voicemail as he leaves a
message that I can’t help but laugh at. “Yo, Payne, you should probably try answering your phone
sometime because it’s your favourite neighbourhood spideyman.” With that, he tosses his mobile
onto the desk in the room and looks back at me. “Wanna get drinking then?”
“Yes I do,” I grin, stepping next to him where a couple of bottles of vodka rest on the glass table.
“One shot for me,” he says, grabbing a bottle, “and one for you,” he hands me the other.
“Right out of the bottle?” I chuckle.
“Might as well...” Zayn smirks, immediately raising it to his face and downing the liquid.
“So excited,” I voice sarcastically, gulping down a quick shot from the bottle, immediately grimacing
but enjoying the burn. “Why is it always vodka with you?”
“Ya don’t like it?” he laughs, taking another drink.
“It’s okay. Bit harsh. It’d be better if it was mixed.”
“There’ll be enough time for that at the club,” Zayn smiles. “If Liam ever shows up, that is.”

“He just texted me,” I giggle, immediately checking my phone as it goes off.

**Liam: heyyyy be there in a secccc :)**

I always know it's Liam texting, even from a simple glance at his message, when there are a million extended letters in all of his words. He never fails to make me smile.

“I got one too,” Zayn says, grabbing his mobile as it vibrates on the table. He peers over at my message after he finishes reading his. “Why do you get a cute text and I get chew on my chode?”

“What?” I bark out laughing, snatching Zayn’s phone from his hands.

**Liam: Chew on my chode.**

My laugh echoes throughout the room causing Zayn to shake his head in amusement. I give him a mockingly innocent look, “Maybe Liam just wants you to chew on his chode.”

“Of course he does,” Zayn winks, unscrewing the cap of his bottle once more. “Let's have another quickie before he gets here.”

“Quickie?!” I blurt out, immediately thinking sexual thoughts.

“I mean another shot!”

“Shit, Zayn, you’ve gotta be specific with that!” I take another swig of vodka as he does.

“Nah, that’s Harry’s job,” Zayn gives me a suggestive look as he places our bottles back on the table.

“Oh my god, quit it!” I slap his arm with intent.

“What? It’s not like you haven’t had a little something-something from each other now and then, am I wrong?” Zayn wags his eyebrows at me.

“We haven’t even kissed,” I stare at him dead in the eyes.

He seems a little surprised at the fact but he shrugs anyway, “Give it time.”

“Harry and I are friends,” I insist.

“You say that now, sweetheart,” Zayn grabs his leather jacket off the back of the desk chair, looking at me steadily. “Just watch what can happen in a few weeks.”

“You sound like Naomi.”

“Naomi sounds right.”

We share a look, neither of us averting our attention. The room is still and the suite is silent. Until a muffled voice sings from the doorway, followed by a couple of knocks.

“Hellooooo.”

“That’ll be Liam,” Zayn clears his throat.

I nod and vouch to get the door, walking through the suite and unbolting the front locks before I turn
the handle. And there’s Liam, standing fit and beaming, right next to a large man who is clearly here for security purposes.

“Andy said they’re already there,” Liam explains, stepping into the suite momentarily. “We just have to take a quick cab.”

“What took you so long?” Zayn comes in from the bedroom.

“I was talking to someone,” Liam smirks.

“A girl?”

“Yeah, a girl,” Liam gives his eyebrows a quick raise.

We grab our belongings and head out the door, leaving the bottles in the suite behind us. I walk ahead as the two boys lag behind to share their gossip. I keep to myself while we’re in the lift but Zayn and Liam’s craic is witty enough to listen in on, really.

We have to wait by the hotel doors as the member of security goes out to the taxi but we are let out soon after to a soft buzz of barely fifteen screaming fans. We say a quick hello but are only allowed a certain amount of time with the girls before we are quickly ushered into the cab.

It’s May, so the weather is nice. Although it’s still a bit cool in the evenings, it’s perfect for a nice light jacket and heels. We’re in Amsterdam after all, so we might as well make the best of what we have while we’re here.

“This is your first time clubbing with us, isn’t it, Scar?” Liam asks aloud, giving my leg a soft pat.

“It is,” I smile at the boy. “First time clubbing in a while actually.”

“Why’s that?” he questions.

“I’m not too crazy about clubs, really,” I shrug with a tilt of my head. “I’ve always been more of a pub and tavern sort of person.”

“Such a rockstar,” Zayn chuckles, flattering me intentionally.

“You’re gonna have fun,” Liam smiles, patting my leg once more reassuringly.

Usually, if someone was looking for the bar One Direction is at, I would suggest to look for the nearest gay bar. This is one of the few times the lads have actually planned to go to a large, regular club. It’s mainly for publicity, but the decision was still made.

The cab comes to a halt and we all filter out. We meet Liam’s friend, Andy, with a number of girls outside of the club entrance. I wasn’t sure if they were part of our group at first; they were so far up I could barely see. But then I saw them fix each other’s hair and take a swig from a mickey of alcohol hidden in one of the girl’s clutches and yeah.

They’re definitely one of us.

We’re all allowed in right away, obviously, since Zayn and Liam were on the guest list. Honestly, even if their managers didn’t reserve ahead of time we still would’ve been let in without a second word.

The nine of us earn soft squeals and hushed whispers of awe as we skip the long line of about fifty people waiting in the cool evening breeze. I lag back with the two One Direction boys, giving a few
quick waves to the crowd of glowing faces before we enter the club.

The shots hit me as soon as I walk in.

The club is hotter, sweeter and louder than anywhere I’ve been in a while. The constant thud of the bass reverberates in my chest as we pass hundreds of warm bodies dancing and grinding against all of us. I’m not sure why I was surprised to smell weed as soon as we entered, since we are in Amsterdam after all, but I was still slightly shocked at the scent.

Andy leads the way as the girls keep closely behind. They cling onto Zayn and Liam as they cling onto me. “Booth!” Andy yells out to our group, pointing in the direction of where he’s being led by one of the club employees.

I keep my arms linked with the boys as we shuffle through the tight squeeze of people. I see the booth up ahead as we near it but I’m suddenly yanked back and thrust into the grasp of another man. He’s not strong by any means — from what I can feel he’s no larger in frame than any of the lads — but the grip he’s got on me is that single ounce too forceful for me to escape.

I look around in panic, trying to spot Zayn, Liam or anyone I know, but no one’s in sight. All I can feel is the throb of the music, the spiny fingertips that are pressing, bruising into my hips, and the sick, half-hard erection that is incessantly rubbing against my backside without letting up.

“Stop! Please stop!”

I yell but my voice is silent. I move but I am rigid. I search but I am blind.

“Get the fuck off of her, mate!” Andy suddenly finds me, pushing through the crowd of people to reach my figure. He frees me from the man’s grip, shoving him off of me before pulling me closer to his own safety. “Fuck off!”

I don’t look back. I feel like if I did I would have the urge to do much more harm than I would like to tonight. I thank Andy sincerely while he guides me to the booth where our group waits. However, the group didn’t do much waiting. They’ve already cracked open the bottle of vodka and are pouring countless fruity mixes for themselves.

The music is still loud and pounding but it is possible to hear actual speech once we’re sat in the booth. The girls with us are taking so many pictures, I think I’m getting a tan from the flash. But even so, I feel safer than I did mere moments ago.

“Finally made it,” Zayn jokes as I shakily sit next to him. He immediately senses my demeanour. “Are you okay?”

I turn to Zayn, keeping my voice lowered, “I don’t really want to be here right now...”

“Why? What happened?” Zayn suddenly furrows his brows, turning his full attention to me.

“Andy had to come save me. I was almost here but this guy grabbed me... he wouldn’t let go...” I find myself rambling as my voice fades out.

“Shit, I felt you pull away but I thought nothing of it,” Zayn’s pulse visibly rises. His neck and chest flush slightly under the splash of ink across his deep caramel skin.

“It’s not your fault,” I promise him, reaching out to rest my hand on his bicep. “Just an arsehole being a fucking arse.”
“Tonight’s gonna be fun, okay?” there is sincerity in his eyes.

“Okay,” I agree, though all I can focus on is the wicked banter coming from the five girls sat next to us.

“You need to take a Hoover and vacuum up those spiderwebs and shit ‘cause you need cock,” a girl with a heavy European accent continues to laugh with one of the other girls in their circle.

“How is Andy even here?” I casually question, averting my attention around the lot we’re with. “Does he just fly out to party with Liam every month or what?”

“Basically,” Zayn chuckles, his eyes twinkling in the low light.

There is a moment where we just look at each other; smiling but not entirely. There is a trace of shared bemusement but it’s masked by my newfound comfort. The ill feeling; the sickening feeling of unwillingly being used is still there, though.

“Wanna have a drink? Might make you feel better,” Zayn offers kindly, “considering the circumstances and all.”

“For the quiet, mysterious one in the group you do talk a lot,” I show him a soft smile.

“The funny thing is, I’ve always been quite loud. But for some reason on TV it seems like I’m the quiet one,” he tells me with a laugh. “Probably because this lot are so loud.”

“They are something,” I smirk, thinking of Louis and Niall and the others, and the shit they manage to get up to some days. It’s mainly Louis I’m thinking of, really. I would much rather be in bed with him — wrapped in his arms, placing mindless kisses along his fingertips — than to be here in this reckless excuse of an atmosphere when I’m already off to a bad night to begin with. My vision goes back to Zayn as I try to clear my head. “I would like another drink, thanks. But I’ll get it.”

I stand, balancing on my heels as I lean over our table and pour myself a vodka shandy. It’s now that a club promoter decides that it’s time for us to take a group picture. Although I feel pretty similar to shit in this moment, it’s not like I would ever say no to photos, so I sit back down with my drink and put on my best smile for the camera.

The night goes like this — chatting and drinking and taking photographs — until it somehow becomes a mutual decision that we should all migrate to the dance floor. I’ve said it before but I can’t dance. At least not to this kind of music.

Somebody is going to have to make me an offer I can’t refuse if they want me out on that floor again.

“Come on, it’ll be fun, Scar,” Liam smiles without me having to say anything. He knows clubs aren’t my thing but I know he wants to keep us all together. “I’ll dance with you if y’like. I’ll keep you safe,” he whispers as he passes me.

That’s it.

I’m sold.
Thank you so much for reading, voting and all of your lovely comments :) 

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@Scarlet_Ryder || #tangerinefanfiction
The throb of the bass isn’t so apparent now that we’re moving to it.

I’ve barely had four shots but I’m feeling good. I’m feeling light. The lingering smoke from people’s
joints has vapourized into the air, sending us all into a calm high. I haven’t smoked tonight, nor am I going to, but the entire club is like one giant hotbox in itself. It’s almost like we’ve lit up on our own.

Not all of the clubs in Amsterdam allow their patrons to smoke inside, but the larger, more expensive ones have no problem with it. As long as no one’s dealing drugs or causing problems, I think it’s fantastic.

Liam pulls me into his space as the seven of us reach the dance floor. Two of the girls stayed back to chat with each other in the booth but the other three are already tearing up the floor, dancing away with Andy and Zayn to the constant pulsating beat.

“Do you know this song?” Liam yells over the loud music.

“No!” I yell back, laughing.

As if I would know any pop club song playing here tonight. Unless it was a potential Pink Floyd remix or something. That would be rad.

Liam chuckles, his eyes twinkling, “Neither do I!”

He moves side to side along with the music, keeping me close and holding me tight. After what happened after arriving here, I’m not trusting anything that’s going on around me. Especially not with any random guys.

“Scar, check your tweets!” Zayn shouts from beside me.

He’s got two girls on him but he’s smirking at me. I cheekily grimace at him before pulling my phone out of my clutch. I quickly navigate to Zayn’s Twitter profile and chuckle when I see he’s mentioned me and Liam in his latest tweet.

@zaynmalik: Sickkk night with @Real_Liam_Payne and @Scarlet_Ryder in Amsterdam :D !

I retweet Zayn and reply with a grin.

@Scarlet_Ryder: .@zaynmalik Name dropper ;)

Zayn laughs out loud as he sees my response. He puts his mobile away as I do then continues moving to the music with Andy and the girls as Liam and I dance close to the group.

There are some roached out joints littered over the floor. I’ve stepped on a few already, nearly slipping in my high heels. I’m not sure if I want to smoke, really. I know I shouldn’t but the scent is so tempting. Zayn’s already implied how he wouldn’t mind smoking a spliff tonight but only in passing. Since we’re in public we can’t do much other than some light drinking. However, for once I don’t actually mind.

The club in itself is already getting me high — I don’t need much else.

“Pretty, pretty girls!” a middle-aged blonde man with a strong Dutch accent slowly approaches our group.

All three of our girls laugh with a positive, “No.”

The man is clearly drunk. Beyond drunk, to be honest. He sways in his stance as he watches the girls dance, completely disregarding the other men in his midst.
The song transitions into a heavier, more upbeat tempo, making the entire crowd react at once. Shots are downed and drinks are passed along. The haze of marijuana smoke above us glows a vivid purple from the laser lights shining through, illuminating the entire dance floor and the busy patrons around us.

“They don’t want you,” Zayn yells at him, though he goes unnoticed.

The blonde man ignores all protests and continues to pester the three dancing girls without stopping. Zayn tries to intervene but eventually gets fed up and signals for a nearby security guard to come over.

“Heeft u hulp nodig?” the security guard yells over the loud music as soon as he arrives.

“English please,” Zayn shouts back to him, shrugging tensely.

“Do you need help?” the guard asks loudly in an accent similar to the drunk man’s.

“Yeah, this guy won’t leave us alone,” Zayn explains, making hand motions to match his words just in case he can’t be heard over the huge crowd. “He’s really drunk.”

“It’s not the first time,” the guard huffs to us, stepping towards the drunk man without a further thought. “Je moet vertrekken.”

“Vertrekken?!” the drunk man spits, laughing obscenely while looking around at the lot of us. “He said I have to leave!”

“Mate, just go,” Andy steps up to him heatedly.

“You gotta get out, sir,” the security guard repeats to him in a much louder voice.

They go back to speaking in Dutch; bantering back and forth, their tones getting louder with every syllable. I can only make out some of the phrases they’re saying — they tend to switch to English for certain words — but none of their comments are pleasant in the slightest.

“Kicked out of the club, hey?” the drunk man practically screams. A sudden silence fall over us, drawing more attention to our group than any of us would like. “You’re kicked out of life!”

The man suddenly grips onto the front of the security guard’s shirt, sporadically crashing his fists down onto the man’s chest with ineffective strength. The guard seems unaffected by the man’s actions but only because it’s not unusual.

“Back off! Just leave!” Andy helps pull the man away as the security guard does his share of wrangling.

“I’m not! Fucking! Leaving!” he rolls around in their grasp, screaming at the top of his lungs.

“Let’s go!” Liam shouts at me, tugging on my arm and grabbing Zayn to come with us.

“Wait!” I frantically pull away from Liam. “Andy!”

The drunken man suddenly raises his fist in the air. And down it lands, straight across Andy’s jaw. Andy stumbles back, completely disoriented from being hit so unexpectedly. The girls scream and I gasp as Zayn and Liam react much more violently.

“Dude, what the fuck?!” rage shoots from Zayn’s eyes as he clenches his fists by his side.
“You fucking prick!” Liam protectively holds me back as he starts to advance on the man.

“Boys! I’m handling this!” the security guard pushes Zayn and Liam back.

Another guard dressed the same as the first arrives and helps drag the drunk man away from us. The three older men pass through the crowd, moving towards the exit and out of sight. As soon as they’re gone, we all turn to Andy.

One hundred words are said at once as everyone tries to calm him and voice their tones of concern. Andy’s left cheek is pink and his jawline is starting to swell a little, but aside from that no blood has been drawn.

I don’t want to be here anymore.

I can’t be here anymore.

“Fuck, let’s get to the booth!” I yell over the still constant noise.

I take Andy by his arm, leading him back to our booth just as he did for me those few hours ago. He’s clutching onto his face, trying not to inflict any more damage upon himself, though the dense, crowded club is proving the task more difficult than I thought.

“He got kicked out! It’s fine!” Liam shouts, replacing my grasp around Andy’s large arm with his own.

“He got punched in the face!” I yell back to Liam, letting him lead Andy ahead of the rest of us.

“That’s not fine!”

The seven of us gradually reach the booth and Liam sits Andy down. The other two girls are nowhere to be found but that’s the least of our concern at the moment. The noise from the club has noticeably reduced, so we can hear each other speak for once but we’re all definitely still shaken up.

“I am fine,” Andy says after eventually letting go of his visage. “Thank you, Scarlet.”

I nod but don’t say a word.

Liam sits next to his friend, helping to clean him up with a few linens and ice from the drink tray. Zayn, on the other hand, tries to calm the three girls, soothing them all with freshly poured drinks.

Well.

Maybe it’s a soothing action or maybe he’s just thinking with his penis. The girls are very pretty, after all.

The lot of us are still semi-drunk and the mood has definitely been killed. But as his mates assured me, Andy is one tough guy who loves to have fun and even a brutal breakout like that isn’t something to stop him from partying on.

Besides, the Dutch guy was wasted off his ass and his punch had the effect of a schoolgirl.

Or at least that’s what Andy said.

I pretend like I’m over it but I still feel like I had something to do with it. I’ve had a negative outlook since I got here and that surely didn’t help. It’s almost like I brought my bad karma upon the group but that’s probably just me thinking too hard as usual.
I sigh, playing with my hands in my lap. I always have this stupid need to blame myself and take things personally, even if something’s completely out of my control. I dunno, I just feel like I should always be aware and looking out for others. It probably has to do with my subconscious need to make people feel good and make others happy. But it often ends with shit getting turned around and my own efforts biting me hard in the ass.

Just like fucking now.

I need a drink.

No, that’s not it. I need sleep. I need to sleep this off.

Sleep it off and forget about this fucking night.

Ten nights.

That’s how long it took me to get out of this slump. I know I should be over it but I can’t stop thinking about what went down in Amsterdam that night. Andy’s okay and the boys are okay but I just feel so fucking bad. I mean, the guy travelled all the way from England to the Netherlands to have a good night out with his friends and then that shit just had to happen.

It doesn’t seem fair.

That’s not to say we didn’t have amazing shows these past couple of weeks, because we did. The day after Amsterdam we played a gig in Germany then had a few others in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, along with select days off in between. I was even invited to sit in and watch some of the lads’ meet and greets before a couple of their shows. It was the first time I’ve witnessed any kind of organised meet and greets ever and the events were both fantastic and hilarious.

The way One Direction interact with their fans is fucking precious and I’m absolutely in love with it.

Although our next stop is Switzerland, we’re staying in Germany for the next few nights. There are a number of large cities around here and I think the boys might be doing some travelling for publicity and whatnot but my band and I are staying put here in Hamburg. Until we leave for Zurich on Wednesday, that is. But yes, that means we currently have three days off in a row.

A much needed three days off.

We’re still keeping busy, however. Harry and Liam are out together for the day, doing some shopping in downtown Hamburg. Zayn and Niall are spending the afternoon skyping their families and catching up with friends online from their own hotel rooms.

And Louis?

Louis is with me.

The thin curtains of his suite windows are drawn closed but only slightly. The soft light filters into the bedroom, beautifully illuminating the crisp white covers of his bedsheets. The covers are messy, tangled in themselves, but we haven’t been doing a lot of moving around. Mostly, it’s just Louis being Louis. It’s been a lazy day, overall.
Louis chuckles out loud, holding his mobile above his figure, “Looks like our boys were finally caught.”

“You make them sound like culprits,” I smirk, laying down close next to the lad.

“They’re dirty bandits, that’s what they are!” Louis jests, scrolling through a few more pictures on his Twitter timeline.

I watch Louis’ screen, looking at the pictures as they pass. There are only a few photos of Harry with fans — three or four at most — and even less of Liam. It looks like they got lucky and weren’t really spotted more than a couple times. For now, at least.

Harry’s wearing a fucking sweet top today. It’s a faded white Rolling Stones t-shirt with a vintage pastel logo on the front and I’ve already decided I’m going to steal it from him as soon as he gets back. And he’s wearing this tan hat that shouldn’t look good on anyone but it does on him. Fashionable bastard.

It’s quite a new thing. Harry’s been wearing hats a lot lately, almost as much as he was wearing bandanas last week. I guess it’s another one of his strange fashion phases that I really don’t seem to mind. That kid really can pull anything off.

“Someone got lucky,” Louis chuckles as another picture of said boy pops up on his screen.

There’s a young girl beaming her heart out with her arms around Harry’s neck. He’s kissing her cheek with his hands on her waist and he’s also visibly smiling into her skin.

“Jealous,” I whisper, almost unintentionally.

“Don’t worry, babe,” Louis distracts me from my sudden flash of thoughts. “I’ve got you covered.”

I smile as Louis presses a quick kiss to my cheek. But my mind is elsewhere.

Yeah, Harry and I are friends. Yeah, we’re totally alike in every way and that’s why we’ve gotten along since day one. Yeah, he’s insanely attractive but all of the lads are.

So I may have admitted to myself once or twice that I could potentially like Harry a bit more than I should. But that was only mentally in the privacy of my own thoughts, don’t fucking get me wrong on that one. I would never in a million years utter those words, whatever those words might be. Fuck, I don’t even know. It’s all just really goddamn confusing.

Do I like Harry? Of course I do.

Do I have a crush on him? Fuck. It’s fucking weird but yes, in the strangest way I do.

Would I ever hook up with him? I furrow my brows. It’s something I haven’t really put much thought into, but-

“Wait, what is that?!?” I stop Louis from scrolling any further as something on his screen catches my eye.

“Oh shit, yeah,” Louis tisks as he finds a few similar tweets in a row.

“What the actual fuck?!?” I grab Louis’ phone from his grasp, physically needing to see this shit up close.

A number of comments, all about me, are displayed right in front of us. Of course, to the people
writing these words, I’m just another person in the media. They probably have no idea that I’m actually reading what they’ve posted — or even have the chance to see their tweets — but here I am.

And here’s a whole new set of rumours.

Just when I thought it was over.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, voting and all of your lovely comments :)

*Read “Tangerine” on [Wattpad](http://wattpad.com) for quicker updates!*

[@Scarlet_Ryder](http://twitter.com/Scarlet_Ryder) || #tangerinefanfiction
Is Scarlet Ryder actually dating that crackhead because I’m not surprised.

How is she on tour with the boys if she’s fucked up... kids go to those concerts.

Scarlet is dating a crack addict why am I laughing.
And those were some of the nicer tweets.

Louis and I remain on his hotel bed, scrolling through his Twitter feed until we’ve both had enough. Basically, Samuel’s addiction story got leaked. Or published, depending on how keen his management team was on making a few extra dollars at their client’s expense. Either way, the press found out and quickly got a hold of the story. Now the entire world knows that Samuel Kitchen from The Radiants is in rehab for his cocaine addiction.

But to top it all off — what makes me laugh most — is that the One Direction fandom has decided to bring me in on this nonsense. All because of a couple of fan photos were posted from our fake date back at the end of March.

Just imagine if I actually went to lunch with him for the paps like Mitch had planned.

That would be a fucking riot.

Although I’m being made out to be a questionable person right now, I’m at least relieved that no journalists have picked up on the fandom’s behaviour just yet. The press never cares if people get hurt as long as they get a story out of it. If they can create a headline and get it publicised, they’re satisfied as long as people start talking. Whether that talk is good or bad, they really don’t give a shit. They’ve done their job.

It’s evidently happened with Samuel being exposed but I’m really not ready for that to happen to me. They say all press is good press but I am a real person underneath it all. To know people are talking about me and thinking about me at all hours of the day can get stressful enough in itself. Even if the majority of opinions on normal days aren’t all that bad, it’s still something that’s always on my mind.

It’s just happening so fast.

My life has been reduced to a series of photographs.

And at this stage, there’s no going back.

I sit cross-legged on the white linen sheets of the bed. A glass of red wine is in my hand and my vision is set upon the tiny droplets clinging to the clear rim from where I just took a sip.

“Careful not to spill,” Louis hums mindlessly.

“It’s not like you could afford the damages anyway,” I smile to myself, swirling the dark liquid around in the glass.

It’s become kind of a thing. Playing gigs until we can’t hear anymore, savouring our days off like lucky stars, and Louis. Always Louis. So so so so much Louis. We’re together more than we’re not. And even when he needs time to himself, he invites me along.

I want to scream symphonies and vomit tears — the happy kind. Louis makes me feel so lucid, so vibrant, I’m bursting at the seams and I can’t even hide it anymore.

There’s something about Europe. It’s more romantic.

After visiting Switzerland and putting on another show for Germany, we spent a couple of days in
Italy; playing gigs for both Verona and Milan. Next to London, Paris and New York, Milan is one of the four fashion capitals of the world, so we definitely did a lot of shopping there.

“We” as in Harry, Louis, Elijah and I, for the most part.

The weather in Italy was so fucking nice and now that we’re in Spain it’s even better. The sun beats down at the high hours of the day, making shorts and sunglasses mandatory. Everyone is making the most of their afternoons, getting out as much as they can to soak up the bare heat. It’s such a brilliant change from bleary, stormy England and I absolutely love it.

I’m such a summer person, it’s insane.

“This is my favourite scent of candle,” Louis says as he lights the jar on the suite windowsill. “It’s fig.”

“You mean you actually have a favourite?”

“What’s so odd about that?” Louis grins innocently, pacing back to me.

“Nothing, nothing,” I smirk at him.

“All the other lads have favourites.”

“Do they?”

Louis nods, sitting next to me on the bed, “They all like vanilla, except for Harry who likes vanilla-tobacco.”

“And you’re just the weirdo who likes fig,” I poke him in his side playfully.

“Exactly,” Louis giggles.

Fucking giggles.

“Can we smoke the vaporizer now?” I ask.

Louis doesn’t respond.

Instead, he leans forward and brings his face to mine, pressing our lips together in a soft, sweet kiss.

“Yeah, babe,” his voice cracks deeply as he pulls away.

I fiddle with the rim of my wine glass, taking a few sips as Louis sets up his vaporizer. He bought the machine back when we were in Amsterdam but decided not to tell me until we got here. Louis already knew we would be in Spain for a few days so he figured we might as well have some fun in the temporary comfort of his own suite.

The type of machine Louis bought is a typical forced-air vaporizer, meaning we can get high indoors since it only expels vapour and not smoke. Louis lets the machine preheat to his desired temperature then grinds some of his weed before placing it in the top of the apparatus. Minutes pass and the detachable balloon at the top of the device steadily fills with vapors from the heated weed until it is completely expanded.

“Dinner’s ready,” Louis hums adorably, removing the translucent balloon from the top of the vaporizer and coming back to sit with me on his bed.
Louis puts the round mouthpiece to his lips, sucking the first load of vapour into his lungs. He exhales soon after, laying his body back on the bed before wordlessly passing the balloon onto me.

I do the same as Louis, bringing the mouthpiece to my lips and inhaling the sweet vapour. I hold it in, wanting to get as much out of it as I can, then I blow it all out, handing the balloon to Louis once more. I lay down beside him, calmly staring up at the high ceiling above us.

I can’t feel it yet but I know it’ll hit me hard soon.

“Nice socks, darling,” I chuckle, looking down at Louis’ form.

“You think so?” Louis raises his legs in the air, pointing his tiny toes back and forth for a laugh.

Louis stole my socks earlier today because all of his pairs needed a wash.

Basically, he’s wearing pink socks.

“Pink’s your colour, Lou,” I smirk, taking another hit from the balloon as he hands it to me. “Makes you look sexy.”

“If I’m sexy, what are you?” Louis winks at me.

“Average at best,” I smile pleasantly.

We finish off the rest of the vapour, sucking at the mouthpiece until the balloon is completely deflated. Louis puts the discarded pieces to the side, on the table next to the rest of his paraphernalia, before rounding back to me. We can worry about cleaning up later. For now, it’s just us and the silence of the room bringing us impossibly closer.

I turn onto my side as Louis lays back on his bed once more; this time, closer to me than before so our limbs are touching. A warm feeling spreads through my body at the slightest contact.

I love being able to lie in bed and see Louis next to me. To watch his shallow breaths, smell his musky skin, kiss his perfectly sculpted lips. I would truly be happy to nestle myself in the crinkles by Louis’ eyes and sleep forever.

“You’re quite beautiful, you know,” Louis looks at me with as much intent as I know I’m looking at him.

“You’re too much,” I reply softly, a smile coming to rest in my eyes.

Louis and I have been lazing around in his hotel suite all day; just the two of us. It’s been a lazy day off but it’s times like these that I appreciate most.

I first met the boys just about six months ago, so I’ve only known them for half a year, but it feels like we’ve all been closely knit for ages. I realized a while ago how much I genuinely do need them and how all five boys are some of the main sources of positivity in my life.

But it’s even more so with Louis Tomlinson.

Louis and I have been spending so much time together lately — more than we ever have in the past — that I’m starting to rethink the whole “just having fun” thing. Our sex is incredible and he’s just so handsome and hot and flawless and sexy and adorable and fuckable and stunning and perfect and fuck I’m hyperventilating.

The thing is, Louis has been there for me whenever I’ve needed him. Especially during this past
week or so, considering everything that’s happened. The rumours haven’t stopped yet but they’ve let up a bit. Louis has already assured me that the fans will get bored and eventually move onto more exciting, more recent news. It happens like this all the time, he said, and it’s just a cycle I have to learn to live with.

The recent rumours really were unfortunate — as I’ve gone over so many times both verbally and mentally — but I could always have it worse. At least I’ve had the pleasure to get lucky with gossip in the past. I mean, millions of people assuming that I’m dating Harry Styles isn’t exactly something to frown upon.

“You know what’s funny, Louis?” I giggle, thinking of those first rumours I had to endure. “It’d be the biggest plot twist in the world if everyone found out you and I were shagging.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because your fans ship me with Harry,” I smirk, really feeling the soft high fade over me.

“Ship you where?” Louis shifts himself onto his side to face me.

“Ship, like as a couple, you idiot,” I give him a light shove on his shoulder.

“Oh fuck,” Louis chuckles. “I think this weed got me way too fucking high, babe.”

“I think you’re just soft,” I tease him.

“I’m quite the opposite of soft, if you’d care to check my pants,” Louis hints suggestively, shifting even closer to me.

It’s the stare before the kiss that always gets me. The lingering anticipation of what’s to come and how it’s going to happen.

Louis’ face nears mine ever so slowly. His eyes flutter shut in expectation. His soft, dark eyelashes paint subtle shadows that dance patterns across his prominent high cheek bones.

“Let’s get under the covers,” I whisper just before our lips can touch.

Louis pleasantly agrees. We sleepily slide off the bed and pull the duvet back before climbing in and cuddling up together. My legs fit comfortably in between his as he wraps the blankets around us like we’re in our own little cocoon.

Louis and I have been like this, on and off, for the past while but nothing’s been said about how intimate we actually are. I’m incredibly close with all the lads but with Louis it’s obviously so much more than that. Neither of us have uttered the “boyfriend” or “girlfriend” word yet but at this point it may already be assumed. It’s truly scaring the shit out of me.

I think I’m in love with him.

I’ve honestly been thinking about it every day but I’ve never wanted to admit it to myself. Maybe I am. But even if I really was, I wouldn't know how to tell him. I'm considering taking the lame way out and saying, “You know who I love? You.”

But they say if you really love someone, you should tell them. No matter how anxious or fearful you are of their response, you should tell them. Even if you’re unsure if they will or won’t say those three words back to you, you should tell them with confidence. Be bold and see where you might end up.
I inhale sharply through my nose and breath out shakily past my lips.

“Louis...” I begin slowly.

“Yeah, Scarlet?”

My heart is pounding so feverishly in my chest I’m surprised the neighbours haven’t complained about the noise. My palms are sweating and my mouth is dry and I can’t do it. The words are there, they’re just not coming out.

I nestle up into Louis’ chest, “I just like knowing you’re here.”

“Always.”

And after mere moments, the warmth and comfort of Louis’ body against mine sends me cascading into my slow, blissful world of dreams.

We just got back to the UK after completing our final show for the European leg of the tour. We just flew in from Portugal yesterday. So what better way to celebrate than to get completely smashed off our faces and make it a night we won’t forget? Or a night we will entirely forget, depending on how much we all drink.

The boys were debating if we should throw a huge shindig or if we should just keep the group small, and we kind of decided on both.

We have a full twelve days before we leave for America. We spent our first night at home settling in and finally getting to relax for once — in mine and Zayn’s case, sleeping for twenty-four hours — but now that it’s our second night back we’re ready to party.

We’re still going to have a large get-together eventually (with an insane amount of people that we’ve probably never met before) but we’re saving that for the end of the break. Tonight, we’re keeping it sacred. The only people here are myself, my own band and One Direction.

Just the nine of us.

We were originally going to invite a few more people we’re close with, like Lou and Andy and Naomi, but we figured they could wait until the group bash. Tonight has more meaning that way, anyway. It’s more special. More intimate. And it’s totally American-themed, thanks to Niall’s expert planning. Theme parties are the best parties, as he insistently told us.

The lad is wearing a pair of boxer-briefs with an American flag on his arse and a grey zip-hoodie without anything underneath. He’s strewn red, white and blue banners all over a hotel suite he rented for us in London and has pinned a giant American flag onto the largest wall of the room.

As if he could’ve made more of a statement.

I’m wearing a star spangled banner dress that I’ve had for a while. I’ve never worn it only because I’ve never had the chance to but I’ve always thought it looked rad as fuck. And it fits in all the right places if I’m not sounding too cheeky.

The lads have definitely gone all out as well; wearing their share of red, white and blue attire. Elijah,
for one, is wearing nothing but an American flag on himself. Literally, that’s it. He’s just wrapped a giant cloth flag around his body and claimed it as “fashion.”

I got here before anyone else did and I helped Niall set the place up as the rest of the boys filtered in soon after. Harry was the last one to arrive. We greeted each other cheerfully but it was that awkward moment where we both went in for a hug and our heads went the same way and then our lips were almost touching and we just stopped.

The world stopped.

Neither one of us moved.

Then I ducked my head and let out a half-cough, half-laugh. And I was pulling away from Harry and slowly backing out of his arms. And I needed to sit down but I was also dying to splash my face with cold water because it felt like I was on fire.

So here I am in the bathroom.

And I look great now that I’m not so flustered and shit. Like, this is probably the hottest I’ve ever looked. My hair is silky and radiant and my makeup was done perfectly, smoky eye and all. And I fit myself into this sinfully tight dress with the top cut low. And now I have that fucking pop song stuck in my head.

So here I am in the bathroom.

And I look great now that I’m not so flustered and shit. Like, this is probably the hottest I’ve ever looked. My hair is silky and radiant and my makeup was done perfectly, smoky eye and all. And I fit myself into this sinfully tight dress with the top cut low. And now I have that fucking pop song stuck in my head.

I need to get the hell out of this tiny room.

“So how do you lads get on with Simon?” I hear Keith chatting up the One Direction boys as I exit the bathroom.

“We have to take him to the dinosaur exhibit just so he can relate,” Louis explains in a serious tone.

Liam nods, “He loves the woolly mammoth.”

“Full of shit, you lot,” I chuckle, taking a seat on the living room couch between Louis and Elijah.

“Ye need a drink, I’m on it,” Niall says and whips off to the kitchen, returning in no time with two bright blue drinks in his hand.

“That,” I laugh, “looks disgusting.”

“It tastes like a blue ice lolly, I swear,” Niall insists.

I shrug, grabbing a glass from him.

It’s my third drink. I already had two screwdrivers while I was setting up with Niall before the lads came. You never really can go wrong with vodka and orange juice. It holds a special place in my heart. I smile to myself while taking a sip of Niall’s strange, colourful creation. It actually doesn’t taste that bad.

Niall was right. It really does taste like a blue ice lolly.

I’ve got my free hand on Louis’ thigh. It’s a thing we’ve become so accustomed to; sitting up close and shamelessly showing our affection when we’re in the company of people we trust. Everyone knows we’re a thing — it’s been blatantly obvious for months — but I’m sure everyone’s just as hesitant to put a label on it as we are. In the mean time, I’m just enjoying all the sexual benefits that come along with being so close to Louis Tomlinson.
I subtly trail my fingertips over the soft material of Louis’ grey sweatpants, giving his thigh a soft squeeze every now and then. His legs are really soft and he smells incredible and I’m completely blissed out.

Louis clears his throat and readjusts himself in his seat, uncomfortably attempting to loosen the bunched up material covering the front of his crotch.

Either that, or he has a semi-chub in his sweatpants and he’s trying to hide it in front of the lads.

I lean my head onto Louis’ shoulder, tickling his skin with my breath as I whisper to him, “Just looking at the bulge of your fucking cock is getting me wet.”

“Get on my lap,” Louis hisses back without even hesitating. “Now.”

It’s not a question. It’s not even an offer. It’s a demand.

I’m pretty sure my nipples are hard.

I get up and sit on Lou’s lap, reverse cowgirl. The boys take notice and laugh because they know it’s sexual. Even I laugh along. I make myself comfortable, resting my full weight on Louis’ muscular thighs. I’ve still got half a glass of Niall’s blue shit in my hand but I down it, quickly drinking the liquid to its last drop.

Then Louis suddenly thrusts up for a prank and I nearly spit out my drink.

“Make me choke, Lou!” I yell as soon as I swallow. The entire room suddenly falls silent. I obliviously look around at the boys before I finally get it. Then I hide my face in my hands, cursing at myself. “Fuck, I had that one coming.”

“Coming?” Pete asks. “Or coming?”

“Is everything I say gonna be a sexual innuendo?” I chuckle embarrassedly.

“Pretty much, babe,” Harry voices amusingly.

Babe. Babe. Yeah, I wasn’t expecting that.

It’s the first and only thing Harry has said all night but it’s not like he hasn’t called me babe before. All of the guys have — it’s just a habit we all possess. Maybe it only caught me off guard this time because we were talking about sexual things. Or maybe I’m just a drunk fucking idiot over-thinking every little ounce of asshole as usual.

Yeah, that’s it.

“I’m off to the Jack’s,” Niall announces loudly as he stands up out of his seat.

“Same,” Pete chimes.

“Wait, are you going pee?” I ask. “Because I have to as well.”

“Yeh, I’m gonna hold his cock while we go if that’s alright,” Niall slurs, smirking straight at me.

“Tradition,” Pete agrees smugly before they both leave the room.

“Where the hell are the USA tunes?” Liam asks the lot of us, noticing the sudden drop in volume. “Play some God Bless the USA. The Family Guy version. I listen to that shit every night. It’s the last
thing I think about before I go to sleep.”

“The last thing I think about before I go to sleep is what time do I have to wake up,” Zayn laughs to himself.

“We’re on our break, Zayn,” Liam tells him, “you don’t need to wake up.”

“Fuck, you’re right, I forgot,” a wonderful grin spreads wide across Zayn’s face. “I’m so happy right now. Thanks, Liam!”

“Get a room!” Louis shouts at the two hilariously, making the entire group howl.

“Yer one t’ talk!” Keith laughs out loud at Louis, looking at me sitting on his lap. “I wouldn’t be surprised if ye’ve already got yer cock out!”

“If anyone’s getting his cock out tonight it’s gonna be Elijah,” Pete says as he returns to the living room with Niall still back in the bathroom.

“What?” Elijah snaps his head up to Pete as he passes him. “Why me?”

“I can nearly see your ballsack under that flag-”

“It’s a dress, hello.”

“-are you even wearing pants?”

“It’s called being a true American and going commando,” Elijah raises his eyebrows to Pete as if he’s proven a point.

“Oh my god, I’m not drunk enough for this,” my eyes widen as I huff out a laugh. I pull myself off of Louis’ lap and sit down next to him like we were cuddling before. “Babe, I’m making another drink, do you want anything?”

“Still working on me beer, thanks, sweetheart,” Louis winks at me, playfully pinching my bum as I stand up. I stick my tongue out at him as I leave the living room and head into the kitchen.

I rinse my glass in the sink before drying it, then pour myself a good-sized shot. Maybe it’s two shots worth but who’s counting? I navigate over to the fridge, looking through the shelves for something to mix my alcohol with, nibbling on my lower lip as I do so. I hear someone enter the kitchen, assuming it’s Louis without even looking.

“Have you seen the-” I turn around to see a taller boy than I expected. “Oh, it’s you Harry.”

“Were you expecting someone else?” Harry chuckles, his dimples on full display.

“No, I just thought you were Lou,” I laugh.

“Would you rather it be Lou?” the boy asks in a cheeky tone.

“Harry,” I smirk and tilt my head.

“Not disappointed are you?” he smirks back.

“You’re not much of a disappointment,” I chuckle softly.

It embarrasses me just to say that.
I shouldn’t have said that.

Harry’s face falls, making me wonder if I’ve said the wrong thing or if I was too brash. Usually, comments like that would be taken lightly between us. Harry and I have never shared awkward silences before, it’s just not how we are. But ever since we got back to England he’s been acting strangely. He’s barely said three words the entire night.

Just as I expected, Harry uneasily changes the subject, “What are you looking for?”

“Orange juice for the vodka,” I avert my vision back to the various food items among the shelves.

“Back right.”

I finally spot the carton of orange juice just where Harry said it should be. I take it out and pour my drink as Harry watches me rather uncomfortably. I give him a polite smile as I screw the cap back on the carton and set it back in the fridge. I close the refrigerator door and dry my hands off on my dress before exhaling deeply.

And as I turn around, there is Harry.

And there are Harry’s lips.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, voting and all of your lovely comments :)

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Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It takes a moment for me to register what is actually happening.

So it takes a moment for me to actually kiss him back.

The kitchen is completely silent aside from the distant chatter of the boys in the living room and the hot, frantic breaths being exchanged between Harry and I.

Our mouths slide against each other’s, hot, wet and messy, yet slow. Harry grabs onto my waist, grinding into me slightly; letting out a strained, silent moan against my lips. My hands find his hair as I pull him in and he kisses me deeper.

It's too much.

I want him too much.

I push him back. His pupils are dilated and his lips are pink and swollen. I doubt I look much different.

“Harry...” I voice in a hushed whisper, slightly panting; our faces still close. I’m unsure if I even said that.
Harry says nothing. He’s still fixed on the moment with a stare that cuts right through me; his breaths short and shallow. I press my forehead against his. And there’s nothing I can do but turn around, leaving him alone in the kitchen as I rejoin the boys in the living room.

Fuck.

Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.

My legs wobble and my knees shake as I tread out of the kitchen. All I can think about is Harry. I feel like I’m floating rather than walking. I don’t feel like I’m here. Really, I feel like I’m out of my own body, watching myself from above as I wring my hands together in anxiety.

I sit next to Louis on the couch, entirely shaken up. The lads have been so caught up in their own craic they barely noticed me or Harry leave. Louis is quick to pull me into himself the moment I return, having me rest against his torso as he slides an arm around my shoulders. The boys go on voicing nonsense about the difference between an orange and a tangerine while I sit uncomfortably in Louis’ hold.

Until Harry returns from the kitchen.

I try hard not to stiffen up but my body fails me. I do my best to ignore him and pretend I’m preoccupied listening to the others but it’s not really working. And then he finally speaks.

“Scarlet...” he breathes. My name sounds so different coming from his worn lips; the same lips that were against mine mere moments ago.

I look up from my seat, as do the boys.

And there’s Harry standing by the kitchen doorway with two glasses in hand.

“You forgot your drink,” he continues.

My stomach does a flip as I stand up, nearing Harry stiffly in front of the lads. I barely want to look him in the eye. I feel like I’m gonna throw up. I know I’m gonna throw up. There’s something in me that feels a little like guilt, but I’m still turned on as fuck. I’m not entirely sure where my brain is but it’s not entirely sure where I am either so there’s that.

“Fix yer hair, mate!” Niall laughs out loud from behind us. “What ye been doin’? Makin’ out with yerself in there?!!”

Holy fucking shit. What fucking irony. If only he knew I was the cause.

The boys laugh and drink as I watch Harry sort out his once-tousled hair with a shake and a swipe. His long fingers cascade back through his shaggy chestnut hair, following the previous traces made by my own touch. I want to touch his hair again.

Fuck, I want to fucking kiss him again.

“Thanks,” Harry jests to me quietly, handing me my drink. It looks as if there is a smirk itching at the corners of his mouth, but I left him in such a fluster that he’s probably unsure if he should show it or not.

I let him wonder.

Once I realise that I’ve been staring at Harry for a well-extended moment, I turn on my heel and
smoothly park myself next to Louis again, only out of pure familiarity. I keep to myself as I sip on my orange juice and vodka mix; looking around at the boys as they speak but not really listening either.

“What’s that, number seven, Horan?” Keith chuckles as Niall cracks open a new beer for himself.

“I’ve never had a drink in me life,” Niall states, smirking.

“Says the most drunk of the lot,” Zayn shakes his head playfully.

Niall gives Zayn a look, then raises his bottle to his mouth and chugs down half of his beer in one go like his life depends on it. He slams his bottle on the table in front of him moments later, letting out a loud, obscene burp.

“This is my first beer,” he insists, “I dunno what yer talkin’ about.”

“Take it easy on the lad,” Liam chuckles at the boys, raising his own glass to Niall. “I’m pretty sure I’m gonna get whacked tonight too.”

“Do you mean whacked off?” Louis voices, cheekily peering over at me with a sparkle in his eye. “Because in that case, same.”

I would usually retort with something equally as clever. But right now, I merely let out an uneasy chuckle. It sounds way too polite to be an actual reaction; so forced that even drunk Louis can tell.

“You okay, babe?” he whispers lowly, his hot breath tingling the flushed skin of my cheek.

“Yeah, I’m-” I begin in a voice so abnormally loud that Liam, Elijah and Harry all turn their heads to look at me and Louis. “I’m, uh... Just a bit lightheaded,” I say in a normal tone this time; my eyes never leaving Harry’s. “That’s all.”

Louis and I were fine before I went into the kitchen. We were normal as always; cute and flirty and all that regular shit. But now that I’m back and now that Harry fucking Styles has fucking kissed me...

I need to sit down.

I am sitting down.

I feel so off. So different. It’s only been five minutes but everything has changed.

I always knew Harry was a flirt, so it was no surprise whenever he made suggestive comments around me. Even the dirty jokes were a given. But I had no clue that he was actually into me like that. Okay, maybe I had a bit of a clue from all of Naomi’s suggestions and my band teasing me every now and then. Even Zayn grew to become convinced that Harry and I could be a thing.

But even with all the questionable moments we’ve had – extended glances, lingering touches and drunken agreements included – the kiss was still a total shock.

It was an extraordinary feeling to be kissed by Harry. I don’t know what it was; his lips, the way he was holding me, or the excitement of not knowing what kissing him would be like. Whatever it was, it was fantastic. Harry’s lips are much more full and plump than Louis’ are; something I could definitely feel when they were pressed so tightly, sliding so instinctively, against mine. He’s taller so I had to crane my neck more than I would with Louis and he tasted so deliciously like rum and honey. I can still feel his kiss tingling on my mouth; the smooth friction of his skin against mine has
only left me craving more.

Then again, he’s Harry Styles; my best fucking friend.

I’ve stopped trying to listen to what the eight boys surrounding me are saying. I tuned them out long ago; I’ve got more than enough on my mind already. It’s only when Harry voices my name again that I snap out of my thoughts and bring myself to look over at the boy once more.

I watch Harry’s lips as he licks off the evidence of our kiss.

“Remember when we were watching the Dark Side of the Rainbow at yours?” he questions deeply.

Harry strokes his lower lip as he speaks to me, bringing attention to his face, hands and mouth. And it just makes me feel like smacking my head against a brick wall.

“Of course,” I curse silently to myself as my voice audibly cracks.

Of course I remember that night. How could I forget it? Before we had even played our first show together – before the tour had even started – Harry and I had already become best mates. It was a queer night, that one. Both of us were entirely sober yet we were both sort of in a daze. We had stretched out on my couch together with his body against mine and his limbs entwined with my own. I’m pretty sure I passed out halfway through but it was only because Harry was so soft and warm. We were both so at ease.

But we were friends then. And now? Fuck, I don’t have a clue what’s going on. I’m entirely in limbo.

“Do you remember that one scene?” Harry continues and I’ve already lost him. “Where Dorothy helped the Scarecrow down from the wooden post and then he jumped the gun and asked to come to Oz with her?”

I speak slowly, completely unclear where he’s going with this, “I do...”

Harry stiffly leans forward in his chair, gripping his hands together until he’s white at the knuckles, “Do you think the Scarecrow made the right decision?”

Oh.

Oh.

I clear my throat, watching Harry very carefully among the steady glares of the other lads, “I think... Dorothy was surprised at first and maybe a bit confused... but I think she wanted to help him all along. Even if she didn’t know it at first.”

“You mean she wanted to the whole time?” Harry’s breath visibly catches in his throat. “Why didn’t she say anything?”

“I don’t think she knew he wanted to do something like that with her... until he gave her that... offer.”

“There were so many offers,” Harry tries to hide his smirk by softly biting his lower lip.

“Dorothy can also be kind of a dumbass sometimes,” I return his shy smirk, my face growing a light shade of crimson.

“Do you think Dorothy would ever... help the Scarecrow again... if she had the chance?” Harry watches me steadily, his deep green eyes cutting into mine.
I open my mouth to respond but Niall suddenly cuts into our conversation.

“I ship Dorothy and the Scarecrow!” he laughs amusingly, downing yet another drink from his bottle.

Louis shakes his head, pompously scrunching his face at the lad, “The Tin Man’s where it’s at, mate.”

In a way, I’m surprised they have no idea what we’re talking about. I’m relieved, more like it. As soon as Harry came out of the kitchen, I was expecting him to say something about what just happened between us. I mean, he kind of just did but it was in a way less explicit manner.

“The human counterpart of the Scarecrow is Dorothy’s friend Hunk,” Harry shakes his head at Louis. “He was the closest with her back in Kansas, even over Zeke and Hickory. They’ve had that connection from the start.”

The fucking cheek of him.

“I think Dorothy would like the tin dick over some straw,” Pete chuckles, making the lads go into a riot, “let’s be honest.”

“Dick can be great but they’re more than that,” I say.

Then I suddenly frown at myself.

I did not just stand up for Harry. The Scarecrow. Whoever the fuck he is.

Harry watches me intently as he sips deeply from his dark glass. Louis and the boys go on debating who Dorothy would rather fuck, meanwhile I can’t help but stare at the young, curly-haired boy.

I must be more tipsy than I thought.

I pull out my mobile, needing a solid distraction from the current moment. I take a deep breath then type out a simple text to Naomi.

Me: *Harry fucking kissed me*

I delete the message as soon as I send it. I don’t know why I did it but if the chance comes around where somebody needs to use my phone, I don’t want the first thing they see to be my angsty confession exposing the boy they know so well.

Minutes pass and I still haven’t heard from Naomi. I consider texting Harry himself, until-

Naomi: *WGHATHG*

Naomi: *OHN KYMH FUCKGHN gOD*

Naomi: *WHEN*

I chuckle at the girl’s sudden response. Naomi was one of the first people to suggest there might be something more going on between me and Harry that I wasn’t aware of; it’s only fair that I would tell her first. I owe her that, at least.

Me: *Just fucking now*
Naomi: **SCRAREKT**

Naomi: **I KNEW IT**

I smile to myself but only softly. I’m still very much in shock and I doubt there will be any breaking
that for the next long while. However long that while may be.

Me: **I know**

Me: **Fuck**

Naomi: **HOW WAS IT**

I lean my head back and it just so happens to fall on Louis’ shoulder resting behind me. I don’t move
away, although I do feel slightly uncomfortable. Louis and I have obviously been close for a very
long time, physically especially, but somehow right now it feels different.

Funny how as soon as I considered being in love with Louis, things had to take a fucking 180 and
*this* had to happen. Not that I’m complaining. I’m kind of complaining. I do love Louis. It’s the kind
of love that I could possibly be in, I think. Or, I dunno.

We’re kind of a thing; we’ve been inseparable ever since that first night at the bar... but then there's
Harry.

Why the fuck did he have to kiss me now, of all times? Why did it have to be so spontaneous, so
heated, so unexpected, so... *fucking mind blowing*?!

I anxiously play with my phone in my hands before sending Naomi another couple of quick texts.

Me: **So fucking good**

Me: **I’dk what to do**

I’m almost about to lock my phone but she responds without missing a beat.

Naomi: **INM SCJDEAMHNG**

Naomi: **WHEN’S THE WEDDING**

I want to bury my face in my hands. I want to scream and groan and peel my face off and I’m
absolutely furious with Harry Styles.

Me: **Don’t push it**

Naomi: *oh my fucking god i’m at dinner with my family i need to go but please please please call
me later i need these juicy deets ok bye xxxxxxxx*

And as soon as I had reassurance, my reassurance was gone.

Aside from being buried by my mobile, all I continue to do is down screwdrivers throughout the
evening. Sure, I’ll add into the conversation every now and then but I’ll only go so far to voice a few
amusing words. We’re celebrating a big event so I’m trying to make the best of it but I’m just not
feeling the vibe.

Harry hasn’t brought up what happened anymore – he hasn’t even implied anything, which is
surprising – but he has been giving me suggestive, knowing looks all night long. Looks that I really can’t ignore.

“Mary, Mary quite contrary,” Niall sings drunkenly, doing a little limp wrist dance in front of the lot of us. “I’m so gay I might be a fairy.”

All seven of the lads burst out howling as Louis shouts out a loud, “Niall, you’re cut off!”

“I’d turn straight just to not have that,” Elijah chuckles along with the group, taking a humoured sip from his own drink.

I laugh as well since, let’s be real, who wouldn’t laugh when it comes to Niall? But it feels different. It feels dry. I’ve had a number of more drinks since Harry... well. So many drinks I haven’t been keeping count. Harry and I abandoned our shot-for-shot rule tonight, for some reason. It’s the first I’m noticing the shocking lack of interaction between us. But like I mentioned, he had been acting weird since he first got here.

At least now I know why.

I genuinely wonder how long he’s been fucking planning to kiss me like that. Or not. Maybe it was spontaneous. It was probably just spontaneous. We’ve all been drinking and Harry and I are friends. Friends, I scoff to myself.

Nevermind. Friends don’t fucking kiss each other then make up Wizard of Oz references to talk about said kiss in front of their bandmates. God, I’m fucked.

I’m so so so entirely fucked. I’m so fucked it does my head in. I’ve reached the level of fucked where I can’t possibly be any more fucked. That fucked.

Does Harry want to fuck?

I avert my vision and look over to the boy. His loose chocolate curls are pushed back past his forehead, his dark green eyes twinkle as he laughs along with a joke Keith just told, and his full lips are stained a deep pink like they were purposely painted that way. Or shit, maybe some of my lipstick rubbed off on him.

Rubbed off on him.

For fuck’s sake. I really need to get my mind out of the fucking gutter. No, at this level of drinking, that is actually not happening; I know it. I can’t be here anymore. I can’t be around Harry.

I grab my drink from the table in front of me – my fifth or sixth, I’m not sure – and chug the whole thing down until there’s nothing left. I set the glass back on the table a little too loudly before I stand up and walk past the lads, making most of their attention draw over to me.

“Burnt out already, Scarlet?” Zayn voices, looking a bit taken aback.

“Yeh, yer always one of the last to stay!” Keith adds in. “What’s up?”

“Just a bit tired,” I shrugged at the group.

“That’s not very patriotic of you, miss Ryder!” Elijah scolds teasingly, readjusting his flag dress so it doesn’t fall past his nipples.

“That’s what I’m saying! Do you hate the USA or something?!” Liam puts on a mocking look for a
laugh.

“The states are great and so are you lot,” I smile endearingly. “I just need to lie down for a bit.”

I look around at the boys, finally realising how ridiculous we all must look; all donned in red, white and blue attire with no shortage of stars and American flags. But I repeat the same lame excuse that I’m just lightheaded, adding in that I may have had a little too much to drink, and they all come to a mutual acceptance.

“Niall, I’m just gonna grab one of the rooms, if that’s fine.”

“’Course, love,” he kindly winks at me. “Anywhere ye like.”

I smile and take my tote bag from one of the side tables, then say goodnight to the boys without a further word. I’m not sure if Louis was expecting a kiss or a hug at the very least but the sour look of wantonness in his eyes may have been that hope. I try even harder not to look at Harry but my curiosity gets the better of me. And just as I suspected, he’s looking right at me.

Harry’s eyebrows are furrowed together in a pleasant way. He looks calmer than usual and it’s scaring the shit out of me considering we just made out no more than two hours ago. I want to run over and hug him, at least give him a kiss on the cheek, but even as best friends I still feel like I’d owe the others something in return.

I stare at Harry but I don’t say anything. I wouldn’t even know what to say, if I could actually speak. And moments later, I’m exiting the living room and walking down through Niall’s suite. I enter the last bedroom at the end of the hall then change into the looser, more comfortable clothes I packed for myself in my tote bag. There’s no way I’m passing out in this tight fucking USA dress. No matter how fitting and sexy it looked all night.

I’m not entirely smashed but I’m drunk enough to begin spinning moments after I lie down. It’s a chore to close my eyes, no matter how fucking much I want to. It feels like I’m out at sea. And although boats are lovely, it’s the exact opposite of whatever I need right now.

I want to sleep. I have to sleep. I need a way to distract myself from this absolute somersault of a day and I’m counting on my dreams to be the perfect diversion. I count the tiles on the ceiling, the slats of wood on the floor, hoping anything will lull me into a daze. But the shouts and cheers from the boys outside just keep my mind overly active.

I wonder if Harry told anyone what happened with us like I told Naomi. I wonder if he told anyone what he was going to do before he did it. I wonder when he’s going to kiss me next; he did suggest that he wanted to.

I wonder if Louis has any clue.

Fuck, Louis.

I can hear the gorgeous bugger’s voice from all the way in the furthest bedroom; shouting profanities and laughing wildly. Nothing out of the usual, of course. He’s helping ease my vertigo but he’s definitely not helping with this whole sleep thing.

None of them are.

This is gonna be a long night.
Thank you so much for reading, voting and all of your lovely comments :) 

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@Scarlet_Ryder || #tangerinefanfiction
The incessant pounding in my head is what wakes me.

Louis’ arm is draped over my torso and his face is nuzzled into the back of my neck. With my arse to his front, I reach out and grab a glass of what I hope is water from the bedside table. I drink the liquid down to its last drop, feeling as if I could do that three times more and still be dehydrated.

I’m not sure if I’m hungover or still drunk. What I do know is that I need some food in me. And quick, or else I might see the remnants of last night’s drinks all over the floor. But I honestly can’t move under Louis’ deadweight and even if I could I’d probably pass out from such quick advances.

I turn over onto my back, gripping my mobile phone in my hand. I always sleep with it next to me; it’s no surprise that it was already in my hand when I woke up. I lift my phone above my head and unlock it in my daze. It’s only when I sense soft movement from Louis’ other side that I notice Zayn was in bed with us this entire time. The two lads are both completely passed out next to me as I take my time to slowly wake up.

I only have two unread messages. One is from my manager, confirming our plans for tomorrow, and the other one is from Harry.

Harry: Woke up thinking of you.
With those simple words, all of last night’s events come flooding back to me. It’s not like I haven’t been dreaming of him all night long but now that I’m awake, I’m absolutely certain it’s real. It happened. We actually kissed and there’s no going back now.

I start to text a response. Then I pause. I stare at the half-written sentence on my bright mobile screen, then erase my words and start over... twice.

Why is it such a task to text Harry right now? Of all people.

It’s weird; I usually don’t have to think twice about what I say to him. It’s always right off the top of my head. Not three and a half fucking minutes later and still nothing.

I decide to get up out of bed to see if he’s awake instead. Everything is easier said and done in person. Or harder, depending on how you look at it. I slide out of Louis’ grasp, letting him roll back into Zayn’s warmth, then glance quickly in the mirror to fix my hair and makeup before leaving the room.

I peer into the separate bedrooms, slowly opening each door a crack as to not wake anyone. I finally find Harry passed out in a bed next to Niall and Pete. The two lads are cuddling together as Harry is on his side, wrapped up in his own bundle of blankets.

I walk over to Harry and gently whisper to him, waking him up softly. His shut eyes part dreamily and a small smile forms on his cherry lips.

“Morning,” he cracks out in a groggy tone.

I was not even slightly prepared for Harry’s morning voice.

“Come make breakfast,” I stutter, resting on his bed next to him. I reach out a hand to graze his bundled figure.

Harry lets out a low groan, clearing his throat as he stretches his limbs under the sheets, “Yeah, I’m up.”

He rises to a sitting position, letting the blankets fall carelessly down past his chest and abdomen. His skin is suddenly exposed, displaying an eccentric array of dark tattoos inked all over his smooth muscles. My eyes are drawn to the massive ship sketched elegantly over his left bicep, then to the sparrows mirroring each other over his well-defined pectorals.

I can’t help but stare at the curve of his collar bones etched so firmly across his broad shoulder line and — fuck, if I’m drooling — his perfectly dark n*ipples, hard and puffy and poking straight ahead without a single touch.

My gaze meets his again.

“What?” Harry smirks sleepily.

“I’ve never- I...” I try to swallow but my throat has dried. “Harry, I-”

Yeah, talking isn’t a thing I can do right now.

“You’ve never seen me shirtless,” Harry plainly states, casually licking his lips while looking at mine.

Fuck his honesty.
“No. I haven’t. I mean…” I furrow my brows, drawing in a deep breath. “Care to explain this?!?”

Harry tries to hide his grin, chuckling while speaking softly, “I’ve got some tattoos.”

“I can fucking see that,” I can physically feel myself starting to sweat. I try to blame it on my hangover but deep down I know it’s because of how breathless Harry has made me.

I’ve obviously seen most of Harry’s tattoos before and we’ve talked about the ones that are usually covered by his garments. I’ve just never had them paraded in front of me so up close and personal. And honestly, if I had already seen him shirtless like this, I probably wouldn’t be reacting as stupefied as I am now.

Harry pulls the rest of his covers away from his body, bringing his legs around to place them on the floor, “As if you’ve never searched up shirtless pictures of me before.”

“Does it look like I have?!” my breath catches in my throat as Harry fully stands up out of the bed. I would honestly scream but Niall and Pete seem so content, passed out in each other’s arms.

Harry’s fit torso draws a straight line from the top of the dip in his collarbones all the way down past his lightly clothed waist, reaching the endless lengths of his lean limbs. He’s wearing nothing but a pair of black briefs but they’re so skin tight it’s like he’s practically au natural.

And yes, there is a bulge. I try not to look at his crotch because it’s so obvious if I do but my vision fails me. And — oh, god — it’s just so thick and prominent and so easily attainable...

Harry laughs to himself as I shamelessly look him up and down, “You’ve at least thought about me naked, then?”

I shake off my thoughts before darkly looking up at the boy — because fuck, have I ever — but I continue with my game of denial and shove him off lightly, “The thought never really crossed my mind.”

“Sure, Scar,” he winks, leading me to the door that I left open. “Breakfast, then?”

“Shouldn’t you put some clothes on first?” I stand up, not following him just yet.

“Should I?” Harry tilts his head at me cheekily.

And with that, he’s out the door.

____________________________________

“Harry, you’re gonna need to get dressed. I can’t concentrate.”

Thirty minutes later and we’re still the only ones awake. Harry and I made a big breakfast of toast and eggs and can barely finish all the food between the two of us. We’ve been sat at the dining room table in Niall’s suite for the past while, dragging our forks across our nearly empty plates and barely making any conversation.

“Still hungover, are you?” Harry chuckles softly.

“Avoiding my request, are you?” I mimic him, trying desperately to keep my eyes above his chest.
“Well, for one, I’m quite comfortable as I am. And second, you do look a bit ill,” Harry frowns, leaning into my personal space. “Would you like some water or anything?”

“I already have water,” I weakly motion towards my half-empty glass.

“Sorry... maybe a hot towel?”

“No,” I shake my head. “Nothing.”

My head feels like a balloon and my limbs are heavy. I keep getting hot flashes, followed by equally as cold chills — often both at the same time. My stomach is in my throat and it hurts to smile and I’m just really, really not comfortable in the slightest.

Shirtless Harry is the last thing I need right now.

“Do you wanna cuddle?” Harry runs his thumb along my thigh.

“Nothing,” I repeat.

“...Massage?” he winks at that one.

“No!” I shove his arm away, lowering my face into my hands to rub at my eyes.

“I can make you tea, I-”

“Stop- doing things for me, Harry,” I accidentally snap at him.

I didn’t mean to break but I couldn’t control it. I’m just so fucked and nauseous and antsy, and Harry has always been so kind and thoughtful and adorable, and it’s just so fucking frustrating.

“I’m sorry...” Harry’s voice falters as he lets his shoulders relax. “I’m just trying to-”

“I know what you’re trying to do,” I raise my head from my hands, glaring at the boy steadily.

“I know...” he sighs, dropping his fork on his plate. “Can we please talk about what happened?”

“Yeah,” I lean back in my chair. “You kissed me.”

“We made out, Scar.”

“Har-”

“You were into it as much as I was,” Harry interrupts me, chewing on his lower lip this time. “Snogging is a two-person thing, if you’re not aware.”

“I’m fully aware.”

“Good. Then you should know that I really enjoyed it,” he lowers his voice, careful not to disturb anyone in the other rooms. “And there’s a burning feeling inside of me that tells me you did too.”

The two of us share a silence.

I look down at my palms, massaging my thumb into my opposite wrist, “I didn’t expect it, you know.”

Harry nods slowly, “It was a long time coming.”
“So I’ve been told,” even my steady breaths are riddled with guilt. “I just always thought your suggestions were meant to be jokes.”

“I was never joking with you,” Harry utters deeply.

I furrow my brows, “Can I ask you something?”

“Anything.”

My pulse speeds up and my lips become dry. I know I’m going to regret this the second I say it. But I figure it’s better than leaving it. We’re all out in the open now and there’s no use in playing dumb anymore.

“Why didn’t we do that earlier?”

Harry smiles, looking down into his lap for a moment before glancing back into my eyes.

“I tried,” he says. “But you would either shove me off or think I was joking... or Louis would come in or something would interrupt us... The list goes on,” he chuckles undecidedly.

“But what about our alone time?” I frown, stressing on the topic. “We’ve hung out, just us, plenty of times before and you’ve never said anything.”

“I do get nervous too,” Harry shrugs. “Besides, our alone time is our alone time. I’m not gonna spoil it by trying to make sexual advances on my best friend.”

“You’re the best,” I wrap him up in a sudden hug. “Love you.”

“Love you too, Scar;” he softly pecks my cheek.

“I’ll have a light beer,” Mitch says to the passing server. “I’m trying to take care of my youthful figure.”

“Mitch,” I chuckle, shaking my head with my hand to my face.

“I’m also going for a facelift next week,” he raises his eyebrow jokingly. “Treating myself for Spring. So I can gaze into the mirror and love myself.”

“You’re killing me,” I snort out laughing.

“They call me Narcissus,” Mitch gazes fondly towards the ceiling. “That’s all I need is a facelift and a mirror.”

“Stop, oh my god!” I hold myself back from laughing too loud and causing too much of a scene. “You haven’t even told me why we’re here!”

My manager has been planning this meeting for just under a week, yet he has refused to say why ever since. I lean forward in my chair, resting my arms on the dining table in front of me, and survey the well-dressed man as he fixes the cuffs on his sleeves.

“We’re here for a reason,” he reassures me. “This is our big break before we’re off to America and
things are definitely changing. You’re beautiful, Scarlet, but more attention is on you now. An American tour is a big thing for all of us and, well, your job is to play the part.”

“Okay, what are you talking about, beautiful?” I’m entirely confused as to what he’s leading onto. “What part?”

“We’ve set you up with a strict regime for the next few months,” Mitch explains. “We’ve hired two trainers that will come along with us on the road that are both centred in Los Angeles. They’ll be working with you and your band; planning meals and working you out.”

“Working out?” I scoff. “Yeah, I’m not much of a gym person.”

“This is not a question,” Mitch says lowly. “It’s part of your job.”

“What, am I not skinny enough?” I suddenly mock him, keeping my voice down to a harsh murmur. “Is the gap between my thighs not wide enough for this fucking fandom?”

“Scarlet!” he scolds shockingly. “You’re lovely, it’s-”

“I’m fucking sleeping with Louis Tomlinson,” I hiss at the man in front of me, leaning over the table so my voice is kept unheard. “If you don’t think I’m fit enough, maybe you can ask a member of One Direction to verify that for you.”

“Scar, we’re in public! Please!” Mitch furrows his brows, then leans back in his seat to look at me. “What is the matter?! What’s really affecting you about this?”

I shake my head disbelievingly, looking around at the chattering people surrounding us. I didn’t ask to burst out like this but there was just no controlling it. Especially in a mindset like this.

“It’s not me,” I state irritably, thinking of all that’s suddenly expected of me. “It’s not who I am. I’ve always wanted to be someone who young people can look up to. Someone different who doesn’t follow the mainstream like every other fucking sheep in this society. I want to be myself, exactly as I am, and have people be proud of me. Without asking anything more than that. Without needing anything more than that.”

Mitch watches me frustratingly. He doesn’t utter a single word but I can tell he’s taken in every ounce of what I’ve said. I release a deep sigh before looking down and picking at my fingernails. “I just want someone to be proud,” I choke in barely a whisper.

“This does not change a thing about who you are. Myself and so many others are so incredibly proud of you and how far you’ve come, especially with everything that’s held you back,” Mitch’s eyes bore into mine as he reaches out to hold my hand. I can feel slight tears pricking at my eyes but I firmly hold them back, not wanting to get into that ordeal right now. “We just want you and the lads to be at the top of your game. At your level of fame, it’s not so much about selling the music anymore as it is selling your personality. That’s all the media is about these days and you’re just going to have to get used to that.”

“I know,” I swallow down whatever emotion I’m feeling. “Yeah, I know that.”

“Cardio will help you with your breathing and stamina on stage just as it will get you fit,” Mitch releases my hand, sending me a calming expression from across the table. “A lot of it is about appearance, sure, but this plan will benefit you in more ways than one and you’re just going to have to push on through, okay?”
“I’m good at that,” I huff bitterly.

“You’re not over it,” Mitch nods to himself in remorse. “I know.”

“It would be easier if they were just gone,” I purse my lips into a straight frown.

“You don’t mean that,” he says sympathetically.

“No, I don’t,” I suck on my teeth. “But I am sure of one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m so ready to get out of this fucking continent.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, voting and all of your lovely comments :)

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@Scarlet_Ryder || #tangerinefanfiction
"How was it?"

"Fuck."
I glance around the living room of my flat. We're past the point of paying any mind to the late night movie and are being distracted by the charm and intrigue of what recently happened between me and a certain boyband member.

"Please, spare me some details other than fuck," Naomi chuckles.

I release a deep sigh.

My mind goes back to the exact moment Harry singled me out in the kitchen of Niall's suite that night. How he grabbed me so suddenly. How I wasn't expecting anything and got so much more than something.

How his lips slid so firmly against mine. How he ground his hips into mine as our bodies pressed together. How he fucking moaned when I wove my fingers into his hair and tugged on his curls.

How my dress felt even more tight and restricting than it had all night. How I had trouble breathing once I left him stranded in the kitchen. How I'm having even more trouble breathing right now.

"Babe, are you okay?" Naomi reaches out a hand to rest on my thigh.

"Yeah, I just..."

"You're thinking of how great of a kisser Harry is," she jokes, letting out a laugh and playfully bumping my arm.

"Honestly," I look at her with a solemn expression, "yes."

"Oh, shit," her face drops.

"Yeah," is all I can say.

"Are you into him now?"

I rest my head against the back of my couch, "It's just a bit weird because I don't think Louis-"

"Do you like him?"

"-has any idea that anything happened and-"

"Scar, do you wan-"

"-I dunno if I want him to-"

"Do you wanna fuck Harry?!"

My flat is forced silent aside from the persistent chatter of the scripted film on television and the patter of rain against my front window pane.

I stand up off my couch and grab our two glasses from the table in front of us. I look back at Naomi to reply but all I can do is furrow my brows.

"I don't wanna think about that right now," I state firmly. "Would you like another drink?"

"Do you have to ask?" Naomi chuckles calmly.

"Guess not," I laugh, bringing our glasses into the kitchen and quickly mixing us another round of
drinks. I return to the living room in no time, setting my drink on the table while handing Naomi hers with a soft smile.

"Thanks, love," she takes a deep sip from her glass once I sit next to her.

"No worries," I grab my own glass from the table, drinking it down as the couple in the movie shares a climactic kiss.

"Alright, spill," Naomi says after an overly-lengthy silence; neither of us really watching the movie as much as we seem to be. "What was it like making out with Harry Styles?"

I sharply inhale into my glass, nearly choking on my drink.

"It was, um," I take another gulp before speaking, trying to settle down although I know that's not happening right now. "So fucking... unexpected."

"Play-by-play, please," Naomi smirks, eagerly clutching onto her drink.

"Oh, god. Okay..." I look down, trying to hide my blush before raising my head and painfully grimacing in anticipation. "We were partying, right? Just my band and One Direction. Kind of a celebratory thing for finishing this leg of the tour," I swallow another shot, gulping it down harshly. "I should've known something was up because Harry was acting weird all night. Silent, like. But nobody really noticed and we were all just laughing and joking as usual. Louis and I were close and flirty I guess but that's was normal too," I frown, trying to remember how the night went along; if there were any signs I should have paid attention to before the kiss. "I went to the kitchen to refill my drink and nobody was in there but then Harry was and that's when it happened."

"He just walked in and kissed you?" Naomi's eyes are wide. "Did he like, say anything? Or did he strut up to you expecting a snog?" she laughs amusingly. "I'm lost."

"No!" I chuckle, shaking my head embarrassedly. "I was looking for orange juice in the fridge 'cause I'd already poured my vodka. I heard him come in but I thought he was Lou."

"Oh my god, did you accidentally kiss him because you thought he was Louis?!"

"Naomi! Not at all," I blush at the girl. "I wasn't that drunk. Neither of us were."

"Sorry, okay, oh my god," she rambles. "What did you say?"

"I started to ask him where the juice was but I turned around and saw that it was Harry, not Louis."

"Fuck."

"He noticed that I was like, stunned or whatever. He asked if I was expecting anyone and I said I thought he was Lou," I take another few sips from my drink, really needing to take the edge off of this conversation. "Then he asked if I would prefer if he was Louis."

"Holy shit," Naomi breathes, completely taken with the words coming out of my mouth. "Oh my god, Scar."

"I know, but I just kind of laughed it off," I shake my head, letting out another deep breath. "Then he asked if I was disappointed that he wasn't Louis or some shit and I told him that he wasn't much of a disappointment... It was a joke at first but it sounded wrong once I said it..."

"Scarlet, you two were totally flirting!" Naomi is on the edge of her seat at this point. "Is that when
he kissed you?"

"No!" I throw my free hand into the air, amusingly frustrated. "He completely changed the subject!"

"What the fuck?"

"Yeah, he asked what I was looking for... So I said the orange juice for my vodka. He told me where it was then I took it and poured my drink and put it back in the fridge and when I turned around again he just-"

I cut myself off, unable to fully say out loud that my best friend kissed me.

Naomi buries her face in her hands, muffling her sudden squeals before continuing to press me with questions, "How did he do it?"

"He just fucking grabbed me," I huff out a laugh, running my finger around the rim of my glass. "He came out of nowhere. Literally, as soon as I closed the fridge his mouth was on mine."

"So fucking hot," she whispers, grinning at me wider than I've ever seen her beam in my life.

"Stop, I know," I groan, downing the rest of my drink before reaching forward and setting my glass onto the table. "It was honestly so good, I can't stop fucking thinking about it. His lips are just so big and soft and wet and- fuck. Nai, please don't tell anyone this but..."

"What is it?" she lets her jaw relax as she gazes at me. "Scar, if you think I'm gonna even hint at this to anyone you're wrong. This is top secret shit. My lips are sealed, love, I promise."

"I know, thank you," I release another sigh and shake my head up at the ceiling, in disbelief with myself. "So, basically... It was more than just a kiss."

"You sucked his dick."

"Naomi!"

"I'm just kidding, get on with it!"

"Shit," I chuckle, closing my eyes to steady myself. "I was shocked at first like, I didn't know what was happening. Then I started kissing him back and- I dunno, we really fucking got into it, Naomi."

"Details," she demands, completely abandoning her drink for once to focus all of her attention on me.

"God, we were going at it," I groan out loud, unable to contain my immediate frustration. "He pulled me into him and like, everything was pressed together. His lips were just so hot and wet and- shit. He was fucking grinding on me, babe..."

"Holy fucking shit!"

"He wasn't like, hard or anything but I could still... feel him, you know?" I gulp down the giant lump in my throat. "And we just kept going and I pulled his hair and he fucking like, moaned and shit, oh fuck."

"SCARLET, I'M GOING TO KILL YOU FOR WAITING THIS LONG TO FUCKING KISS THIS GUY, I SWEAR TO GOD!" Naomi literally screams out loud. "I'm gonna throw up. I hate you. How did he use his tongue?"
I run a hand down my face, laughing thoroughly as I can feel my chest and cheeks heat up. I pause for a moment, letting my eyes wander around my cozy living room; searching through my thoughts and memories to remember how exactly Harry's mouth felt against mine.

"There wasn't even tongue," I state surprisingly, realising it for the first time since our actual kiss. "We were just snogging, that's it."

"That's it, she says," Naomi chokes out a laugh, shaking her head at me in bewilderment. "Okay, so now what? Does Louis know? Does anyone else know?"

"You're the only person that has any idea of anything," I tell her. "Unless Harry told someone."

"If he did, it would probably be Liam, Zayn or Niall that he told. There's no way in hell he would spill that to Louis. No matter how close they are," Naomi raises her eyebrows. "I can do some asking around with Niall, if you like. Without implying anything, of course."

"Yeah, could you?"

"For sure," she smiles, touching my hand warmly. "We are forgetting something, though. Something kind of important in this whole situation."

"What's that?"

"Louis."


"What, you haven't thought about that before?"

"No, I have," I sigh. "A lot, actually... I just don't like bringing it up."

"I never really understood what's going on with you two," Naomi swallows down the rest of her drink. "Are you guys dating yet or what?"

"We're not official. And we obviously don't go out. But we are together. Sort of. In a way," I shrug noncommittally. "We're just each other's people."

"You're so cute, though," she nudges my arm.

"Tell me about it," I smile fondly. "Louis is a sweetheart. He's so cheeky and clever and ridiculous. And a great fucking kisser and damn good in bed," I grin down at my hands, thinking of all the moments we've had together; mostly sexual if I'm being honest. "I thought I wanted him to be my boyfriend, you know?"

"Shit, are you serious?" Naomi lowers her voice unnaturally.

"Dead serious," I nod. "We've been getting closer and spending a hell of a lot of time together lately. It always used to end up in sex but the past couple of times we didn't even fuck."

"That's intense."

"I know," I sigh. "But the thing is, I know more about his body than I know about him. And yeah, maybe I'd want us to take the next step if we connected emotionally rather than just physically. But Louis and I were never friends. We've always been more than that."

"It's almost like you're moving backwards," Naomi chuckles softly.
"That's exactly what it's like," I return her expression appreciatively.

"What about Harry, then?" she offers. "You obviously weren't best friends right off the bat. You must've had a little crush on him at some point in time."

"I remember the first day I met One Direction," a grin spreads warmly across my face as I mention the boys. "It was a few months before the tour started and I was still against the whole boyband thing but I did think Harry was cute. We got on right away, like we knew each other for years, and I reckoned he looked like a young Mick Jagger, which I was totally fond over."

"You sound fond over him," Naomi smirks playfully. "What stopped you from being into him like that?"

I shrug, looking at her calmly, "I could tell Harry was technically the frontman of the group and I've never been into the type of guy that all the other girls like. That, and he's two years younger than me," I chuckle reminiscently. "Plus, I was far gone for Louis within a few weeks of knowing the lads and there was no going back from that," I laugh, feeling my cheeks lift to my eyes. "By then, Harry and I were already on our way to being best friends and I was completely enraptured with Louis and... I dunno," I shrug once more, still smiling pleasantly. "It just turned out that way."

"But now..."

"Now everything's changed," I huff out a laugh.

"Clearly!" Naomi stresses, standing up and grabbing our empty glasses from the table. "Come on, let's get refills."

I follow Naomi into my kitchen and watch as she pours us another round of mixed drinks.

"Are you gonna kiss him again?" Naomi fails to hide her smirk as she sets the vodka back in my freezer.

"I've been thinking of that kiss every second of every day since it happened," I take hold of my glass but don't drink from it just yet. "I definitely wanna kiss him again but I still find it a bit weird. Like, it's Harry. But at the same time, I can't stop thinking about him."

"You're the cutest thing in the world! Oh my god!" Naomi suddenly wraps me in a quick hug. "I feel so bad for Louis."

"What do you mean?" I ask, half-laughing and half-frowning.

"Well, think about it," Naomi looks at me intently. "What's gonna happen if you and Harry... you know... on top of the emotional, best friend connection you have now? That's a big thing. And Louis? What do you have with him other than sex?"

"Naomi, don't say that."

"This is your wake up call," she raises her eyebrows, watching me as she takes a long sip from her mixed drink. "If you like Louis as much as you say you do, you should probably work on your so-called friends thing before the sex gets boring and Harry wins you over."

"Naomi, what the hell?!" my mouth stays parted as my eyebrows meet in the middle.

"Hey, you're the one who started talking about emotional connections," she shrugs, taking yet another drink.
"That doesn't mean you can start trashing Louis' and my relationship!" I nearly shout.

"Whoa, Scar! I'd never trash you or Louis!" Naomi takes a step back, watching me incredulously. "Don't think for a second that I ever would!"

"What the hell are you saying, then?" I lean back against my counter, waiting to hang onto the girl's every word.

"All I'm saying," she says slowly and precisely, "is that you can't have a proper relationship without forming a solid friendship first. You just told me you know his body better than you know his brain and it's one of the main things holding you back from committing yourself to the guy."

I keep my mouth shut, nodding my head consideringly before taking another few sips of my drink.

"Look," Naomi casually drawls, watching me. "If you really wanna take the next step with Louis like you say you do, do yourself a favour and learn to be his friend."

"Are we talking no sex?"

"That's up to you," she lifts a hand in protest. "But I mean, friends don't fuck. And you said yourself, your sexual chemistry is what held you back from being friends in the first place," she points out, making my stomach drop; guilty with the brutal honesty that's being thrown at me. "I'm not forcing you to do anything, babe. This is just a suggestion, nothing too crazy."

"No, you're right," I nod to myself, taking in everything Naomi just told me. "I wanna do it."

Naomi beams, raising her drink to mine. We clink our glasses together and down the rest of our drinks before I burst out chuckling, resting onto Naomi's arm to steady myself.

"Fuck it!" I say firmly, looking into the eyes of the girl before me. "I'm gonna be Louis' friend!"

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 33

I'm marking this day in my calendar.

Because today is the first day that I have ever stepped foot into Louis Tomlinson's bedroom.

It's almost as I expected it but it's completely different than I'd imagined at the same time. His walls are painted a soft grey, accented by the crisp white linen curtains flowing on either side of his large bedroom window. He's got mismatched CDs and cases stacked all over his dresser. There are used clothes thrown around his laundry basket rather than in it. And a single acoustic guitar is set up next to a completely expensive-looking sound system.

Not to mention, his oversized king bed takes up barely a third of his massive room.

Right now, we're sat over his covers, resting by his bedside table. It's covered by a few pipes, grinders, rolling papers and lighters – all surrounding a jar full of buds that looks like it's filled with a few hundred dollars worth of weed. We haven't smoked just yet but the option is out there.

Not like Louis couldn't afford it anyway.

Every day I forget just how filthy rich the One Direction boys are. They could literally buy a new house each year and it would seem like pocket change. They work hard for it, though. Some of the
things the boys are subjected to on a daily basis are unimaginable. But they always manage to push on through and dive head first into every situation.

They never fail to impress me.

"I still think Belgium was one of my favourites," I continue to reminisce over our European tour like Louis and I have been doing this past little while.

"That's because I'm one sixteenth Belgian," Louis winks at me.

"You are not," I shove him off playfully.

"I am. It's a little unknown fact," Louis chuckles honestly. "Look it up."

"I love how you can just say that," I shake my head in disbelief. "Why should I waste my time getting to know you when I can just ask Google?" I smirk sarcastically.

"Because this way," he leans in suddenly, pressing his lips to mine, "is much more fun."

"It is fun," I agree, feeling my heart fall to the pit of my stomach as I remember what Naomi and I talked about yesterday. "I like you a lot, Louis..."

"I like you even more, a lot," he quirks adorably.

Why does he have to make this so hard?

"I, uh... I wanna offer something, Lou," I fiddle with my thighs, picking at the rips in my jeans. "If you feel, um... If you're, like- looking for the same sort of thing."

"Really...?" Louis cocks an eyebrow, looking at me queerly. "So do I."

"You do?"

"Yeah, I..." he begins then shakes his head. "You go first."

"No, please," I insist. "You first. My offer is much more, uh... involved."

"Kinky?"

"Quite the opposite."

"Oh," Louis' face falls suddenly. "Alright, then. I suppose I should just... wow. Fuck it."

"Are you okay?" I frown, watching as Louis taps his knees anticipatingly; chewing on the inside of his cheeks in anxiety.

He turns and looks at me gauntly. Most of the colour has drained from his usually sunkissed face and his expression is entirely unreadable, even for him.

"I'm nervous," Louis whispers to me.

I reach out to steady his thigh, running my hand along his firm, solid muscles, "Why are you nervous?"

"Because I'm gonna ask you to be my girlfriend."

All of the breath suddenly catches in my lungs. I stare at Louis, completely in shock. From the looks
of him, his heart is pounding just as incessantly as mine.

"You're joking," is all I manage to say.

"I'm not joking," Louis continues to stare at me.

"You must be fucking with me," I frown, furrowing my brows with worry.

Why does this have to be happening now?

Why couldn't he have asked me this after we've gotten our shit together?

I'm so taken aback, I can't even think straight.

"Like an actual boyfriend-girlfriend committed thing?" I stutter. "In reality?"

"In reality, yes," Louis chuckles nervously. "I'm not fucking with you, Scar. I mean it."

"Shit."

"We've been seeing each other for a while now without really making a move and, I dunno. I figure it's about time we do something about it," he reaches out and takes my hand in his. "I like you more every day and I want you to be mine."

"Louis-"

"All I need is a yes or no," his lips curl up at the corners of his mouth; stroking over my hand with his rough thumb. "Preferably a yes... but that's up to you," he smiles hopefully.

I can't even look at him. The mere sight of his bloody optimistic face is crumbling my spirits to bits. I want to say yes. I want to kiss him all over, whispering tiny little, yes yes yes yes yes, into his soft, stubbled skin.

I want to agree to this.

I want to be Louis' girlfriend.

But from a stroke of twisted fate, the first thing I thought of when he asked me — other than my plan of trying to make friends with him like I've already firmly decided — was none other than Harry Styles.

How would Harry feel about this?

How would I feel, never knowing what Harry and I could possibly become?

But then I stop myself and think, is that really what's holding me back?

The romantic preference of a younger guy shouldn't stop me from going after what I want. It shouldn't make any difference to me whatsoever. But that younger guy just so happens to be my best friend. And that best friend just so happens to be an amazing kisser. And that amazing kisser just so happens to have a charming personality and a winning smile and an insanely fit body and stupidly hilarious jokes and gorgeous curly hair that makes him moan into your mouth when you're making out as you tangle your fingers into it and give it a soft tug, making his knees weak and his deep voice crack.

Wow, I'm fucked.
But that's not why I'm doing what I'm doing.

I'm taking Naomi's advice only so I don't end up regretting it later.

"Louis," I begin slowly, squeezing his warm hand to comfort both him and myself. "I can't give you what you want. I wish I could but I'm just not ready. I'm not going to say yes. But I'm not going to say no either."

Louis' hopeful expression dims and the twinkle in his eyes disappears.

"I really wanna be with you, I do. But I wanna get to know you first," I explain in the kindest way possible, really not wanting to hurt him more than I probably already have. "Someone really close to me recently told me that a lasting relationship is near impossible unless you form a solid friendship first. And frankly, we kind of skipped the whole friends thing and went straight to sex."

"Is this your way of saying you don't wanna date me?" Louis' voice cracks unwillingly.

"No, Louis-"

"I really thought a relationship was where we were headed," he cuts me off. His entire aura feels dejected and his hooded eyelids slouch over his faded blue eyes.

"It is," I insist, staring at Louis intently. "I mean, it can be."

"Really?" Louis asks bitterly. "Because it kinda sounds like you're putting me in the friend zone."

"C'mere," I extend my arms and pull Louis into a tight hug. "We've never put labels on anything before so why do we have to now?"

"It would be nice."

"It's not needed, though."

I pull back. Louis and I share a look, both trying to understand where each other are coming from. It feels like there is a distance between us as we sigh. I've never felt so far away from him although we're still physically touching.

I wanna kiss him.

That would be the worst thing I could do in this moment – I know that – but it doesn't make me want to do it any less.

"So if we try being friends," Louis asks me, all very slowly, "are we still gonna hook up?"

I shrug uncomfortably.

"I'm not like, rejecting the idea but I really can't say," I nibble on my lower lip, scanning over all the unique features of Louis' beautiful face. "I really wanna learn more about you. As a person."

"Honestly, Scar, I can't live without sex," Louis scoffs suddenly, raising his eyebrows overdramatically. "That's fucking mandatory. I appreciate that you wanna like, get to know me and all but cutting out sex entirely is just ridiculous."

"Can we just see how it goes?" I intertwine my fingers with his, holding him tight like he'll fade away if I don't. "Please, Louis, I need this."
Louis seems to mull over the ideas I've offered him, looking down at how our hands are folded together so comfortingly. He looks up at me with understanding in his eyes, although my reasoning might not be fully clear to him just yet.

"What was the thing you were going to ask me?" Louis asks gradually.

"Me?" I purse my lips, watching him intently. "It was just that."

"Really?"

"Yeah," I nod as Louis takes a deep breath.

"Fuck, you should've asked me first," Louis slides his hand out of my grasp.

"Maybe I should've," I frown inwardly at Louis' cold gesture, "but it's good to know where we both stand with this." Louis shrugs at that. "So?"

"...Okay," he says firmly. "Yeah, alright. This could be good."

"Really, Lou?"

"Yeah, uh..." Louis looks around his room, avoiding my gaze until he finally finishes speaking. "As far as we go, like... Are we seeing anybody else? Since we're not really together..."

A wave of nausea suddenly flashes over me, as if I've suddenly become seasick. I've never thought about Louis seeing other people before. Taking interest in them, flirting with them, kissing them. Having sex with them just like he does with me. I'm not sure if it's jealousy I'm feeling or pure repulsion.

I never should have ruled it out, though. I mean, we never did have a label on anything and we were far from ever being official. Well, far enough that Louis' closest friend took the opportunity of us not being together to go ahead and kiss me.

Are we seeing anybody else? Louis' question still rings clear in my mind.

"I haven't hooked up with anyone since our first kiss, if that's what you're wondering," I say as Louis nods. "But I mean, if something happens, it's not like we're chained down," I shrug noncommittally, although the idea of something happening between Louis and someone else really gets my stomach turning. "Have you?"

"Have I hooked up with anyone aside from you?" Louis asks, just to verify. I nod and he smiles. "No. Not since we kissed."

"I hardly believe that," I smirk, shoving him aside playfully. "Louis Tomlinson, world famous boyband member, sleeping with only one person at a time?"

"I'm not as much of a scumbag as you think I am," Louis cheekily rolls his eyes as his grin reaches his cheeks.

"Yeah, you are kind of a scumbag," I continue to smirk as we hold each other's gaze.

Our expressions slowly fall but there is still a burning intensity between us.

"Scarlet?" Louis tentatively asks in a voice so low I can barely hear him.

"Yeah?" I muster.
I can tell Louis is about to say something but he decides against it. Instead, he leans forward, pressing an extended kiss to my lips, exhaling as he rests his forehead against mine.

"I'm sorry, I just-" Louis sighs. "I wanted to do that before I couldn't."

"I know," I utter, equally as breathless.

"Do you think we could have a little fun once more?" he suggests, giving me the offer as if he's got nothing to lose. "For old time's sake?"

"We really shouldn't..." I pause, bringing my lower lip into my mouth.

"I can hear your heartbeat from here," he points out smoothly.

"You've got me there," I chuckle, gazing down to Louis' lips, watching them move as he moistens them.

I know Louis and I are supposed to try and be friends now. We're supposed to hold back on sex and kissing and even flirting like we're so conditioned to. But one last time can't hurt, can it?

Louis moves his face closer to mine again, expecting another kiss until I push him back.

"Wait..." I recoil myself from Louis' embrace and climb out of his bed. Reaching the other side of his room, I bolt the lock of his bedroom door, making sure it won't open unless we want it to. "You never know," I muse.

"Good idea," he laughs, knowing that Harry could be anywhere in their flat at any time and not really wanting to be walked in on at a time like this.

I rejoin Louis on his large bed, resting on my side as he cuddles up in front of me. He raises his hand to my temple, brushing away a few strands of stray hair that fall lightly over my eyes.

"So clever," Louis whispers, pecking my right cheek, "and pretty," he pecks my left one, "and sweet," he kisses my nose, "and all mine for the next hour," he smirks, ultimately placing his lips on mine.

We make out lazily for what feels like centuries. It was a bit of a shock kissing Louis at first since he's such a drastic change from the last person I made out with. Harry is such a different kisser than Louis and it took a moment for me to get back into the old routine. I'm not sure what it was, and I'm not sure if it's for better or for worse just yet, it was just- different.

Louis' tongue slides along my lower lip, teasing me before licking into my mouth. I meet his tongue with mine, dancing along his skin like smooth velvet to spark his nerves. I can feel him hardening against my front as I reach down to tease him by sliding a hand down his hips. Louis bucks up at my touch, pressing his jean-covered bulge into my palm.

We share hot, open-mouthed kisses as Louis wraps his arms around me; thrusting for more. It's not too long before he rolls us over and I'm straddled on top of him. I immediately attach my lips to his neck, running my hands all over his body before he sits me up to rest on his pelvis.

"Let's see those beautiful tits you've got," he moans, looking up at me.

Louis reaches up to massage my tits over my shirt, grinding up against my crotch in sensual pleasure. I strip off my shirt, needing to feel everything he's doing to me with every sense I have.
"How bad do you want it?" I fall back down to lick up the shell of his ear. "Show me."

Louis kisses across my collar bones, his rough stubble grazing harshly over my unblemished skin. He wraps his arms around my back, unhooking my bra with a sharp bite into my shoulder. I groan out loud as he throws my bra to the side, then I sit up and shove my tits in his face. Louis grabs both of my tits with both of his hands; sucking on one of my nipples as he plays with the other, rolling it between his forefinger and his thumb. I smother Louis' face with my chest, allowing myself be a little selfish before I slide back down his body and lift his shirt up.

Louis removes his shirt, throwing it onto the floor to expose his perfectly tanned torso, gorgeously covered in dark tattoos and light chest hair. I moan at the sight of him and automatically start kissing along his chest, trailing my lips down his soft stomach.

"I'm gonna suck your thick cock," I nibble over Louis' stomach as I quickly begin undoing his jeans, "then I wanna see how hard you can fuck me with it," I grab onto his waistband, tugging his jeans and briefs down together at once.

"Ugh, fuck me," Louis moans as his cock is exposed to my view. His dick lays heavy, flushed and aching over his stomach. He's already leaking with precome, anxiously awaiting my touch.

I look up at him as I take hold of his erection, focusing on his trance-like state as he follows my every move; gazing down at me through his long, feminine eyelashes. He lets out little 'uh, uh, uh's and 'god, yeah's as I stroke him. But his dazed musings become near whimpers as I wrap my lips around his tip.

I swirl my tongue around the salty head of his penis, licking up the precome beading at his tip. I bob my head down with every suck, causing Louis' breaths to become erratic and his palms to fist at his sheets.

Louis soaks in his pleasure for minutes on end but before I know it, he's lifting me up off his cock and rolling me over to lay on my back.

"Want me to give your pussy a kiss?" Louis trails his mouth down my torso, stopping just above my waistband to pull my jeans off along with my pants.

"Fuck- yes," I whine obscenely, in no way expecting him to offer that at all.

"Mmm," Louis moans, spreading my legs to kiss up my thighs. "You like it when I eat you out?"

"Babe- ugh," I can barely speak, watching in awe as Louis licks his way to my centre, ultimately pressing his mouth against my wet heat. "God, Louis!"

Louis exhales hotly, licking his tongue up my bits. I moan at the feeling, resting my head back against his pillows in reeling pleasure. His persistent actions send my mind shooting to the stars. Either his entire room is spinning or I've just hit a new level of vertigo.

"You taste so sweet, babe," Louis mumbles against me as he sucks his entire mouth over me, basically full on french kissing my bits at this point.

"So fucking perfect," my eyes roll in their sockets.

I subconsciously continue to rotate my hips to meet his mouth, becoming more vocal with every lick of Louis' tongue and every press of his lips. My heart is in my throat and the pleasure has become so electric it's like I've been drugged and lifted out of my own body.
I ache to sustain his touch.

And Louis, usually one to think mainly of himself in sexual situations like this, spends more time down on me than I can ever remember him doing. Ever. And it's fucking mind-blowing. It almost makes me regret asking him to be friends in the first place. But I know that's just my stimulated high talking.

Eventually, my lungs become shaky and my pulse is pounding in my neck. A burning heat is coiling in the pit of my stomach and the grip Louis has got on my thighs won't let up. My breaths become dry and ragged as Louis' tongue flicks so roughly and persistently over my clit. I'm biting my lips bloody and whining high in my throat and thrusting my hips up to his mouth and I'm coming hard. Louis is making me come with just his mouth.

"God, get in me!" I scream as my orgasm fades, struggling to pull him up to kiss my lips.

"Just call me Louis next time," he whispers playfully against my mouth, nipping down on my lower lip with ease. I watch him smirk as he pulls away. He sits back on his heels, ruffling through the pockets of his discarded jeans before he finds the condom he's looking for. "Gonna fuck you with my thick, hard cock," he muses, continuously looking between me and the condom he's rolling over his stiff, full erection.

"You're so fit," I breathe, mindlessly watching him work with his length.

Once his condom is on, Louis reaches out and runs a hand over my sensitive entrance, making me hiss at the sudden contact. He wanks his cock, blissfully slipping a finger inside of me as he does so. Louis prepares me with his fingers, warming me up before aligning the head of his cock to my wet opening and pressing in.

My mouth hangs open in a silent moan, watching as Louis' focussed frown turns into an emotion of ecstasy once he rests inside of me completely. He starts thrusting into me at a slow speed that gradually picks up pace as we get a steady rhythm going.

"So good," Louis watches me take his pounding; biting onto my knuckles from the pleasure he's causing me.

Without warning, he lifts my legs over his shoulders and presses forward, practically folding me in half. His cock slips relentlessly in and out of me. I yell out in ecstasy as he hits that one sensitive spot, sending pulsating waves of electricity up to my brain and all over my body.

"Louis, fuck!" I moan, cursing his name over and over until my throat is tainted raw.

"So fucking tight, Scar-" he cuts himself off with a shockingly loud groan; his body shuddering over me deliciously.

"Babe, c'mere," I reach up and grab his face, pulling him down to meet my lips.

Louis and I grin against each other's skin. Ridiculously happy. Foolishly blissful. We make out sloppily – both of our tongues freely exploring each other's mouths – as he keeps generously fucking me. My ankles are still hooked around his neck as he pounds into my heat. I've been thrown into such a daze that I'm almost hallucinating.

"I wanna come," Louis furrows his brows, panting.

"Already?" I chuckle breathlessly.
"You're so gorgeous," he kisses me heatedly, thrusting into me with determination as our lips fit perfectly together. "So fucking gorgeous."

I kiss him back, sighing into his touch, "So are you."

Maybe I do love him.

Louis pulls out, barely ripping the condom off before he straddles over me and is shooting his hot load across my face and into my mouth. I delicately suck his cock as he comes down from his high; swirling my tongue around his head and kissing down his flaccid shaft.

He sighs contently, finally climbing off my body to rest on his bed next to me.

"Gonna miss that taste," I purr reminiscently.

"We don't have to stop," he turns to me with eyes more serious than I was expecting.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't wanna stop fucking you," Louis admits. "Kissing you..." he trails on. "I don't wanna not be with you."

"It's just a temporary thing, Louis... A stepping stone," I move myself onto my side with a sad sigh, trailing my fingers up the side of his bare body. "Think of it as a refreshing way to force us to get to know each other," I come to rest my palm over his hot chest; my hand pressed flush against the steady beating of his heart. "We're gonna end up together. I can feel it."

"You're making it sound like we're dying," Louis giggles amusingly, a bit too giddy for such a morbid statement.

"We're reincarnating, that's what we are," I smirk, turning my back to Louis as I climb off his bed. "Like Jesus," I gather my garments up off the floor, stepping one leg through my pants before the other.

"We're holy," Louis chuckles, tilting his head adorably. He gets out of his bed to redress himself as well, just as I finish slipping on my last layer. "Meet you downstairs?"

"Yeah," I make my way to his bedroom door before hesitantly turning around. "One more thing."

I pace back over to Louis in all of his half-dressed wonder and wrap him up in a warm embrace, pressing my lips to his. I let him take control, soaking in his sweet, musky scent and the way his thin lips feel as they're sliding against mine. He holds me close, pulling me in by my waist with one hand and running his fingers through my hair with the other.

"Thank you," I whisper serenely, pulling away before either of us would like but also knowing we have to move on eventually.

Louis and I share the same content smile as I leave him in his room and head downstairs for a glass of water.

I'm ready to spend the rest of my day relaxed with a movie on or something nice like that. Maybe I'll go for a walk or learn a song I've never played before. The day is only half over and we have hours ahead of us to do whatever we please. Well, almost anything, considering Louis is one fifth of the world's most famous boyband. He can barely go outside without being spotted by some sort of admirer but we've all grown to accept that.
I'm so deep in my ideas as I walk through the flat that I barely notice the person slouched over the spacious kitchen counter.

Either he's had a fight with his half-eaten bowl of cereal.

Or I've done something I really shouldn't have.

Chapter End Notes

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Harry looks at me with silent hurricanes swirling in his eyes.

"I heard you and Louis having sex," he informs me cooly. "Your moans really complimented my banana and bran."

Uncontrollable heat flushes over my face in shame. At first, I was surprised that Harry didn't greet me like he normally would before jumping into his accusations. But now, I don't blame him. I'm riddled with guilt knowing Harry had to be subjected to that. Not just as my friend, but as someone I've been growing so close to these past few weeks.

In more ways than one.

"Shit, I'm sorry, Harry..." I choke out. "I didn't mean to be so loud."

Harry chooses not to respond, simply taking in another large spoonful of his cereal, so I carry on the conversation myself.

"I didn't know you were here."

"Surprise," Harry voices sarcastically. I stand exposed in the centre of the kitchen as he resumes eating from his bowl. "You know-" Harry pipes up suddenly. "I don't get why you would like, do that in my flat after what happened between us the other day."

"Harry, we kissed, oh my god," I frustratingly look around, keeping my voice low so I'm sure only he can hear me. "Louis and I have been together for however long. I don't get why you're so shocked that we hooked up again. Like, I'm sorry we were loud and it's really shit that you had to
"Scar, I know you didn't mean it," Harry presses. "I'm just not keen on being more aware of you and Louis than I already am."

"I know..." I slowly advance to where he's perched on his stool. "I'm sorry again. But it's probably the last time we'll talk about this for a while."

"Why?" Harry frowns at me with a milky mouthful.

"We're not hooking up anymore," I state plainly, implying myself and Louis.

"Did you break up?"

"We were never official, love."

"I hope it's not because of..." Harry hints at us kissing. "You know."

"No, it's more than that," I climb up and calmly sit next to him on his neighbouring kitchen bar stool. "We're getting to know each other as friends."

Harry watches me curiously, "That's good, I hope."

"I hope so too," I wet my lips with my tongue.

"At least you guys will be close for the rest of the break," Harry shrugs, focussing his attention back on his bowl of cereal.

"No we won't."

"Aren't you visiting Cheshire?"

"Why would I?" I question.

"Everyone's visiting their families this week," Harry frowns, turning his body to face me. "I thought you would too."

"You're my family," I voice quickly. "I'm staying in London."

"But your parents-"

"I don't associate with them," I crudely cut him off, feeling the blood flow in my veins for an entirely different reason this time. "They're not worth it."

"They probably miss you," Harry persists on dragging out the conversation, not realising that I've wanted it over with since before it started.

I roll my eyes, staring at the boy in front of me.

"We don't even talk, Harry," I insist. "You wouldn't understand."

"Maybe if you let me?"

"I don't wanna go there."

"Why don't we go there?" Harry drops his spoon in his bowl with a loud clink. "Are you just gonna ignore this for the rest of your life?"
"That sounds nice, yeah," I voice sarcastically.

"Maybe it's about time you tried connecting with them," he suggests forcefully.

"I don't want that," I object to him yet again. "I don't like them and they don't like me."

"Don't be ridiculous," Harry shakes his head, mouthing over another large spoonful of bran.
"They're your parents, of course they like you."

"No, you know what? I'm done," I throw my hands up in frustration. "I knew you wouldn't get it. I was right."

Harry is the type of person who always tries to see the good in people, above all. It's rarely a downfall, making him one of the sweetest, most genuine people I have ever met. But this time it's no more than a bother.

I release an annoyed sigh, placing both of my hands atop the marble counter. Without a further word, I push myself up off the tall kitchen stool and step onto the tiled floor.

"Wait," Harry stops me from making another move. "Please don't leave. I know it's a tense sort of day but don't shut me out, Scar," he looks at me with infuriated, glimmering eyes. "They might not be here for you but I am. Just tell me something- tell me what's going on and I'll help you. I promise," he reaches out to me. "No matter what it takes."

I pause for a moment to swallow down whatever emotion I'm feeling and end up responding a bit more harshly than I would like, "You can't help me."

"Then let's start small and see where it goes," Harry muses openly. "It can't hurt, can it?"

I huff at his statement.

Because for once, Harry is wrong.

It can hurt. It can hurt a whole hell of a lot. And it has been hurting. For years, those two people have been plaguing me. No matter how hard I try, no matter how far I run, they're constantly there; nagging in my thoughts and eating away at the back of my mind.

And it's fucking torturous.

"Make me a tea, will you?" Louis suddenly appears in the kitchen, visibly relaxed from his recent release.

Neither Harry or I say anything, both just staring at each other like fire and ice.

"Or I'll make the tea myself..." Louis murmurs to himself, raising his eyebrows at our unnatural silence.

Harry was close.

He got me to actually talk about my parents, even if it wasn't very much. I usually try to avoid that subject at all costs, skillfully keeping my history closed and sealed in a locked iron box.

If I were to tell anyone, however, it honestly would be Harry. Even Naomi falls second to him with personal issues such as that. It could be a good thing — potentially — to finally let someone in on the part of my life I've been holding back. Especially if that someone is Harry Styles.
We are supposed to be best friends, after all.

"Harry needs me to help him pack," I voice thickly, giving a nod to the curly haired boy who gazes back at me in a surprised stupor. "We'll be upstairs for the next little while."

Harry drinks down the milky remains in the bottom of his bowl in one go. He efficiently disposes his dishes in his kitchen sink, wordlessly agreeing to my implication.

"I thought Harry finished packing last night?" Louis frowns to himself without meeting my eyes, busy rummaging through his cupboards.

I mentally kick myself in the arse, knowing something as simple as packing was a lame excuse. Regardless, I manage to muster up a quick cover.

"He obviously didn't read the list I sent him," I claim casually, "because he's missing a lot."

"It was a very thorough list," Harry pipes up as he reaches me, his voice deep in concentration.

"Oh, alright, then," Louis smiles, placing his cup on the counter to gaze over at me sweetly. "See ya, friend."

"See ya, friend," I repeat, unexpectedly blushing back at the older boy with a smile that warms me from the inside out.

Harry and I make our way up to his bedroom. He shuts the door behind us once we're both inside. Usually, I would question the sudden behaviour but this time it makes me feel safe. Protected.

I appreciate that Harry went along with my little white lie. He's generally pure shit of a liar and most often transparent if he ever tries, so I'm quite impressed with the effort he put into covering with me. I admire him for it, even.

We rest on his bed, facing each other. We sit cross-legged, pressed together at our knees and playing with the rips in each other's jeans. Harry lets me take my time, warming up to the idea of actually spilling what's been going on all these years. I gradually gather up my thoughts and take a deep breath.

I slowly open my mouth to speak once I feel I'm ready but nothing happens. I want to start telling Harry about my past — say something, at least — but no words are passing through my lips. Not a single sound can be forced from my restricted lungs, no matter how hard I try.

"Scarlet?" Harry frowns, taking my hand.

"Yeah?" I look up at him with wide eyes.

Harry searches my expression fervidly, rubbing his thumb over my fingers, "Maybe you should just start from the beginning."

I nod, swallowing tightly before speaking.

Chapter End Notes
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"I was born in Middlewich, Cheshire..."

"Not that far back," Harry jests with a laugh, teasing me lightly. "Wait- Middlewich?"

"Yeah."

"I thought you said you were from Northwich?"
"Same thing," I shrug.

"Yeah, but Middlewich is a ten minute drive from Holmes Chapel -- barely -- when Northwich is like, twice as far," Harry presses on. "That changes everything."

I nod and shrug again, not really knowing what to say.

"You do realise if I were to walk home from Middlewich it would take only an hour on foot?" Harry questions matter-of-factly.

"I am aware," I chuckle.

"We grew up ten minutes away from each other, Scar..." Harry clarifies, his mouth parting a little as he speaks. "And we didn't even know?"

"Pretty much," I laugh, embarrassedly. "Well, I knew. I mean, I found out the day we met. That's why I was so taken when you first told me you were from Holmes Chapel."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Harry beams at me disbelievingly.

"I don't give a shit about Middlewich, that town can burn in hell," I roll my eyes, making Harry's bright expression dim. "Northwich is okay but London is my home."

"So, wait- did you move to Northwich?" Harry asks carefully. "Or, how did that play out?"

"I grew up in Middlewich, like I said," I tell him. "My parents fought a lot when I was a kid and thought that moving would change how unhappy they were. We moved but nothing changed," I shake off any harsh emotions I might be feeling from talking about such a bothersome topic. "I was fourteen when we went up to Northwich. We stayed there for three years until I moved out. I lived on my own then and I have ever since."

"Wait, seventeen?" Harry states, looking at me with piercing eyes. "You moved out when you were seventeen?"

"Yeah, it was, uh-" I pause. "It was an experience."

"Wow, that's- That's incredibly brave, Scarlet," Harry sits back on his hands, taken with the words I'm saying. I mouth a small 'thank you' to him, smiling softly before he continues. "What about your parents? Where are they now?"

"They moved back to Middlewich once I left and rebuilt a creepy reflection of their former life," I cringe at the kind of people they are now. "Without me in the picture, of course."

Harry furrows his brows, surveying me intently. I look around his room, antsy with all the pressure that's been put on me. Harry takes a few moments to form his next question, trying to get his words right so he doesn't come off with the wrong impression.

"What happened, love?" Harry lowers his voice, folding our hands together between our crossed legs. "I know you said your parents fought a lot but I'm sensing that wasn't the whole reason why you left."

"It wasn't."

"Wanna talk about it?"

"There's a bit to tell," I bite my lip, unsure of how deep Harry is willing to get.
"I have time," Harry smiles softly but I give him a look, making him correct himself with a goofy grin. "Well, I have until tomorrow morning."

"Thought so," I smile, lowering my gaze to our hands. "Alright. Well, my dad was a stockbroker and my mum was a math tutor. I think they chose those sort of jobs on purpose. They weren't really people-people, you know what I mean?" I grimace as Harry nods along. "They were fully set, security-wise, and they could tell their patrons straight facts rather than actually communicating with them as humans."

Harry continues to nod with his brows together, taking in every word I'm saying.

"They were a faceless, nameless sort of people," I go on. "They didn't treat me like parents should. Always wanting me to do what they wanted and never letting me think for myself. Never letting me have my own creativity because they thought they already had my life's path carved in stone."

"Scarlet, I'm so sorry, that's really shit," Harry empathizes. "Were they always like that?"

"Yeah, always. They were fake. Pretentious. They were afraid to let go and be themselves, so they put up a front to blend in with everyone else; to mask all individuality. Fucking clones, both of them. The only reason they fought was because they were too busy to see that they were exactly the same," I look down at Harry's large hands folded over my own, chuckling lowly despite my fixed grimace. Harry soothingly rubs my hand, urging me to go on.

"Their fights were stupid, pointless," I shake my head, gazing up at Harry as he gazes across at me. "I would listen in on them sometimes and even as a kid I could tell they were yelling just to hear their own voices. But that didn't stop them. Almost every day would result in an argument. There wasn't a week where I didn't run off to my room crying..."

I let out a slow, deep breath.

"And then one day, it's like it all disappeared," I stare ahead blankly. "They would go through their daily routines, pretending to be overly-interested in small talk that they could honestly care less about. They'd even sleep in the same bed at the end of every day," I huff out a bitter chuckle. "But they weren't happy."

"What happened?" Harry asks darkly.

"I dunno, something just changed. But by then I was nearly an adult and I basically knew what I wanted to do with my life. And it definitely wasn't what my parents had planned. That really struck a nerve," I laugh, somewhat amused at my teenage rebellion. "Every day they would tell me I was going nowhere with music and that it was just a silly hobby I shouldn't waste my time with. What they didn't know was that it was my escape; my release from their harsh rules and ridiculous, unhealthy restrictions. Music was my only way to be free and finally express myself for once. But they just didn't see it that way."

"What did they want you to do?" Harry frowns, trying to understand where I'm coming from. "What was their plan, I mean?"

"They wanted me to get a higher education, study books I had no interest in and land a job just like theirs. They expected so many things from me..." I Huff out in distress. "Things that I couldn't offer. What they planned was what I hated but they wouldn't have it any other way. They would constantly put me down, saying there was no way I, of all people, could make it in the music business. They'd trash anything unique I found an interest in, never forgetting to remind me that anything I had a
genuine interest in was a nothing more than a pipe dream. Then they'd try and get on my sensitive side and guilt me into doing what they wanted so I'd basically end up with no choice... They were really forceful, Harry, I can't even explain it."

"Did they ever... hurt you?" Harry swallows, hundreds of emotions swirling in his eyes.

"No. No, it was all mental. So much mental stress. I was unhappy for way too long. And depression runs in my family so that was a given," I close my eyes, not wanting to see the heartbreaking, pained look on Harry's face. "I couldn't sleep. I wouldn't shower for days. I would go between binging and not having much of an appetite. Not to say I stopped eating, but when I did eat I would just make myself sick. I don't really wanna get into that shit now but I didn't think it would ever stop. Until I met Mitch."

"Fuck," Harry states. "...Your manager."

"Yeah, Mitch Leybourne," I nod, continuing on liberally. "Without my parents knowing, I would play in pubs and parks. They thought I was doing extra curricular shit but really, I was taking a break from the world," I chuckle, looking back on my past with mixed emotions. "I didn't expect much but it was more for myself anyway. Mitch just happened to hear me one afternoon in a local pub in central London. He liked the fact that I wrote original songs and had a unique singing voice, I guess. That, and I could actually play guitar as well as most boys could," I laugh. "He came to a few more of my gigs after that and then one day he offered to focus all of his attention on me, as my executive manager."

"That's fantastic... What did your parents have to say about that?" Harry chuckles, knowing none of it could have been good.

"I didn't let them have a say this time," I lower my eyebrows, pursing my lips. "I told them what was happening and they couldn't do a thing to stop me and I moved out within the month."

"Holy shit."

"I could tell they were surprised that something actually worked out for me, music-wise. I still remember the disbelieving looks on their faces when I first told them to this day. And the fucked up thing is, after their initial shock, they pretended to be happy for me. They acted like they knew I could do it all along and that they were supporting me from the beginning -- which was the exact opposite of what was really going on. That made me fucking sick but it was almost expected," I roll my eyes sarcastically. "I didn't show them how smug I was. I wanted to rub it in their faces, you have no idea. But I didn't. Instead, I took the high road out of there and never looked back."

"Do they ever try to contact you?" Harry frowns. "They must see you in the media all the time now."

I chuckle tiredly, "That's another story for another day."

"Fair enough," Harry emotes. "I can't even begin to imagine what you had to endure. Those must've been some hard years but look where you are now. You're so lucky, Scar..." he breathes. "No-" he suddenly changes his mind with a firm purse of his lips. "You're better than lucky. You worked bloody hard to be here. I'm so fucking proud of you. Give me a hug."

"I honestly don't know why I'm not crying." I laugh, falling into his arms as he holds me. "I should be. I usually do. I guess I'm just numb to it now."

"Don't hold back if you have to. That's the worst thing you can do," he rubs along my spine, soothing me with his familiar touch. "I'm always here if you need a shoulder to cry on. I'm quite
practiced with that -- I have credentials," Harry lightens the mood, alluding to the last time I let myself go at his expense.

"You are a good shoulder to cry on," I grin, pulling away from him slightly. "You can put that on your resume."

"I might just start applying for jobs now," Harry lowers his voice and I smile.

"Too late. You're already taken, love," I happily wrap Harry in another comforting hug, feeling a light blush form on my cheeks. "You know, I never really had a place that really felt like home. But now I have you and the boys. I'm so fucking thankful for that."

"Not everyone is lucky enough to have a close family. People who love and care for you unconditionally are hard to come by," Harry says thoughtfully, pulling away to look at me. "Everyone needs somebody to support them through the rough times. I can't imagine what you must've gone through, Scarlet. I can only hope that you forget about all of that one day and can look back on it as a lifetime ago. I don't want you to see family as a bad thing because really, it's one of the most cherished things this world has to offer -- blood or not," he takes my hand in both of his. "...That's why I wanna ask you something."

"What is it?"

My heart pounds in my chest. My lungs feel like they're in my throat and my legs are numb. My mind is firing off countless explosions all at once, running over infinite thoughts of what Harry’s proposal could possibly be.

I swallow down the lump in my throat.

The last time someone left me hanging like this, it resulted in me having to reject the proposal of being his girlfriend. I just hope it's not something as far-fetched as that. I hope what Harry has to offer is something at least a bit more reasonable. But knowing him, it should be.

After a long pause, Harry finally lets go, speaking in the deepest tone his voice can produce.

"Come home with me."

"What?" all the air is released from my lungs, as if I've unexpectedly received a hard blow to the chest. "Really?"

"Yes, really," Harry nods once, showing no emotion just yet.

"To Holmes Chapel?" I verify, not believing any of this at all. "Tomorrow?"

"To meet my mum and sister and spend a week in a real home... with me..." he adds in a deep undertone. "Yes."

"That would be a dream," the idea is so unbelievable, so unfathomable, I'm almost brought to tears.

"A dream is a wish your heart makes."

The breath catches in my lungs at Harry's sudden poetic words. We lock eyes, not saying a word, not moving a muscle. I wet my lips at the sight of Harry moistening his. My eyes fall to his jawline, clenching and unclenching as he parts his lips, before we are interrupted by a knock on his bedroom door.
"Scarlet?" Louis pushes Harry's door open a crack, carefully peeking in before entering.

"Hey," I smile at the sight of the boy.

"Thought I'd find you here," he mirrors my expression enthusiastically. "Sup, Harry."

"Sup," Harry quirks with a goofy smile, letting Louis sit on the bed next to us.

"Hey, I was thinking-" Louis plants himself right next to me. "If you're not doing anything for the break... Since we need to get to know each other more and- you know... You should come to Doncaster for the week. With me. And my family."

"Oh."

As if this day couldn't get any more riotous.

As if Louis had to ask me to go home with him mere seconds after Harry did the same.

As if I couldn't hurt this boy anymore, I sigh, squeezing my eyes shut to collect my thoughts.

"That all sounds really lovely, Lou..." I bite my lip, stalling unwillingly.

"It does, doesn't it?" the boy grins, riddled with positive energy.

"Yeah, but- I really appreciate you asking me, I-" I stutter, glancing between Louis and Harry; ruling out all the temptation in my soul that tells me to betray Harry's proposal. "I can't. I uh- I have plans."

"You do?" Louis asks, surprisingly. "I thought you were just staying in London?"

"Not exactly. That took a sudden turn," I lick my lips, trying not to look at Harry as much as I know I am. "I'm going- I've got some- personal things I need to do..." I lower my gaze, touching Louis on his thigh. "I'm sorry, Lou. Please respect that."

"Yeah," Louis frowns like it's no big deal but I can tell his heart has deflated for the second time today. "Yeah, of course. I just thought I'd ask. You know."

"Yeah. Thank you, really," I stress, putting on a forgiving expression.

Harry still hasn't said anything but I'm fucking thankful that he hasn't. Louis doesn't need to know what he doesn't need to know. That would only complicate things more than they decidedly already are and I really don't think I have the brain capacity for that.

"We'll have plenty of time to get to know each other in America," I voice uneasily, giving Louis' leg a squeeze before removing my hand. "I'm sure of it."

"I'll hold you to that," Louis smirks, playing around with a twinkle in his eye. "I guess you're all done packing, then?"

"Packing?" I frown.

"Do we need to do any more packing?" Harry hints at me, giving his eyebrows a raise.

"Oh," I hastily remember the cover Harry and I used for our chat. "No, I think we pretty much covered everything."

My brain does a mental flip.
I'm looking forward to going to Cheshire.

I really am.

It was sweet of Louis to offer for me to go to Doncaster with him. But if I'm being honest with myself, I think I'd feel more comfortable going home with Harry this time. I know more about him and I'm more relaxed with him and basically, it just feels right.

I can only imagine how awkward it could be if I were to go home with Louis and his mum and all of his sisters and do nothing but flirt with the boy in front of them. It's all we know how to do and we haven't exactly experienced this whole friends thing yet.

I feel weird just thinking about it.

But all of my negative thoughts vanish as I remember where I'm headed and the boy I'm headed there with. I need to go home and start packing up for the coming week. We leave for Cheshire tomorrow and I wanna be sure I have all of my essentials.

But there's one, slightly more important thing I need to do before I go.

I really need to keep track of my lies.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

[Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeros - Home]

[Wattpad Link]
"You've got everything?"

"Yes, Harry."

"Are you sure? We can turn around if you need to."

"H, we're halfway there," I chuckle, peering to my right at the boy in the driver's seat. "I think your mum would like us to get there today, rather than tomorrow."

"Sorry, Scar," Harry blushes adorably, keeping his eyes on the road. "I just wanna make sure you're comfortable."

"You're doing a good job of it," I smile serenely.

The entire ride goes like this. Chatting about silly things, singing along to old songs on the radio and feeling the fresh air of the country roads whip past Harry's vintage car. We've been playing games like every time you see a stop sign you have to moo or else spill an embarrassing fact about yourself to pass the time. We haven't been keeping score but it's been entertaining nonetheless.

We're taking the long way to Cheshire; not taking any main roads or busy routes that might have too many stops along the way. We're trying to stay as low-key as possible and it just so seems to be working out perfectly. Harry has just finished telling me about the time he stubbed his toe on purpose when he was five just so his mum would give him an ice lolly, when he suddenly moos out loud, cutting his own self off.

"Where the hell was that one?" I gape, not ready to spill more of my dark secrets just yet.

"Down the dirt road we just passed," Harry chuckles, staring straight ahead.

"That's not even fair, I didn't see it."

"That's how you got me last time!"

"Fine," I smirk, resting my head back against the headrest of the passenger seat. "I'm touring with a boyband."

"I'd no idea," Harry jokes, letting his mouth curl up at the sides.

"No, that's my embarrassing fact," I chuckle. "I'm touring with a boyband."

"That's embarrassing to you?" Harry's hands visibly clench over his steering wheel, though he tries to hide it.

"Well, yeah," I ignore the boy's dejected aura to explain my thoughts. "Not so much anymore but when I first got the offer to open for you I was ready to turn it down right away."

"What changed your mind?"

"You," I say simply.

"What?" Harry's voice raises slightly. He quickly glances back at me while still watching the road.

"I mean, all of you," I hastily correct myself, not wanting him to get the wrong idea; whatever that
idea may be. "I grew attached... I guess. And I couldn't let you go. If anyone was gonna tour with you this year it was gonna be me. I couldn't have anyone else taking that place. No matter if I'm still considered a rockstar or not," I chuckle at that last bit.

"You're sweet," Harry muses.

"Sweet?" I joke to distract from the pink flushing over my cheeks. "Is that your embarrassing fact?"

"It's not embarrassing," Harry studies me for a moment, surveying my darkened eyes, then turns his attention back to the road. "You're gonna like my mum."

I smile serenely, looking away from Harry to watch the green fields that pass us by.

"I have a feeling I already do."

It's strange being back in Cheshire.

Harry's hometown seems so familiar, although I've never lived here. We passed by so many streets that I knew and sights that I remembered. The whole way here, I was feeling sick with the idea that I might recognise someone as we drove through the quiet towns but we didn't. And as soon as we made it to Holmes Chapel, all the bitter memories of my past vanished with a fresh outlook on my present.

Anne and Harry greeted each other with countless hugs and kisses the moment we stepped through their door. It's almost mesmerising to watch Harry interact with someone he knows so well away from all the fans and the crazy, hectic lifestyle we're so used to.

Especially when that person is his mum.

Anne is beautiful. She accepted me right away and there was no question if I could stay here or not; she practically suggested it the moment Harry rang her last night. To imagine having someone like her as a mother is just so unfathomable and far-fetched, especially for me. Anne is so open and loving, I'm almost in a daze. This entire experience with Harry's family is nothing short of surreal and we've barely been here for five minutes.

"And how was the drive, Scarlet?" Anne turns to me after her affectionate reunion with Harry.

"It was great thanks," I smile as we share a friendly hug.

"Little Harry wasn't too mad of a driver, was he?" she winks.

"Mum-" Harry rolls his eyes, albeit beaming from the massive love he feels for the woman.

"He was quite a professional, I have to say," I smirk at Anne who chuckles at my expression.

"I'm really surprised we haven't met earlier," she says, leading us into her house. "Harry's told me all about you."

"He has?" I question, glancing back at the boy who struggles to hide his peculiar smile.

"All lovely things, I assure you," Anne smiles warmly before turning to her son. "Do you need help
with your bags, darling?"

"No, thanks mum," Harry grabs hold of his own suitcase, putting his bicep muscles on full display. "I'm alright."

"You sure, love?" Anne asks Harry. However, he doesn't have time to respond before another voice enters the room.

"Can't open a magazine without seeing your ugly mug," a young woman's voice comes from the stairwell.

A pretty girl no more than a year older than me joins us in the foyer. She looks similar to Harry, having his same nose and mouth; even sharing his dark, striking green eyes.

"Gem!" Harry drops his bags, pulling the tall girl into a tight, extended hug. "Missed you."

"Missed you more," Gemma squeezes Harry's shoulders as they separate. "Hi, Scarlet."

"Hey, Gemma," I beam as I approach her.

Gemma goes for a handshake but I bring her into a soft hug instead, making her chuckle lightly as we step apart. I'm surprised how she greeted me so casually. She's obviously seen me perform multiple times and Harry's definitely referred to her a lot; we've just never once met in person.

"I heard you're staying the whole week," Gemma chats me as Anne helps Harry with our minimal luggage, regardless of his kind protests. "I'd no idea, I only just found out yesterday."

"So did I," I quip, making Gemma's eyebrows raise in curiosity. "I was just gonna stay in London but Harry was kind enough to invite me here," I can sense Gemma's hesitance so I put on a calm smile. "If you don't mind, of course."

"No," Gemma grins, shaking her head kindly, "not at all, it's totally cool."

The way she's looking at me makes me feel like she knows something I don't. There's a slight discomfort in the air surrounding us but I just brush it off as it's my first time in her home. There's bound to be a little tension, no matter what.

"You'll be here all week too, right?" I ask hopefully.

"I'm actually leaving tomorrow. I'm only here for the night," Gemma purses her lips apologetically. "I've got exams."

"University?" I frown, a bit let down.

"Yeah, it's the summer exam period. I wish I could stay longer," Gemma shrugs. "It's kinda shit that my last exam week had to be the one where Harry came home but what can you do?"

"That is really shit," I agree with her. "You seem confident, though. I think you'll do well."

"That's an act! I'm not bad but there's no way I'll ace it," she barks out a laugh. "But thank you. I appreciate it."

"Of course," I chuckle humouredly.

Even though Gemma was a little standoffish at first, I'm still really keen on getting to know her. She seems like a cool person and I think we could get along if we tried. She's my best friend's sister, after
all. If she's not half as lovely as he is, I wouldn't believe it.

"Let's have a show around the house, shall we?" Anne comes back into the foyer with Harry on her heels. "Joining us, Scarlet?"

"Yeah, let's see!" I grin, nodding to Gemma as I follow Harry and his mum.

Anne and Harry show me around the house; directing me throughout the kitchen, then the living room and the spacious backyard. Anne leads us up the stairwell, making sure to point out all of Harry's childhood photographs that line the walls. There's a story for each of them and they tell them together, laughing and correcting each other, all while fondly reminiscing about their endearing past.

"And here's the upstairs lavatory," Anne points out a smaller room decorated in white. "You can wash up any time you like; have a bath, take a shower. Treat it like it's your home because it is."

I have stars in my eyes as I smile at the woman before me, "Awesome, thank you so much."

"This is where I took my first wee!" Harry adds in enthusiastically.

Anne slaps Harry's arm with a scoff.

"Cheeky monkey," she chuckles, rolling her eyes at her son. She smirks as she goes on. "And Scarlet, I've set up a room for you right next to Harry's, it's-"

"Thanks mum, but Scarlet will be staying with me," Harry politely interrupts his mum.

"Oh, alright then," Anne nods.

"Comfort, you know?" Harry adds with a shrug.

Anne smiles pleasantly, sensing her son's true emotions, "I do, Harry."

"Thanks, Anne," I smile, not wanting to intrude, but genuinely appreciating everything she has done for me so far.

Anne is the first mother figure I've been around in practically forever, so to her a simple action might not seem like much effort, but to me it means the world. She's just so kind and lovely and the way she and Harry interact is something truly incredible. I've never had that with anyone in my life and it astonishes me just to watch them together.

"I'll leave you to your unpacking," Anne nods, waving us over to Harry's room. "I'll let you know when dinner's ready."

"Thanks, mum!" Harry calls out as Anne heads back downstairs.

Harry shows me into his bedroom, nearly stumbling over the suitcases he and Anne just placed by the door. It's a small room but it's very neat. I glance around at the furnishings and boyish decorations before noticing how Harry's bed is considerably smaller than either of us are used to. It's fitted with cotton sheets and pushed up against the far right corner of his cosy bedroom. It's much tinier than the royal-sized beds we're always treated to in the classiest hotels on tour and it looks as if it's barely big enough for the two of us.

And strangely, I'm okay with that.

"So this where the magic happens," I smirk, taking a seat on Harry's small bed.
He looks over at me amid sorting his packed clothes into his wooden wardrobe and nearly chokes.

"I've definitely had a few memories in here," Harry raises his eyebrows adorably.

"Embarrassing story time," I state.

"Absolutely not," Harry chuckles.

"You've got a stop sign in your room," I smirk, pointing out a large photograph of John Lennon on the wall by Harry's window, "and- oh, what's that?" I cut myself off before mooing quite loudly, alluding back to the game we invented in the car. "Looks like you've got a story to tell, Styles."

"You're actually the worst," Harry bites his lip, glaring at me regardless of his constant smirk.

"I'm waiting," I tease him, watching as he pauses with his sorting to rack his brain.

"Alright," Harry begins, clearing his throat. "My mum was out once and I had a girl over. We were both like, fifteen and it was the first time I was gonna see actual boobs," he blushes, shaking his head as he laughs. "So I got her shirt off and as we were kissing I was fiddling around with her back, trying to find the clasp of her bra or whatever. I was sweating for like, *five whole minutes* until she finally moved away and asked me what I was doing because, turns out, it was a sports bra the whole time."

I fall back on Harry's bed, riddled with laughter, "That's the best thing ever!"

"It gets better," Harry cheesily points a finger at me.

"How could it get any better than that?" I shake my head.

"I still got to see her boobs," he smirks cockily, going back to sorting his clothes.

"You stallion," I chuckle, gazing at Harry and noticing for the first time how his left dimple is slightly more prominent than his right.

"C'mere," Harry suddenly voices. I rise up off his bed without a word, silently approaching him. "The top drawer is yours. You can keep all your clothes and things in there for the week so you don't have to stay packed."

"Thanks but that's alright, H," I kindly object to Harry's offer, warming up to his side. "I'm more than used to living out of my suitcase while we're on tour."

"We're not on tour," Harry insists, already opening my suitcase for me, "we're home now."

And all I can do is nod with a simple, "Okay," because now it's a fact.

I just really can't say no to this boy.

---

My first dinner at the Styles-Twist household was probably the most I've ever felt at home among an actual family ever in my life.

We had a nice get-together in Harry's dining room with only myself, Anne, Gemma, Harry and his
step-father, Robin. We all shared a bunch of stories and laughs and I learned more about Harry's family at this one dinner than I ever thought I could learn about a single family in an entire night.

Harry's relatives are amazing. After seeing how he and his family interact with each other — so naturally in the comfort of their own home — I already feel this massive warming love for every single one of them.

It's unfortunate that Gemma could only stay with us for one night but she promised to catch up with everyone during our next break back home. Turns out, I got along with her easier than I originally thought I would. It's strange to say, but she and Louis share a number of similarities in their personalities, so once we both figured each other out in that sense, we formed an understanding and ended up getting along fairly well.

After most of the food has been eaten and everyone's bellies are full, we all clear our plates, leaving Anne and Robin to do the cleaning up in the kitchen.

"Are you sure you don't need any help?" I ask for the second time, resting in the doorway of the kitchen.

"Oh, no," Robin protests with a laugh.

"Don't worry about it, darling," Anne smiles, concurring with her husband. "You have enough to stress about daily, I'm sure. And you're on holiday! You enjoy your evening."

"Thanks for dinner, it was great," I wave a hand, making my way out of the kitchen before hearing a jolly "Don't mention it!" from Robin and a warm chuckle from Anne.

I jog up the stairs, passing Gemma who's already retired to her room before meeting Harry in his own.

"Harry Styles, can I have your autograph?" I lean in Harry's doorway before joining him by his closet.

"You're in a good mood," Harry smiles pleasantly, chuckling at my humour.

"I feel good," I smile back. "Are we going to sleep now or what's going on?"

"We're definitely not going to sleep," Harry states intriguingly, making my stomach flutter into itself.

"So what are we doing?" my voice falters unnaturally.

"We're going outside," Harry turns to me. "You might wanna put on a jumper, it's a bit chilly out there."

There are a number of questions swirling around in my head but I know if I chose to ask any of them I would probably end up more confused than I already am. It's Harry Styles we're talking about here. So I agree without saying a word and round back to the wooden wardrobe that stands by the bedroom door.

I open the top drawer of Harry's wardrobe — the one that apparently belongs to me now — and quickly rummage through it. I look through the small stacks of folded clothes, trying to find a jumper or something warm to wear, only to find that I didn't pack any.

"How could you not pack a jumper?" Harry questions when I tell him so.
"I dunno, it's May," I drop my hands in defeat. "I guess I forgot how cool it gets at night."

Harry chuckles endearingly, "Take mine, love."

Harry takes a step back and pulls off his own jumper. He shows a bit of his fit tummy as he does so — something which I definitely did not almost drool at — then shakes out the wrinkles of the garment and hands it over to me.

"You really don't have to..." I toss the large jumper in my hands, trying to find where to put my arms in.

"I know, you're not used to people doing things for you," Harry recites and I can't help but nod in agreement. "Well, you're gonna have to get used to it. My home is your home," he says as if it's the most simple thing in the world. "My clothes are your clothes."

Harry grabs another woolly jumper from his closet as I pull his worn one over my own torso. I settle into the garment, letting it drape loosely around my shoulders. I have to bundle the sleeves by my wrists so my hands can breathe and my torso is nearly drowning in cotton and wool but I like it that way.

I watch Harry pull over his new jumper as I settle into his old one. It's huge and soft and fluffy and warm. It's way oversized and it's nearly falling off my right shoulder. There's a tiny rip in the left elbow and it smells undeniably like Harry’s skin.

In other words, it's perfect.

"Are you ready?" Harry asks once he's done changing.

"Yeah, but- what exactly are we doing outside?" I frown, unsure of what this boy has planned for the night.

"We," Harry casually slips an arm around my waist, warmly leaning into my side, "are going on an adventure."

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

It's late in the evening and the weather has noticeably cooled down.

Harry and I make our way down to the kitchen before heading outside, where we find Anne and Robin drying the last of the dishes. Anne helps us find some tea lights which we carefully light and place in tiny glass lanterns. They're so cute and rustic and I feel so natural and bohemian just carrying mine.

Or something like that.

"Don't go too far," Anne calls out from the kitchen as we reach the sliding glass doors that lead to the backyard. "There are animals out there, Harry."

"The only animals I'm worried about are the filthy ones," Harry jests with a smirk.

"I mean it, darling," Anne presses. "Keep your phone on. Ring me if you need to."

"Of course, mum," Harry slides one of the doors open and helps me step out into the yard. "Don't wait up."

"Harry-" she voices in a warning tone.
"I'm only joking," Harry shouts back to his mum with a laugh. "We won't be long!"

Harry grabs hold of the tartan blanket he set by the door and guides me out into the darkness. The air is fresh and I'm breathing easy. The breeze is scented of freshly cut grass, nighttime dew and the subtle drafts of a nearby neighbour's campfire. It's a bit chilly but Harry's oversized jumper warms me to my bones.

Once the door slides shut, Harry slings his tartan over one shoulder and takes his lantern in his other hand. The two of us tread through his backyard until we come to a massive clearing just beyond the log fence at the back of his mum's property. It's a field more than anything and is rid of any trees or foliage of any sort. It's simply home to a massive expanse of deep greens, seeming empty in the darkness the further we embark on it.

"Wanna settle down, sort of in the centre here?" Harry walks ahead to the middle of the small field, hesitantly drawing the tartan from his shoulder.

"Yeah, this is-" I stumble and, for lack of a better word, I conclude with, "perfect."

"Perfect..." Harry repeats curiously. He sets his lantern down in the grass before laying the blanket out for us both. "Care to join me?"

"Never," I chuckle sarcastically, physically needing to lighten the mood before I know I'll make a true arse of myself. I rest next to Harry on the soft wool, placing my tea lantern on the grass next to his. "Is this the infamous adventure you're taking me on, then?"

"Almost," Harry moistens his lips, visibly intent on my reaction. "Look up."

I watch as Harry cranes his neck back to look at the sky above us. His thick Adam's apple bobs in his throat as he swallows down the expression of wonder that slowly takes over his visage. I find myself becoming mesmerised with the way Harry's face is shaped. The precise angle of his chin leading to the tip of his nose. The soft veins running down the sides of his neck, gently licking over his heavy collar bones.

I blink my eyes a few times, getting my mind back into focus.

If Harry Styles himself is more intriguing to me than the supposed adventure he's trying to take me on, then my state of mind is decidedly more than questionable by this point.

But it's not like that. He's beautiful. And what is beauty if it's not recognised? Certainly not as much as it's worth. Not as much as he's worth.

Then I look up for myself.

Millions of distant stars are painted elegantly across the charcoal black of the night. They shine and sparkle and are all scattered into hundreds of tiny constellations above us. And the moon. The moon is perfectly full and brighter than I've ever seen it in any circumstance. My breathing slows down and it's like the world has suddenly begun spinning a fraction of a second slower than it has been my entire life.

I've never seen a night sky so clear. At least, I've never experienced one so vivid — so painstakingly beautiful.

A tiny breathless "wow" flits past my lips without me even noticing.

"Thought you might like this," Harry hums mindlessly, still keeping his eyes on the sky.
"I do," I whisper; those two words feeling so much more significant now, in this moment, than ever before.

"I'm glad you're here;" Harry turns his attention towards me, "that you decided to join me."

"There wasn't much of a decision to make," I chuckle lightly. "I was pretty much set on coming here the moment you suggested it."

"Well then, I'm glad you're enjoying it," Harry's cheeks turn a soft pink as he smiles.

"I'm glad we're friends," I inwardly cringe at the word as I say it, but I continue nonetheless. "You know, I was mad at you for a bit."

"Why were you mad at me?" he questions, amusingly drawing his eyebrows together.

"Well, I wasn't mad, so much as I was- I dunno, not jealous but-" I stumble over my words, huffing out slightly. "Yeah, I guess I was a bit jealous."

"What- what were you jealous over?" Harry's lips curl into a peculiar expression that is neither a frown nor a grin.

"Amelia," I state plainly. "Not the fact that she was dating you or anything. Or, I thought she was dating you," I correct myself, shaking my head nonsensically. "Just the idea that you would get into a relationship so quickly. Without telling me, you know? Like, I thought we were gonna... like something was gonna happen at that party with the chair? Then barely a month later you were seeing someone else. It just seemed so ridiculous, so illogical, so easy for you," I clear my throat as Harry listens, in silent awe of the thoughts I'm so suddenly sharing with him. "Meanwhile, Louis and I had been going at it for practically four months and we still had no official relationship formed."

I inwardly toss a brick at my own head. I didn't intend to make this discussion about me and Louis. Harry's been kind enough to bring me out here and share his time off with someone he already sees nearly every day and the last thing I would want to do is spoil that by talking about his best friend in such a derogatory manner.

I'm actually an arsehole.

"Sorry to rant on, I-"

"No," Harry insists. "It's- I didn't know you felt that way."

"Yeah, well..." I purse my lips. "It doesn't matter. I found out it was fake eventually and- yeah, we've already gone through this."

"You called me a knob," Harry recalls, failing to hide his smirk.

"You're still a knob," I grin playfully. "That hasn't changed."

"What has changed, then?"

"We've changed," I voice slowly, implying what happened between us a few days ago. "Louis' changed. So have I."

"You really like him," Harry says more than asks.

"We're just friends now, remember?" I point out.
Harry shrugs, leaning back on both his palms, "Doesn't mean you can't still like him."

"I like a lot of people."

"In a romantic way," he specifies.

"Yeah," I say as if it's obvious. "Mick Jagger, David Bowie, Robert Plant, Freddie Mercury... I have a whole list."

Harry's voice echoes into the darkness as he laughs out loud, "Everyone you mentioned is either dead or ancient!"

"I'd still marry every single one of them."

"Yeah?" Harry raises his eyebrows at me.

"Yeah," I chuckle, shifting to make myself more comfortable on the tartan.

"Well, if that ever happens, I'm living in the guest house," Harry puts on his goofy little lopsided grin, causing my stomach to do a flip.

"Sounds like a deal," I feel my cheeks getting warmer even amid the cool evening weather.

Every time I'm around Harry, I'm thrown into a constant state of awe at how lovely he is. I marvel at all of the things he and his band have to deal with on a daily basis and how they always manage to pull through with their heads held high. I'm around them nearly every day but that doesn't make their lives and actions any less remarkable.

Harry, especially.

Being Harry Styles is probably the most difficult thing imaginable in the celebrity world. Everyone wants a piece of him; mentally and physically. They want to touch him and talk to him and take countless pictures of him, even if he's not entirely feeling it. And the thing is, he lets it happen. While any other person at his level of stardom would crumble under day after day of mounting pressure, Harry so graciously accepts it all. He hardly ever lashes out. He hardly ever gets irritated. And to take words from Naomi, he's basically the same exact boy as he was when he first auditioned. There is no ego to Harry Styles. He is not an arrogant person in the absolute slightest, even considering his unfathomable amount of fame. In fact, Harry is one of – if not the most – kindest, sweetest, charming, most polite people I've ever had the pleasure of knowing in my life.

This, all coming from me – a very particular rock and roll performer who doesn't give pop music a second listen, let alone a first – about someone in a fucking boyband.

If that isn't saying something then I don't know what is.

Harry and I continue to chat, flirting and giggling about nonsense then touching on issues we're more passionate about. I fiddle with the long sleeves of his jumper draped around my wrists as he readjusts it over my shoulders with a laugh. It's easy bonding with Harry; easy and so calming. He has this way about him that keeps me serene, no matter where we are or what we're doing.

As long as I keep any obsessive thoughts pushed to the back of my mind, that is.

"The candles are burning low," Harry points out, nodding over to our twin tea lanterns. "Might wanna start heading back."
“Yeah, let’s do that,” I nod, standing up for once and giving my limbs a stretch.

Harry and I roll up the large blanket together. He tosses it over his shoulder once it’s folded, just as he did when we first walked here. I grab both of our lanterns from the grass, handing one to Harry and keeping the other to guide our paths.

“Sure you’re alright to stay with me tonight, Scar?” Harry asks as we begin walking back to his mum’s house. “I know we already planned it and all but you can still have the guest room if you’d like.”

“You’re my best friend,” I shove his arm cheekily. “Of course I’m alright to stay with you.”

“Good. I just reckoned you might miss Louis and want to be on your own,” Harry voices as if he’s deep in thought. “You tend to stay with him most of the time.”

“I’m not gonna lie, Harry. I do miss him,” I mindlessly scuff my boots as we walk along the grass. “I’m used to having him here. Now that he’s gone, it feels like something huge is missing. But whatever.”


“It does suck but I’m like, okay with it at the same time. I know it’s for the best and things have a way of working themselves out in the end,” I look up at Harry, so casually sauntering next to me in the darkness. “Plus, you’re here.”

Harry smiles down at me without missing a step, “Think I could substitute for the night?”

“You and that tiny bed of yours,” I joke and he chuckles at my accidental sexual innuendo. “Yes,” I smile softly, adopting a slightly more genuine resonance to my voice. “You make me forget about the world.”

Harry gazes at me and doesn't utter a word. Instead, he reaches out with his free hand and interlocks my fingers with his, giving my palm a gentle squeeze. I return his squeeze admiringly, beaming up at him in pure comfort.

It just so happens that neither of us let go.

Harry and I walk along the empty field, hand in hand, with only the dim lights of our tea lanterns to guide us. It's not like I haven’t held Harry’s hand before because, with both of us being quite expressive people, it only comes naturally. But to have his large fingers interlaced with mine, without saying a word, as we consciously wander through the dark of his childhood property is something both brand new and curiously intriguing.

“We have to be quiet when we get in there,” Harry tells me once we pass the rustic log fence surrounding his mum's property. “Everyone should be asleep by now.”

“For sure,” I let go of Harry's hand so he can slide open the back door.

We step inside the living room and Harry raises a slender finger to his lips as he locks us in for the night. I nod, amused that Harry has to be so mindful of our actions. I know he trusts me, it's just comedic to watch him make sure of it.

We gradually reach his bedroom. Harry insisted on watchfully giving shushing fingers to the creaky floorboards beneath us as we walked along. But we made it.
I wander over to Harry's wardrobe once he shuts his door. Although his woolly jumper is still so damn comforting, it's getting just a bit too snug in the heat of his small bedroom. I slide open the top drawer of the wardrobe, looking for something more suitable to sleep in. I casually rifle through my clothes, until Harry suddenly warms up next to me.

"Sure you don't wanna wear something else of mine tonight?" he cheekily remarks in my ear.

I immediately stop searching through the drawer and nearly choke. Harry Styles is the only person in the world who can go from adorable idiot to charming casanova in under sixty seconds. And it's fucking frustrating.

"I'm alright, thanks H," I manage.

We agree to change our clothes with our backs to each other like we did before. However, this time, there is a considerably higher amount of tension between us. After a few minutes, Harry tells me he's done changing and — once I'm decidedly settled in my sleep shorts and tank top — I let him know I'm done as well.

The two of us turn around at the same time and my jaw nearly hits the floor.

"You're n-not done," my mouth goes dry as I look Harry up and down in all his magnificence. Aside from a single pair of boxer-briefs, his body is completely bare, showing off his dark tattoos and firm muscles stretched over his milky expanse of skin.

"Oh," Harry chuckles, otherwise oblivious to my utter shock, "I hope you don't mind but I tend to sleep shirtless."

"I don't mind. I don't mind. I don't mind. I don't mind."

I swallow deeply, my pulse noticeably increasing, "I don't mind."

So, this is great.

It's one thing for me to agree to sleep with Harry in his tiny, little childhood bed. But it's something on a whole other level to find out that I'll be sleeping with Harry in his tiny, little childhood bed while he's standing there, practically fucking naked, and acting as if we're doing nothing more than casually sipping our afternoon tea and talking about the fucking weather.

"Care to join me?" Harry fails to hide his grin, pulling back the covers of his narrow bed.

"Well," my lips curl up at the sides as I maintain my naive expression, "since you asked so kindly..."

Harry crawls into his bed, holding the covers up so I have room to lay next to him. And I do. My body fits cozily next to Harry's as I cuddle up to him. He drapes the blankets around us both. Only from lack of space do I rest my hand on Harry's bare side and keep it there, even once we're both settled.

All I can think about is how damn narrow this bed is. My heart is racing steadily, and I can't help but draw in the musky scent of the younger boy. Harry must have sensed my nerves, as he sits up for a moment to reposition us; sliding his bottom arm under my neck so we're closer than ever.

It's not like Harry and I haven't cuddled before or even slept in the same bed. It's just never had as much meaning as it does now. What, with me opening up to Harry at his flat and him accepting me so graciously, then inviting me to stay with his family for a week in the comfort of his childhood home. Not to mention, having me sleep with him in here instead of by myself in a perfectly adequate
guest room. Maybe it's a bit much, but he's done more for me in the past couple of days than I can even comprehend.

And the wonderful thing about it is, I don't feel like I owe anything to him. Harry is kind because he genuinely wants to be. There's no bullshit behind his actions if he can control it. And it would kill me if I ever felt obliged to please him in any way or, with that said, felt as if I was taking him for granted. That would be unfathomable. I couldn't possibly live with myself if we were like that.

But we're not. We're balanced. And it works.

Nearly ten minutes pass.

Ten minutes of warm skin and firm muscles. Ten minutes of sensing the rise and fall of Harry's rib cage as he exhales into my hair. Ten minutes of drifting away into his scent; mindlessly floating through tendrils of uninterrupted bliss.

And it's only once those ten minutes have passed, that I have to look up at Harry — see him from this angle; feel him from this distance — and discover that he is, in fact, not sleeping.

His eyes are stunningly open.

But it's not just that his eyes are open.

It's that his eyes are open and he's sleepily looking down at me.

"Why are you awake?" I look up at Harry with questioning eyes.

"Why are you awake?" he mimics my inquiry, gazing down at me throughout the darkness.

"Because you're here," I confess.

Harry chuckles; dimples softly forming in his cheeks, "What?"

Feeling a blush form on my cheeks, I lower my head; burying my face in Harry's chest; whispering over his inked skin, "You're distracting."

That's when he whispers back to me, so lowly I can barely hear him.

"You have no idea."

And I'm not sure if that was a kiss I felt on the top of my head, or just another satisfied breath, but I am sure of one thing.

Everything has changed.

Chapter End Notes
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The birds begin chirping at seven in the morning. I try to go back to sleep to finish the dream I was having, but it's impossible just listening to the cars pass by outside every now and again.

Harry is already gone and the rustled sheets to my side emphasize that fact. I want to lay with him again. I already miss him next to me. I'm so fucking drawn to him lately, it's the weirdest thing ever.

There's a note on the top of Harry's otherwise spotless dresser. I notice it as I'm changing out of my sleep attire. I read it with a smile plastered across my face, whether I realise it or not.

*Morning, Scar —

*Meet me in the kitchen when you're up.*

— H .xx

The crosses at the end of Harry's note make my stomach flutter. His handwriting is so personal; so delicate. And it gets me thinking. While any other person would have chosen to text me or something similar, Harry chose to leave me a handwritten note.

As if that's not the most precious thing ever.

I skip down the staircase once I'm dressed in a loose-fitting Jim Morrison t-shirt and high-waisted jean shorts. I find Harry in his kitchen, just like he said, preparing some fruit for breakfast.

"Good morning," I voice, bumping into him playfully.

"Good morning," he mimics, bumping back into me, making me laugh. "Did you have a good sleep?"

"Really good, actually," I smile, picking out a piece from the fruit he's chopping. "How about you?"

"Same," Harry draws out the word endearingly. "I usually sleep naked at home, but I couldn't spoil everything on our first date," he winks.

First *date*.

"Right," I smirk, ignoring my accelerating pulse. "Wouldn't wanna get injured."

"What?" Harry furrows his brows in a chuckle.

"Louis said you've hit him round the head with your willy while he was sleeping a couple times-"

"Oh my god."

"-said it wrapped around his whole face," I go on, not even bothering to stifle my massive grin. "I'm surprised he didn't get whiplash."

Harry gapes at me comically, "Louis told you that, did he?"

"Oh, yeah," I gaze back at him, smirking through my closed lips.

Harry flashes me his gleaming smile, dazing me momentarily. The expression he gives me doesn't allow for any words to leave my mouth. His eyes are so perfectly green and fuck, if I didn't have a crush on him before, I definitely do now.
"Oh," Harry pipes up, going back to chopping his strawberries, "I almost forgot!"

"What's up?"

"You were still asleep when I got out of bed today but I looked at you for a second and- I dunno, it just came to me," Harry smirks, setting his knife down momentarily. "This one's pretty good. I think I'm gonna tell it on stage in Mexico," he raises his eyebrows, awaiting my anticipation.

"Go on, then," I amusingly resist rolling my eyes, despite how much I know I'm gonna want to after hearing this one.

"Alright," Harry clears his throat, rolling up his sleeves a bit more. "I'm so good at sleep, I can do it with my eyes closed."

I crack up laughing, shaking my head at how hilariously lame it is, but I can't just not praise him. It's Harry.

"So good," I beam fondly.

"Yes!" Harry raises a little victory fist. "Another one for the bank."

We share a spontaneous high five, giggling and way too giddy for this kind of early hour. Harry gives me another look before tossing all of his chopped fruit into one bowl.

Every time he touches me, even in the most casual way, my heart seems to swell. I hate the distance between our hands, our mouths, my body that could be against his, if only I would just go for it. I hate wanting to touch him and kiss him. I hate wanting to hold him and feel his breath against mine. I hate wanting his attention. His lips. His skin.

I hate wanting Harry.

I miss Louis, that's what it is. I can't stand the infinite thoughts in my mind drowning me in Louis' voice, Louis' touch, Louis' scent. I miss him enough that whenever I think of him my heart breaks, and whenever I'm not thinking of him I'm walking through life with an indistinguishable void, wondering why my heart feels so broken.

It makes my thoughts seem almost pointless, having Louis constantly here even when he's not. It's a mind-numbing sort of feeling. A feeling that puts me out of place, even at my strongest.

"Hey, Scar, you okay?" Harry senses my ill demeanour and pauses what he's doing to caress my arm comfortably. "What's the matter?"

"I, uh-," I chuckle, briefly running over my nagging thoughts once more. "I'm an idiot. It's nothing."

"First, you're not an idiot. I don't want to hear you calling yourself names like that. You're worth more than you know," Harry's eyebrows raise intently. "And second... is it about Louis?"

I blink my eyes, annoyed only at myself, and nod plainly, "I'm trying not to think about him. I really am. It's just not working out. At all. I'm feeling a bit blue, I guess."

"Whenever I'm feeling blue, I start breathing again," Harry utters softly, lightly breaking his contact from my skin. "Why don't you have a wash upstairs and come back for some breakfast when you're done? Might help you feel better."

I nod, rounding back out of the kitchen and heading upstairs.
It's not that I'd rather be staying with Louis over Harry. I just don't like the idea of having to choose between two perfectly good things.

I don't understand it, is what it is.

I can hear Anne talking with Louis' mum, Johannah, as I pass her and Robin's bedroom. They've been on the phone together since I woke up, making me feel closer and farther away from Louis than ever.

I consider texting him but I wouldn't know what to say.

It would probably come out like, "Hey, I'm at Harry's and he's being fucking sweet and I really like him and oh hey guess what we're sleeping in the same bed and did I mention he sleeps naked lol but I guess you already knew that."

Yeah, I'm definitely not texting Louis with a mindset like this.

At least, not yet.

I feel like I take my time in the shower but it's a quick wash overall. I draw little pictures on the steamy mirror once I'm done and the water is off. I figure Harry will probably be taking a shower after me and mirror doodles are something I know he'll have a good laugh at.

I exit the bathroom with a smile.

And I'm not sure how it happened but somehow Anne and I end up watching telly together in the living room while Robin works out in the garden. We've got a large bowl of Harry's fruit salad in front of us and we're watching old reruns of Happy Days. My hair is still damp but the towel over my shoulders is pleasantly comforting.

"He's been in there for a while, hasn't he?" I feel my face flush at my accidental comment about Harry in the shower but Anne just laughs.

"He's known to take the longest showers of all the boys."

"Really?" I chuckle. "How do you know?"

"Mums know things," she winks wittingly. "Besides, all the boys have spent enough time in all of our homes that I'm sure the other parents know what I'm talking about."

"Oh, yeah, I never really thought of it like that."

Aside from Anne's long phone conversation with Johannah this morning, I almost forgot the boys' parents are all connected and very close with each other. Especially Anne and Jo.

That's the fucked up thing about having feelings for both Louis and Harry. They're best friends. Obviously, I had to get involved with the two best friends of the group. But what's even more fucked up is so are their mums. It's like I can't escape them. Whenever I'm with Harry we'll refer to Louis and whenever I'm with Louis we'll mention Harry and it just goes on like that.

It's shitty because now that I'm here in Cheshire, I have this weird feeling that Anne knows more about me than she's letting on. The lads are all incredibly close with their families — closer than I could ever understand — so Louis has most likely told his mum about me, considering all the time we've spent together. And if Johannah has heard from Louis, Anne has definitely heard from Harry.
So if Louis told his mum and Harry told his mum...

And both of those mums are best friends just like their sons are...

I don't even want to start to think about what could've possibly been said about me in those circumstances. My stomach turns in guilt at the thought of it. Anne's been nothing but fucking lovely to me and she probably thinks I'm using her son or something foul like that. I can't even look at the woman, imagining what she might know or believe.

I'm a terrible person.

I can't pretend like what I'm doing is right.

"How has your stay been so far, dear?" Anne's voice cascades into my thoughts.

My breath hitches and my face heats up, "Really, really-" I can feel my eyes lightly glazing over. "It's been... fantastic."

"I'm really glad you're here with us," the lively television programme comes second to Anne's attention on me. "So is everyone else. Gemma even mentioned you when we were seeing her off this morning."

"She did?" my breath hitches.

Anne simply nods, "She said you got on pretty well; that you've got a likeable personality."

"Wow, that's- I'm a little surprised."

"Why are you surprised?"

"Well, I just kind of showed up last minute. I wasn't really sure if I was allowed to come but..." I can feel small tears welling up in my eyes as I whisper the last bit, "you've all been so nice."

I don't cry often but once I start it's hell to stop. I'm trying to hold back as best I can but it's not really working out.

"Scarlet, you're one of Harry's best friends," Anne reaches out and rests her hand on my knee. "Of course you're allowed to be here. Anytime you need something, just ask. Don't be afraid to make this house your home, because that's what we're here for. Me, Robin and Gemma too."

"I just-" I cut myself off to sniff my stuffed nose as my tears quickly leave my eyes and roll down past my cheeks. "I never thought this life was possible."

Anne lets out a sentimental sigh and wraps me in a sudden, warm hug.

That's when I lose it.

I grip onto Anne's waist, holding her close without letting go. There's a throbbing ache in my chest as I bawl in her embrace.

"Everything's going to be okay," Anne whispers to me, gently rubbing along my back. "Maybe not today, but eventually."

My eyes burn. I can barely see from the tears blurring my vision.

And for once I can feel.
"I didn't ask for any of this," I hitch in the tiniest breath.

Anne gently strokes my hair, openly letting me rest on her shoulder.

"Darling, you didn't need to."

Anne steps out for groceries just as I can hear Harry finishing up in the shower.

I climb back upstairs and wait for Harry in his bedroom. I'm not the best at making myself at home and Harry's room is the most familiar area in the house for me so far. It's where most of my things are and it's the location I'm most naturally drawn to, so I'm perfectly comfortable just relaxing in here.

I lay on his bed, scrolling through my phone, and decide to follow a bunch of people online. I send a massive thank you to everyone who's been supporting me this far and has allowed me to experience as much as I have. If it wasn't for Mitch and countless determined fans, I'd still be that ignorant person who would scoff at the mere mention of One Direction without a further thought.

It's only been half a year since my life changed but it's always going to feel like a lifetime ago.

"You look comfy," a voice comes from the bedroom door as it clicks open.

I can feel myself stiffen up at the sight of him.

There's Harry Styles. Fresh from the shower with his curls settled around his forehead. Ringlets framing his face like a poignant work of art. Damp hair slicked back and pushed into itself despite his playful curls.

He's really fucking beautiful.

"Is this another silent treatment?" Harry jokes; a smirk playing on his lips.

I laugh suddenly. I'm aching to try and keep my vision on his face, although I know I've already checked him out a few more times than I would like to admit.

"Liam was right," I tell him, decidedly ignoring his cheeky comments, "you do look like baby Tarzan."

The closer he gets to me, the more I can smell the minty scent of his body wash.

"If I was really baby Tarzan I'd have to shake out this mess," Harry motions to his damp hair as he rests next to me on his bed.

"Yes, you would," I stirringly raise my eyebrows.

Harry chuckles at my expression, effortlessly smirking back at me and lowering his voice on command, "Wanna get wet?"

"Harry-" I choke but it's already happening.

My screams are muted in Harry's chest as he shakes out his hair. Tiny droplets of water are sent cascading all over me, his blankets and his hard oak floor.
"You arsehole," I hiss against his collar bones.

"You like it," Harry whispers back, holding me close.

And he's right.

I'd rather be here doing nothing with Harry. Watching his eyes as he looks at the world. Laughing together about stupid things. Feeling closer to him than ever. I'd rather be here, feeling his presence and understanding his thoughts. Here, in my best friend's childhood home with a real family and real love.

I'd rather be here than almost anywhere at all.

And as for Louis?

It's almost as if he's in another world.

Chapter End Notes

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I don't wanna even say it.

But once again, I've started thinking about Louis.

It's nothing new but I can't control how gloomy I'm feeling. I still haven't even texted him but he's constantly on my mind. Harry's been sweet about it though; dropping little jokes here and there to cheer me up whenever he figures I'm thinking too much.

We've had a relaxing day few days overall, aside from my nagging thoughts. Harry and I spent the afternoon singing and playing guitar for Anne and Robin today. The four of us were just fooling around and laughing and catching up and, on my part, really getting to know everyone.

Harry and I eventually managed to set up the old record player in his room. We've already played a few selections from his tasteful collection of vintage vinyl and have interestingly enough moved onto side two of Led Zeppelin's third album.
"Were you ever caught tugging yourself in here, or what?" I smirk, continuing our conversation about the kinds of things that have happened in Harry's bedroom when he was younger.

"Never caught," Harry points out, his face turning a light shade of pink, "but I did have to hide a boner under my sheets a few times."

"Nice one," I smirk cheekily. "Did you get a hard on with the sports bra girl?"

"You're not gonna let up on me with that one, are you?" Harry grins at me through his embarrassment.

"Nah, I don't think so," I wink.

"I don't think there was any action down by my pants," he chuckles lowly, "but I do remember she was pretty good with her mouth."

"Really..." I voice intriguingly. Harry simply winks in response, causing my lips to curl into a playful grin. "I'm a better kisser though, yeah?"

I watch as Harry's expression genuinely shifts from in control to off the road.

"I- don't remember," his voice drastically lowers after a long pause, emphasising every rough crack. But it's what he says next that makes my heart race. "Might need some refreshing."

My mouth becomes parched without me realising it, "With her, or me?" I swallow down my accelerating pulse. "Wait, don't answer that-" I cut myself off as my mind suddenly sparks up a new, experimental idea. "We're doing a survey."

"What are we doing?" Harry laughs, visibly bewildered by where I'm going with this. "A survey," I repeat. "Who kissed who? How did it happen? Was there tongue?"

At this point, I'm sure Harry's laughter can be heard from all the way in the garden.

"I couldn't even say..." Harry beams, mumbling away. "It was years ago. I can barely remember how it happened," he pauses and looks at me before clearing his throat. "I never thought about her like I think about..."

Harry's sentence fades away as a stunningly familiar guitar riff begins playing from the vintage vinyl. The sounds of a single acoustic guitar fill the room, sending a wave of numbing heat to course through my body. The melody strikes something in me. It's delicate and bold at the same time. It's sad and sweet and I recognise it instantly.

"Oh my god..." my eyes go wide as my vision shoots to the boy before me. "I fucking love this song..."

"Shit..." Harry's expression has spontaneously fallen just as awestruck as mine. "Me too..."

I stare at him, practically in shock at the sounds emanating from his old speakers, "I'm pretty sure this is my favourite song ever."

"No, are you serious?" Harry is literally frozen. He can barely do anything other than gaze at me. "This is actually my favourite song."

"No," I almost want to cry at how wonderful and unexpected this strange feeling is getting to me. "I don't think you understand how much I love this song."
"Scarlet," Harry presses, putting his hand on my thigh. "I don't think you understand how much I love this song."

"Harry," I breathe.

"Yes?"

I can't even fathom it.

I'm starting to have deeper feelings for Harry than I could ever imagine. From the way he licks his lips while he's trying to decide which fruit to eat in the morning to the way his eyes light up whenever he's about to tell a cheesy joke. I'm growing more entranced with his mouth, his eyes, his chest, his scent. I'm growing more fond of Harry every day.

I'm going fucking mad, that's what's happening.

It's this fucking song. The way my heart is responding to the lyrics. The way Robert Plant's bittersweet voice resonates over Jimmy Page's harmonious acoustic melodies. The way Harry is just sat here, watching me take it all in, waiting for me to say something but I can't.

And that's it.

I've fallen mental.

Isn't that what crushes do to you?

I'm too deep in my thoughts to even reply.

That is, until Harry's deep, gravely voice surfaces in my mind.

But it's not just his voice that strikes me. He's singing. And his tone sends a shiver down my spine.

"Tangerine, tangerine, living reflection from a dream..." Harry smiles softly as he sings along with the hauntingly familiar lyrics. "I was her love, she was my queen..."

I can do nothing but watch as Harry sings in awe.

God, even his fucking teeth are beautiful.

"Harry..." I repeat unnervingly.

Harry chuckles, still in the trance of the song, "You keep saying my name but you're not saying anything else."

His smile is lopsided and completely fucking endearing. And he's just so close. And he smells so good. And his hair looks so soft. And I know he can sense just how intently I'm looking at him. But right now, I don't even care.

"What is it?" he asks aloud, watching me more soberly now.

My eyes flit between his emerald eyes and his deep rose lips, "My urge to kiss you when I'm close to your face... is dangerously high."

"Oh... I..." Harry shifts his body a bit closer to mine. "What else...?"

"My urge to kiss you right now?" I can literally feel my heart pounding in my ears.
"Is what?" Harry continues for me, eyes never leaving mine.

"It's really fucking high," I lick my lips, nervously biting down on my bottom one.

Harry's face flushes amid the afternoon shadows of the room. His jaw sets and his voice lowers in a series of cracks.

"...Then do it, Scarlet."

And I'm not sure if it was from how I was looking at him. Or from how intensely he was gazing back at me. But Harry doesn't get to finish the last of his request as I lean forward and my lips are suddenly pressed against his.

Harry's inhales sharply and suddenly as he kisses me, breathing heavily through his nose. My lips tremble into his own as he raises his hand to cup my jaw, rubbing circles with his thumb into my skin.

Thoughts flash past me. Thoughts of how Naomi would react to all of this. What Louis would think if he found out. What the lads in my band and the rest of the boys would think. But I've got to keep going. I've got to focus on Harry entirely and not let anything distract me.

I restrict my conscious to focus on only one thing. And that's the reality of Harry being here with me now. And the fact that he's letting me do everything. And with every heated moment, Harry himself soon becomes more than enough to distract me from even my most unsettling distractions.

"God," I murmur into Harry's lips, licking against his mouth for more, more, more.

"I know," he utters back.

Harry presses another wet kiss to my mouth before parting his lips and sliding his tongue against mine for the first time. A shiver courses throughout my body, settling right in my crotch. He's skillfully keeping the heat turned down to just below the point of explosion and it's killing me.

I can't get enough of Harry. So much Harry. Everything Harry. He tastes like skin and warmth and his lips are like hot lava against mine. I shift closer to him on the bed, allowing him to deepen our kiss as he pulls me into him.

"Are you okay?" Harry asks as I unexpectedly shudder under his touch.

"Yeah- I just-" I hesitantly exhale against his mouth. "Can't really breathe."

"Do you wanna stop?" he looks at me, lightly feathering his fingers through my hair, calming me in the most soothing way.

"God, fuck-" I close my eyes, leaning into him just to know he's there. "Please, no... Don't stop."

Harry presses his lips against mine once more; caressing my face and holding me close. If I could stay like this, kissing Harry all day, I would. If I could hide away in his warm embrace for hours, I would. I want to memorise every detail of this moment so I can play it back in slow-motion and make it last forever.

Soon enough, a commotion can be heard coming from outside. A strew of voices are laughing and conversing, as if something out there has suddenly become entertaining.

But I can barely hear them.
I'm kissing Harry fucking Styles.

Harry grins into my lips, letting his hands trail along my jawline and down my neck, before they come to rest over my collarbones. I grip onto the thin material of his shirt by his hips, letting go so I can feel up the sides of his muscular abdomen.

"I, uh..." I gradually pull away, searching Harry's eyes for any sign of reverie. "This is..."

"What is it, Scar?" his irises are seas of the deepest green.

"I think..." my breath hitches in my throat. I can feel my pulse throbbing in my neck and my head is getting incredibly light but I still manage to say it. "I think I have a crush on you."

Harry giggles. Fucking giggles. Then his hands fall from my shoulders and unintentionally end up resting in my lap.

"I've always had a crush on you."

If I thought I couldn't breathe before, then I must be suffocating now.

I don't think it's ever occurred to me that Harry's green light has been on this entire time. We arrived in Holmes Chapel as friends and have been friends for however long before that. Literally, since we met.

Except for that one sporadic, drunken kiss we shared, of course.

But this is the first time we've ever kissed sober. It's the first time something like this has happened willingly on both of our ends. And I've come to believe that the only reason it did happen is because this is the first time we've truly been alone and uninterrupted. Away from our hectic, scheduled life; away from the typical intrusion of speculating fans; and even more notably, away from Louis.

It's hard when you think you fall in love with someone, only to find out that they're a complete stranger. I still want to get to know Louis as a friend — I really do — but it's difficult now that we're basically going backwards. There's always going to be that underlying sexual connotation between us, whether I like it or not. And it really doesn't help one bit.

As for Harry, it seems like he has secrets; but none of the bad kind. Harry and I have always been quite close and have tended to share most things with each other. With the exception of leaving out the bits where we've surreptitiously been attracted to each other, as it goes.

It's weird because Harry and I are kind of the opposite of myself and Louis, in that sense.

All emotion and bare action.

All action and bare emotion.

If only the future could blend two people into one. That would be a dream.

"Wanna see what's going on out there?" I mumble into Harry's mouth as he softly continues to kiss my lower lip.

"With you?" he voices. "Yeah."

Harry and I somehow manage to laugh off the whole snogging situation. As we step outside together, we meet up with Anne and Robin. They're chatting away with a small group of neighbours on the front lawn across the street and it almost feels as if we didn't just make out a few minutes ago.
But god, did we ever.

Basically, what's happening outside is one of the neighbours was being so loud training his dog on his front lawn that a number of people in the neighbourhood came out to watch. Now everyone's standing around, whooping and cheering whenever the dog gets the trick right and speaking hilarious words of motivation.

Only in Holmes Chapel.

Nothing is said about what happened between myself and Harry for the rest of the afternoon. We don't come off as overly touchy or even excessively close but there's been an increasing implication in our glances all night.

We chat and eat like usual. We play with the cat in the backyard underneath the setting sun like everything's the same. We joke around with Anne and Robin while they're trying to set up a movie as if nothing's changed since we woke up this morning.

But we're only fooling ourselves.

Everything is different.

Harry and I went up to his bedroom fairly early this evening. It's barely past midnight. His bedroom door is shut and the curtains framing his window have been left undrawn, letting a soft haze of moonlight to cascade onto the walls that encompass his small bed.

We've already changed into our sleep clothes — or, in Harry's case, stripped down to nothing but his briefs — and we eventually come to rest under the covers.

Harry lays on his back with my arm draped over his torso as I cuddle him. But that soon gets unsettling. So we both roll over and trade positions so I'm on my back and Harry's got his arm over my torso as he cuddles me instead. But we agree that it's the blankets that are making us so uncomfortable, so they're gone without a second thought. Then, without any sheets to cover us, I shift onto my side to face Harry in the darkness.

And that's when those uncontrollable urges begin bubbling inside me, ready to spill.

He's just so close and warm and lovely. His large hand perfectly fits into the crook of my waist like it was sculpted to fit there. My eyes scan over his intricate features — his plump, pink lips and his soft, defined jawline. I can't help but smile at him when he notices me gazing at him. And he can't help but smile back.

Harry makes even breathing look magical.

"Wanna kiss you again," I whisper into the darkness. I'm so close to his face, I'm surprised I've lasted this long.

Harry rubs his thumb over my clothed waist, "Then kiss me."

"It's that easy, isn't it?" I breathe, feeling myself pull closer to him.

"It's always been that easy," Harry utters deeply.

And before my heart can continue beating, Harry's lips are moulding with mine; slow and sweet with no need to make haste. It's not too intense of a kiss. But it's enough for our tongues to touch and our hands to roam.
Harry's fingertips trail down my body as we snog lazily. He teases a light patch of exposed skin by my hip. The sensation causes me to want the boy in front of me more than I ever have before. I'm looking at him in such a more vivid, sexual light than I could've ever imagined.

I almost pull away out of fear or uncertainty or something of the likes, but I don't. Instead, I run my fingers back through Harry's curls and give a gentle bite to his lower lip, simultaneously tugging on the hair by the nape of his neck.

A disengaged moan escapes from Harry's lips. My heart jumps into my throat at the gorgeous sound. If I have the power to cause such a boy to make such a noise, I can do anything in the world.

"I think that's enough kissing for tonight," I whisper to Harry against his lips.

"I think that's- yeah, god," he can barely speak.

I want him.

Fuck, I want my best friend.

And the fucked up thing is, it doesn't even feel that strange anymore.

In fact, I can't fucking get enough.

"Spoon me," I roll over quickly enough so Harry doesn't see the smirk on my face.

He chuckles and curls up behind me. Only his chest is pressed against my back as he places a kiss to my exposed shoulder, "Goodnight, gorgeous."

My eyes shut tight, glowing under the taught smile that my cheeks can't control. I gradually allow my body to rest, focussing on my breaths rather than the stunning boy behind me. I inhale and exhale, letting my chest expand in a gentle rise and fall.

My mind drifts away into Harry's sweet scent as I settle my head onto his soft pillow. His arm brushes against my waist as he readjusts himself against the mattress, comfortably nestling his head into the back of my neck.

I sigh blissfully as an evening breeze floats through the far window. The air is warm like the summer night and it pleasures me to relax into Harry's touch. Harry hums softly as I shift back against him but everything stops as my bum accidentally presses into his crotch.

My body freezes and my eyes flutter open. I almost gasp but I hastily swallow down any sound I'm aching to make.

Harry is hard.

There's no easier way to put it.

My breathing stills and my eyes widen. My cheeks flush as I carefully shift away, no more than an inch, from Harry's growing member. I silently pray to all the gods that Harry didn't notice my movements. Although, I'm sure as hell he isn't asleep yet and I wouldn't deny that he's probably in as much fucking shock as I am right now.

An ill feeling settles deep in my stomach. A few moments pass where neither of us utter a word or even move in the slightest. But I know he knows. I can almost feel his eyes on the back of my head.

I bite my lip in frustration.
If it already happened, it happened for a reason. I did leave him on quite an intriguing note. With our mouths sliding against one another's, his large hands gripping onto my waist and teasing my skin as he kissed me, my fingers tangled in his soft mess of curls as I nibbled on his lower lip and tugged on his unruly hair and fuck, his fucking moans.

I shift my body back towards Harry's before I know it. I'm aching to feel him against me again. I swallow down the lump in my throat as I soberly press my bum right against Harry's bulge once more. A sharp gasp of air enters my lungs as I feel that he's even harder now.

Harry is entirely still as I cautiously grind my bum against his stiff member. My heart is beating out of my chest, feeling that each movement is only making him harder. I begin to wonder if I should stop and just go to sleep like we agreed, until Harry impulsively grabs onto my waist and begins grinding his own self against me without any restraint.

I release a long, shallow breath as my body flushes with a sudden heat. Harry rubs himself against my bum much quicker than I had been doing, making me bite my lip at his sudden inhibition. His fingertips dig into my sides and his breath is unsteady against my ear. The aching need building up in my core is unreal as a silent moan slips from my lungs.

"Fuck," Harry hisses as his hips suddenly buck up into my bum. His thrusts slow down and his grip on me softens. "Shit, Scarlet- I'm- Fuck, I'm so sorry."

I blink into the darkness as my heart continues pounding in my chest, "Did you just...?"

Harry doesn't reply and he simply shifts away from me. I instantly miss the close contact between us as he shakily exhales behind me. I roll over to face him.

"I'm sorry," Harry repeats, avoiding my gaze now that he knows I'm looking at him.

"Harry." I quietly start to object but he covers his crotch and shifts out of the bed. "What are you doing?"

"Changing my pants," Harry keeps his voice low as he paces over to his wooden wardrobe. He keeps his back to me as he quickly finds a change of underwear. "Kind of made a mess, you know."

I almost want to laugh at his sarcastic behaviour, as it's rare to see Harry so put off in such a situation, but I manage to hold back.

"Harry, it's okay..." I voice lightly.

"Gimme a second," he whispers back to me, closing the middle drawer once he finds what he's looking for.

And here, right before me, Harry shimmies out of his messy briefs, letting them fall to the floor as he steps out of them, rendering him fully nude. Like, completely, fully nude to the point where there is just endless skin and dark tattoos and Harry.

Harry stands with his back to me in the dark shadows of his room. He bends over to step into his fresh pair of crimson briefs and discards the old ones into his nearby laundry bin.
I have to blink a few times to make sure that what I'm seeing is real. Harry's got a perfect ass on him and anyone who says otherwise is a liar. He rounds back to me once he's covered what needs to be covered. He crawls into bed next to me without a word.

"Harry, I-" I begin but don't know how to put it. He looks at me so dejectedly, with so much guilt, that my heart drops at the mere sight of him. Only out of temptation do I lean forward and press a chaste kiss to his cheek. "It's okay, H... I liked it."

Harry doesn't say a thing as he tucks one arm under my neck and pulls me in close to him.

This time, there is a kiss to the top of my head.

This time, my lips graze over his second sparrow; the one with the hooded eyes.

And as I slowly fall into my dreams, I understand.

With as much satisfaction as I'm feeling right now, there's an equally strong sense of guilt that I just can't part with.

It's the kind of guilt that lingers with you.

The kind of guilt that follows you into the most private corners of your mind.

It's the kind of guilt that appears out of nowhere — with a point to prove and a will to break — the exact moment you're least expecting it.

Chapter End Notes

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I wake with a pleasant burning in my loins.
There is barely any light escaping from the heavily curtained windows. The minimal light that does make it through highlights only the edges of Harry's toned silhouette; his perfect jaw line traced by the light of dawn. His dark tattoos can barely be seen, making me forget for a moment that he is actually moderately inked. His mess of loose curls delicately feather over his temple, leading to his brow that — stunningly — is not furrowed.

It's rare that I do see Harry without that infamous crease down the centre of his visage but in this moment he looks incredibly at peace.

His stripped beauty is astonishing.

It doesn't take long before all of last night's events come flooding back to me. I can't stomach the memories. I feel slightly ill but I'm not sure if it's because of my lingering guilt or, even more curiously, my strange intrigue.

God, the intrigue.

My eyes flirt with Harry's skin. Our blankets lay abandoned on the floor from the hot night before and Harry lies exposed beside me; flushed, tanned and at ease. My vision licks down his torso so vividly, like I'm not even controlling it at all. My eyes travel over his soft abs and the light trail of hair just above his waistband, before hesitantly settling my gaze upon his crimson briefs.

Or, if I'm being honest with myself, the noticeable bulge they're firmly stretched over.

I shouldn't be having thoughts like this. I shouldn't be looking at Harry like this, especially when he's fucking sleeping. It's so wrong. This is all so wrong. But I can't help feeling like maybe it was bound to happen all along. Maybe I was just too distracted, too infatuated with the idea of someone else, to see what I had right in front of me this entire time.

The only reasonable thing I can do with my wounds is turn them into wisdom. If I'm unable learn from my own actions, then I can't be considered entirely human. I breathe knowing I will stumble down mislead pathways. And it's only from those wrong turns that I can better myself.

That's not to say Louis was a mistake or anything so drastic. He's so, so much more than that. I just feel like, at this point, I should take a step back and look at my life as an outsider. Someone not connected to myself in any sense.

I don't know what I want.

I really don't.

For now, I'm just going to take things as they come — trying not to make too many stupid decisions along the way — and hopefully my life will gradually fall into place.

When it comes down to it, the best thing for me to do right now is to not do anything at all.

It came from nowhere.


Anne goes to attend the front door as Harry and I exchange absent-minded shrugs on the living room
couch. Neither of us are expecting visitors but this is the Styles home we're talking about. Anyone could find a celebrity's address if they really tried hard enough. Harry and I are no stranger to that.

But this time it's different.

There is one person at the door.

And he's not a fan.

My stomach drops to the floor the moment I hear a startled "Louis!" come from Anne. They greet each other politely amid their shuffles of hugs. Anne quickly invites the lad in and locks the door behind him.

"Did you...?" I whisper to Harry.

He shakes his head, sharing the same worried frown, "Did you...?"

"What is going on?" a wave of panic causes my head to go dizzy, fluttering my senses and making each moment feel like it's echoing on for a tiny eternity.

"Fuck," Harry curses, lips pursing under his flushed cheeks. "Come with me."

"I don't think I should..." I utter nervously.

"It'll look really bad if you stay back," Harry raises his eyebrows at me seriously. "Come."

My knees shake as I stand up off the couch. I follow Harry to the front door as Anne offers to leave the three of us alone with a beaming smile. If only I could be in her brain as we speak. It's bound to be less cluttered in there. Less assuming.

And it is Louis at the door. I have to clench my fists at my sides to feel that I'm still awake because I almost can't believe it. This doesn't seem real. None of this seems real.

"Well, this is some shit," Louis huffs a bitter laugh as we reach him. "I don't even know where to start because this is just too good."

My brows meet in the middle, "Lou, what are you-?"

"This was the personal thing you needed to do?" he cuts me off, continuously gazing between me and Harry.

"Yes," I stress honestly because really, what else can I do? "It is."

"Mate, why are you here?" Harry cuts in before Louis has a chance to respond. "What's going on?"

"Are you serious?" Louis' eyes narrow with a disbelieving chuckle. "You're actually serious!"

"Why are you here, Lou?" Harry repeats sternly.

Louis' eyes visibly roll to the back of his head as he scoffs, "You know, I didn't believe it. I had to see this shit with my own eyes; that's how much I didn't believe it."

"And that's why you randomly showed up in Holmes Chapel at Harry's door?" I can only imagine what kind of bewildered expression is plastered over my face as I stare at the lad before me. "Louis, what the fuck are you doing?"
"Wait, how did you know Scarlet was here?" Harry frowns at his friend. "I'm confused."

"I was talking to mum this morning. Mentioned you," Louis suddenly looks at me. "She asked why you were staying here. Clearly, I had to ask the same question."

The three of us stand around, exchanging accusing glances between the three of us.

No one utters a word.

I would never lie to Louis. At least not explicitly. But the fact that he took time away from his limited family time to come to Harry's place to see if I really was here is near insane.

"You couldn't just call?" I voice into the broken silence.

"Nah, wouldn't be as much fun, now would it?" Louis mocks sarcastically.

"It would be more sane," Harry mutters under his breath.

I didn't wanna say it.

But there it is.

Louis visibly reacts, chewing on the inside of his cheek as he spits back, "Harry, don't even get me started. You could've said something just as easily as she could've," I flinch at the sound of Louis talking about me in third person but I remain silent. "And what else? Going behind my back? The girl I'm into and my best friend fucking each other then acting like everything's okay when we're all together?" Louis glares at me. I've never seen him so put off. Then he whips around to Harry. "Fuck you, man. Really, fuck you."

"Louis, for fuck's sake!" my eyebrows raise as all the breath shakily leaves my lungs.

Louis spins back to me, making my lungs tighten, "So if you two wanna--"

"No!" I cut him off, unable to stomach hearing any more of this. "You always seem to fucking forget that Harry is my best friend too! I don't know what fantasy you're living in but this whole me and Harry fucking thing is a bloody illusion! Seriously, Lou," I nearly growl I'm so fucking put off. "Ask Harry. Ask fucking anybody you want and you'll get the same answer. The only one who genuinely believes Harry and I are having sex is you and I don't get it! I really don't get it, Louis!"

That's the thing about Louis Tomlinson.

He always insists that Harry and I are fucking when we're really not. And I can't entirely say no because I did just have the lad's cock on my arse last night. But I can whole heartedly say we've never hooked up or done anything excessively inappropriate.

Louis just doesn't seem to want to understand that.

I try voicing my thoughts but all that comes out is, "Why?"

"I believe it because I can't not believe it," Louis grimaces. "Look at you--"

"Do not put this on Scarlet!" Harry states firmly, his jaw setting and his eyes blazing on fire. "She's going through enough, can't you see?!"

"I see what I see," Louis wets his lips; mouth clearly parched. "And what I see is that it's inevitable that you two would end up together. It's a laugh, really."
"Louis, are you high?!" Harry fumes, visibly concerned yet still past his peak. "How did you get here? Did you drive? You shouldn't be driving like this-"

"Why does it matter?" Louis scoffs to himself.

"Someone could've seen you," Harry presses. "You could've hurt someone. Or worse, yourself."

"Okay, fuck it, I get it," Louis' nostrils flare. "Just-"

"Are you actually high?" I frown at the lad seriously.

"God, yeah? Scarlet, listen-" Louis steps towards me impatiently. "Why the hell are you keeping shit from me if you wanna be friends so bad?"

My heart doubles up, causing a lump in my throat.

Louis has a right to be upset. Harry and I aren't telling him the full truth, whether we choose to see it that way or not. I just hate false accusations and to know that Louis still thinks that Harry and I are fucking, or have fucked in the past, drives me up the wall.

"Harry asked me here before you did," I tell him blatantly. "The only reason I said it was personal is because my private life is fucking- touchy, and only Harry knows about it, alright? Not anyone else. Not even Naomi."

I leave out the bits where I figured all Louis and I would do at his place is awkwardly flirt in front of his family. Aside from that, everything I tell him is the truth. When it comes down to it, I just needed to experience what a real family was like without any added mental pressure of what people might think.

Clearly that plan failed.

But I take it as it comes.

"That's all very lovely, Scar," Louis concludes once he gets the gist of my explanation, "but why didn't you do that with me?"

I open my mouth to state that Harry and I are closer friends — which should've already been obvious — but Harry sharply voices his opinion before I even get a chance to.

"Maybe she would let you in on her life if you actually cared about her instead of always thinking with your dick," Harry spits.

And with that, he's gone.

Everything falls silent.

Louis and I watch in shocked awe as Harry storms through his living room and exits through the sliding glass doors at the back. We face each other. Louis' expression is gaunt and his cheeks are hollowed, darkly defined by his overgrown scruff. I lick my lips, watching the lad as Harry's words fire away in my head like ricocheted shots.

"He doesn't mean that," I breathe, looking Louis up and down in his dumbfounded state.

Part of my conscience is telling me yes he does, yes he does, yes he does, but I firmly ignore the unsettling words.
"I know you care," I utter when Louis doesn't say anything. "You wouldn't be here if you didn't care."

Louis simply nods.

We agree to sit at the dining room table. We try to converse as civilly as possible but it's not doing us much good. I continue to remind Louis that Harry and I haven't slept together like he so determinedly believes but his dissatisfied expression doesn't change one bit.

"I kinda feel like shit," he tells me. "Like, you rejected me twice for Harry without telling me why and- it's just shit."

"What are you talking about, twice, Louis?" I frown.

"You rejected my offer of staying with me at my place to be here with Harry," he chews on his lower lip. "You expect me to believe that you didn't reject being my girlfriend for Harry either?"

"Stop saying rejected," I cringe at his words. "It sounds so bad."

"It is bad, Scarlet," his voice wavers slightly. "It's fucking bad."

"I wish you wouldn't overthink this. Everything I've said today is the truth and yeah, I didn't tell you I'd be staying with Harry but it's only because I knew you would react like this," I try to stay as calm as possible but it's not working very well. "I didn't wanna hurt you more than I did."

"If you knew I would react like this then why'd you do it?" Louis folds his hands together, looking at me more honestly than he has all evening.

"I don't think you understand, Louis," I frown at him. "This is a very personal thing for me, being here. I don't have much of a family and Anne's the closest thing I've got to a mum and fuck. It's all very fucked up," I trace my fingers over a ripple in the glass table. "I just needed time to myself. To experience what a real home is like. It just so happens that it's Harry's home as well."

"Shit, Scar, I-" Louis huffs over his words, tiredly leaning back in his seat. "I didn't know."

"Yeah, well," I press my lips together. "I asked you to respect my decision and you didn't."

"Don't put this on me."

"Don't put it on me either."

"Fuck," Louis states after a long pause between the two of us. "I guess we can kinda call this a fifty-fifty resolve. Or something."

"Yeah," I nod to myself, "that sounds... I mean, I'm sorry for not telling you, but-"

"I'm sorry for being a cocky asshole."

"Yeah."

I really care about Louis. I hate feeling a distance between us and I can't stand that unforgivable aura of tension. I grab him a bottle of water from the fridge and suggest that he should stay for dinner. I can't have him driving high. I need to know he's going to be alright.

He accepts the water but shrugs off the rest of my offer.
"I can't stay," is all he manages.
And then he's gone.

I was so happy this entire weekend. Someone could've shot me in the foot and I would still be smiling. But now it's all changed.

I fucking miss Louis. All day, every day. I miss him.

I have a tendency to feel like I've caused situations like this but this time I know it was my fault.

I find Harry in the clearing by the back of his property. We have a long talk about what happened. It's nothing new to him — getting into small quarrels with any of the four boys he spends his life with — but it's still something he doesn't care to go through.

Especially with someone as close to him as Louis.

Harry assured me that the argument will blow over in a few days. I believe him but I know he only said it to get these unsettling thoughts out of my head.

Thoughts of Louis. Thoughts of how disappointed I am in myself. How lame he must feel. How I wanted to hug him or touch him in the very least but I didn't.

I can't stop thinking about how much I miss Louis, no matter how hard I try.

And he probably can't even imagine how pathetic it makes me feel.

Because at this point, I don't even know if he misses me back.

Chapter End Notes

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@Scarlet_Ryder || #tangerinefanfiction
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

The boys have left me.

Well, they've left the country but they do have a world of people to meet. My band and I are still in England, focusing on promotional events. We have one last rehearsal tomorrow before we meet up with the rest of the crew in Florida this week and I can't wait to get started. I'm a little nervous about travelling overseas for the first time but anything with the three rowdy lads in my band is an
adventure.

Naomi has come over for the night, as we won't be able to see each other for the next month or two. I'm torn over it — having made such a close friend so suddenly and having her taken away just as quick — but I know she'll be over to visit on Niall's watch sooner than I expect it.

I'm sure of that, at least.

"You're doing it again," Naomi's voice fades into my thoughts.

"I'm reading," I tell her, yet my eyes stay fixed on the screen of my phone.

"What are you reading?"

"Literature."

Naomi chuckles impulsively, "Reading texts from snobby boys in bands is not literature."

"Louis is not snobby," my vision shoots up from my phone to gaze at her.

"Thought I'd crack you," the girl smirks, tugging on a single strand of her short, pink hair. "You're seeing him in a couple days, you know."

"I know," I shrug, calmly going back to my phone. "It just- I still feel a little unsure of what's happened. I just like knowing we're okay. And this is proof." I raise my screen to her.

"Yeah, what did he say about the...? Wait-" she takes my phone in her hand and scrolls through Louis' and my messages. "Yeah, here. It's not like we can take a walk on the beach or anything. But building sandcastles in hotel rooms is fun too. With that little happy face. He's basically asking you on a date."

"He's so cute," I can't help but gush.

"Friends," Naomi voices. "Mhmm."

I release a long sigh with a smile on my face the entire time, "I know."

"Stop smiling!" Naomi laughs, handing my phone back to me. "I feel bad for him."

"It's your wine!" I throw my head back. "It's making me giggly."

"It is a giggly wine, isn't it?" she smirks at me, taking a sip.

"Yeah-" I chuckle absent-mindedly. "Wait, why do you feel bad for Louis?"

"'Cause you're leading him on a little with Harry and whatever."

"You know I'm into Louis more..." I internally frown, yet my expression stays calm.

"I don't know that, actually," Naomi shrugs, downing a bit of the deep red liquid in her glass.

"I do," I tell her, watching her without letting my attention stray anywhere else. "And why are you saying I'm leading him on? You're the one who suggested we should be friends in the first place."

"I know. And I still agree with it," Naomi reasons, "but there's that unspoken promise that you'll get back together eventually."
"We were never together."

"You know what I mean."

"Look, Louis can have whoever he wants. Literally anyone in the world. We both know that. He knows that. Everyone knows-" I cut myself off to breathe. That, and settle down. "Well, yeah. There's no need to feel bad for him or anything. He's an adult," I add just for a laugh.

"Sure, but what if, of all the people in the world, the person he wants most is you?" Naomi raises her eyebrows. "And now that you've spent so much time with Harry, you grow to want him more? Then what?"

"Nai, you're really not helping with this whole friends thing."

"I'm just saying, you should look at the entire spectrum before acting on it," she says. And to be honest, that one statement sends my mind delving deeper into my thoughts than I'd imagined I'd be doing all day. "That goes for you and Harry too."

"Louis and Harry..." I mumble to myself, not really caring to sort out my thoughts because they're all over the place anyway. "I'm just one person in their lives of many people."

"It's about quality, not quantity, Scar."

"I'm not an infomercial," I try to remain serious, yet a small smirk breaks through my expression. "It's more than that."

"Then what is it?"

"I think it has to do with hugs."

"Hugs?"

"Yeah, like..." I shake my head, smiling to myself. "Harry's hugs are great. I just seem to fit right in there. But any time Louis and I hug, it just turns into some sort of sex position."

"That's kinda true," Naomi snickers into her glass.

"You haven't... have you?" Naomi's face suddenly drops and all I can do is shrug and look at her. "You said nothing happened!"

"Well..." I shrug again, almost unsure if I should say anything or not. "It wasn't entirely nothing..."

"Wow! Thanks for the updates!" Naomi voices sarcastically. "I really appreciate it! Awesome!"

"Hey, you barely talk about yourself and Niall," I point out. "I think we're even."
"That's because there is no *me* and Niall," she stresses, although her cheeks still turn a light shade of pink. "And I promise I will tell you if anything happens to go down at any point in the near or distant future, just *tell me, tell me, tell me* -"

"Alright!" I laugh out loud. "Alright, alright. I will... *Oh, god.*"

"There's an oh, god?" Naomi moves to the edge of her seat, blatantly staring at me. "Shit. You sucked his dick."

I nearly spill my glass of wine, I burst out laughing so hard, "Why do you always say that?!"

"I'm sorry! I'll shut up, I promise! Just tell me, *fuck.* What happened?!!" she rants on, barely stopping to breathe. "Did you hook up? *Shit,* I mean- I'm sorry. I'm done. Go on... *Fuck.*"

"You sure you're done?" I tease the girl, yet I'm lost in my own uncontrollable fit of laughter. Naomi merely nods, pretending to zip her lips with her fingers, then she motions for me to continue.

"Alright, so we spent a full week there; at his place in Holmes Chapel. Got to know his mum. Got to know each other. *Fuck,* he was being really sweet the whole time. He is sweet. *Always.*"

"Alright, stop being a sap and get to the good bits," Naomi shoves my shoulder playfully, yet her expression remains kind. "With details. You know what I'm talking about," she adds with a wink.

"*Shush,*" I can feel my face turning a light shade of crimson.

"So what happened?" she bites her lip, watching me innocently.

"Basically, we were in his old bedroom listening to vinyl, which- We slept in the same bed, by the way, and he sleeps shirtless-" I pause for a moment as Naomi lets out an inhuman squeak. "And this song came on. And turns out, it's both of our favourite songs."

"What song was it?"

"Tangerine."

"Led Zeppelin?"

"Yeah."

"Really?" she sings. "Aw, that's your favourite?"

"Harry's too," I smile.

"So fucking cute," Naomi blushes at the thought.

"Yeah, and we like told each other that and everything went silent and it got really hard to breathe and I- I told him I felt like kissing him..."

"*Shit, Scarlet.*"

"...so he said I should. And we just. *Yeah.*"

"*You kissed* again?!

"We fucking made out for a while," my mouth goes dry as I say it.

Naomi sits back on the couch.
"You- Fuck. Shit, what-?" her words are barely coming out. "Are you a thing?"

"No, it's- kinda fucked up, like. Just- just listen."

"Wait, so you actually snogged?" Naomi voices just to clarify. "Was it longer than the time at that party?"

"God, yeah. Way fucking longer. We did a lot, you know?" I bite my lip at the feverish memories as Naomi lets out another lascivious oh my god. "And that was it. We didn't do anything as, uh... intimate as that, until... later that night."

"Shit, you did suck his dick," Naomi breathes, eyes wide in wonderment.

"That's never gonna happen!" I bury my face in my hand before taking another sip of wine. "But... Oh my god, I'm just gonna say it. He got off on me."

A horrendous noise is emitted from beside me as Naomi suddenly inhales whatever amount of wine she was just about to swallow. She gasps and splutters and I have to pat her on the back to make sure she's alright.

"Got-?!" Naomi chokes through her words. "Got off on you?!"

"Are you okay?!" I continue to rub along her spine.

"Yeah, just-" her breath hitches almost comically, "tell me!"

"Alright, well..." I press my lips together, keeping my hand on Naomi's back just to make sure she's calmed down. "We were spooning and he like, got hard, and- fuck, I felt it with my bum and it was an accident but it- we just didn't stop."

"Did you fucking make him come?!" Naomi whispers, pulse rising to her face. She has tears in her eyes but I try to believe it's from all the choking she's done.

I nod my head slowly, "He felt so bad. I dunno why. Like, he couldn't control it."

"Obviously he couldn't control it! He's been built up for fucking months about you! This is Harry Styles we're talking about, Scarlet! Do you even realise that?! Harry," she stresses, leaning her head back on my couch, not even bearing to look at me. "Did you wank him?! Were you just grinding, or-?"

"Oh, god," I repeat, wondering just how many times I've uttered that phrase today. "It all went by so fast. There was no like, touching, other than- you know. I didn't see his... uh... but from what I felt? It really wasn't small."

"Scarlet!" Naomi tumbles into my side, leaning up against me as we both laugh and squeal hysterically with each other.

"Shut up, I know," I squeeze my eyes shut, basking in my memories. "It was... curious. We didn't really talk about it after it happened. But then again, we didn't really have time to because... Louis showed up."

"You're fucking with me."

"I swear," I shake my head, looking the girl straight in the eyes.

"I'm not drunk enough for this," Naomi mutters into her glass, chuckling in bewilderment as she
downs another sip.

I sigh, genuinely amused as I also swallow another gulp, "I guess Anne told his mum — Johannah — I was there and- yeah, Lou just showed up without any warning. He fucking like, drove to Holmes Chapel and he was high and like, really put off because I didn't tell him I would be there."

"Clearly," Naomi huffs silently, aware of Louis' behaviour slightly more than I am.

"Anyway," I purse my lips lightly. "I dunno if he and Harry are alright because Harry did get kinda fed up with him. Like, I don't blame him — Louis was being an idiot — but Harry really called him out on it."

"What did he say?"

"Something like, Louis should actually care about me instead of always thinking with his dick."

"Oh, shit."

"Yeah."

I give my eyebrows a shrug, nibbling on my lower lip as Naomi stares back at me with just about the same expression.

"Look, I'm sure they've resolved at least something," she ensures me. "They've got a gig in Mexico tonight so they have to be good. But, erm... What are you gonna do?"

"Nothing," I stand up, grabbing my empty wine glass off of the table. "That's what I'm gonna do."

I've already decided.

I'm not going to be cold but I'm not going to be excessive either. If Louis or Harry want to make a move on me, they're more than welcome to. Personally, I have too much going on to let my mind become more distracted than it already is.

The boys are playing two shows in Mexico with a local opening act, then they have an additional three days off before I join them in Florida. It's only a few days until the first show of our American tour but I'm already feeling a slightly anxious sensation deep in my stomach.

I can't tell if I'm uneasy because of the tour, because of my restless itinerary or because I continue to miss the boys. It's the first time in a while that I've been without even a single member of One Direction for more than a few days on end and I miss them more than I ever dreamed.

I have been keeping busy, nonetheless. My band and I have been rehearsing and doing mad promotion for the North American leg of the tour nearly every day. It's tough. God, it's tough, but I go to bed every night feeling so whole-heartedly satisfied that every ounce of sweat we endure daily is ultimately worth it.

In fact, I've been so busy that I've hardly had time to think about kissing or loving or any of that nonsense. The only thing that has been most apparent whenever One Direction passes over my mind is that same inevitable longing. I do still feel quite attached to Louis — as expected as that is — yet I'm surprisingly at a loss of how I feel towards Harry.

It's just as strange as it is intriguing.

It's hard, suddenly feeling something for someone I've looked so platonically upon in the past
— especially when that someone is my closest friend — but that one night we shared together is constantly at the back of my mind whether I'm aware of it or not.

And it isn't until one evening when I am alone in my hotel room and my hands are working down into myself as shallow breaths are forced from my lungs that a stunning image of a certain curly-haired boy fades into my mind, involuntarily causing my hips to grind around my wet fingers and a moan to escape from my parted lips, and I realise that fuck.

Maybe I really do want to get Harry Styles naked and on top of me.

It's not too long now.

Before I know it, I'll be in America with my manager, my band and the five boys I so fervidly think about. We'll be touring the country and playing shows nearly every day and living off of complimentary breakfasts and dressing room refreshment tables and I'm so fucking nervous but I really can't wait.

The only thing I'm apprehensive about is seeing Louis again.

And Harry.

Or, I'm not entirely sure.

But I sure as hell am about to find out.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, voting and all of your lovely comments :) 

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"Can I get you anything else?" the passing air hostess waits by my side.

"No, I- uh, just the water's fine, thanks," I smile up at her politely as she carries along to the next few rows of seats.

"Ye should've asked for an airplane martini," Keith suggests, swirling the small amount of beer
around in his plastic cup.

"'Course you would, Keith," I chuckle, smirking at the lad.

"What's that?" Elijah leans back in his seat to look at us.

"It's a martini with a little airplane in it," Keith explains to Elijah. "Ye get t' keep the airplane."

"I don't think that's a real thing, mate," Pete shares a cheeky look with me as Elijah just shrugs and goes back to his mobile.

"It's completely real, I saw it on E! News," Keith maintains.

"As if E! News has anything to do with reality," Pete hides his scoff with a laugh and I can't help but join him.

"He's right, you know," Mitch points out, smiling with the lot of us.

I nearly forgot my manager was sat next to me. Although, as soon as he spoke it was a comforting reminder. Mitch is one of the main reasons why I'm not so freaked out about flying right now.

We haven't been in the air for long.

We have about seven hours left of our nine and a half hour trip over the Atlantic ocean and, to my consolation, all of my nerves are gone. It's not like I haven't been on a plane before but this is my first time travelling to a continent other than Europe. I honestly thought it would be scarier than it turned out to be. I'm almost fully content. Except for the single fact that I have amazing lingerie on and no one's gonna get to see it.

No one, meaning Louis, of course.

Now that we're in the states, we're about to be putting on shows nearly every day. And when we're not playing shows we'll be on the road. And doing interviews. And working out. And attending photo shoots. And basically promoting ourselves in every humanly way possible until we pass out.

Mitch wasn't kidding when he said things will change the second we step foot on American ground.

It's literally already happening.

From here on in, I won't be staying in the same hotel as One Direction. Neither will my band. It has a lot to do with fame and popularity but it also has a lot to do with management, if I'm being honest.

If I were to stay in the same hotel as the boys, a lot of speculation would be passed around about how close the lot of us really are. Obviously. So to avoid any increase of those rumours, our management teams have separated us. As if distance solves everything. Nonetheless, as long as both the boys and myself are at this level of fame, it will continue to be like this. We will always have to live with this heartbreaking distance no matter what.

From now on, it's out of our hands.

"Hey ladies, you're jamming up a lot of exits! Can we move over and just jam up like one?"
Two young security guards from our Florida hotel carve a path through a sizeable group of about thirty teenagers. Pete, Keith, Elijah and I part our way through the raucous young crowd with Mitch at our tails. We manage to reach the doors with the promise that we'll be back down soon enough to meet the lot of them later tonight.

"Thanks, lads," I voice to the guards as they lead us inside.

"No problem," one of them gives us a nod.

"I feel really shit," I overhear Pete sigh from behind me. "It's like herding sheep."

"At least they have a sense of humour about it," I hear Elijah note.

"Still," Pete maintains.

Unlike back home in England, our security in America is extra tight. We've had our tour dates scheduled for months and we're only in each city for a day or two at most so the fans make the most of it while they can.

They're mad.

In the best way possible, of course.

Our fans, especially those of One Direction, make it their mission to know exactly where we are every minute of every second of every day. It's gotten to the point where teenagers behind their screens are aware of our flight schedules hours before we are.

"Are we going right up to the rooms?" one of the security guards asks Mitch in a light American accent.

"No," Mitch replies to all of our surprise, then he corrects himself. "Well, yes. Just a quick stop off then we'll be using your utilities! The gym, that is."

"You've gotta be kidding."

"What time is it even?"

"Haven't you heard of jet lag?"

My band and I argue with our manager all at once, ignorant to the rest of our passers by in the lavish hotel. We've already endured a nine and a half hour flight, without even considering security scans and baggage check, and now Mitch wants us to bust our arses in the gym.

I'm not sure whether to laugh or cry but I'm definitely overwhelmed.

"Only thirty minutes. No fret," Mitch raises his hands in innocence as the two guards show us to the hotel lifts. "Need I remind you, you're in the big time now. Working out is, from here on in, a daily thing for you four, alright? Fit in with your schedules — of course — but thirty minutes isn't as bad as it could be."

"Look who yer talking to," Keith makes a point of rolling his eyes.

"We could always make it an hour..." Mitch comically raises his voice in mock-authority. "I could talk to-"

"Thirty minutes sounds good," I cut him off, making the lads around me laugh at their own saved
If exhaustion was a person it would be named Scarlet Ryder.

I fall back on my bed in nothing but a towel without even bothering to dry myself or get dressed. I was almost second-guessing the shower I just had, I was so light-headed from the flight and workout. Putting on some Pink Floyd, I scroll through my text messages before I know I'll inevitably pass out.

The lot of us transferred to our new North American numbers not too long after we touched down in Florida, so I don't expect to have many messages just yet. I have a couple of random ones from Elijah and Naomi, as well as one from Harry. I casually respond to the others before reading Harry's cheeky text.

**Harry: Hellooooo USA**

A smile spreads across my face as I type back to him.

**Me: That was a long ass flight omg. At the hotel.**

He responds within a minute or two, causing my phone to vibrate in my hand and wake me from my dazed half-slumber.

**Harry: How fast did you flap your little wings?**

I nearly snort at Harry's cheesy sense of humour and tap out a quick response before navigating over to Louis' new mobile number.

**Me: Is it even legal to work out after a 9 hour flight?**

I'm personally surprised that I didn't sext him. Usually I would have to hold back from making things seem sexual with Louis but this time it just came off the top of my head. This friends thing must be going better than I thought.

**Louis: I'm pretty sure it is in Japan**

**Louis: Are you here ?**

I briefly go back and forth between talking with Louis and Harry until I become so tired I can barely keep my eyes open. I send them each a message, stating how sleepy I am and that I'll probably be dreaming within the next ten minutes. Coincidentally enough, I receive two responses at the same time.

**Louis: Goodnight x**

**Harry: Goodnight .xx**

I try to ignore the fact that Harry sent me one more cross than Louis did.

As it goes, I'm not able to ignore it.
But at least I tried.

I get so confused waking up in America because I've been dreaming in Holmes Chapel.

Everyone is still pretty jet lagged, including the boys. They flew up from Mexico the same day that we flew over from England. One of Sam Teasdale's friends, Ruby's, advice for everyone's jet lag was Rohypnol. I still laugh to tears whenever that one comes to mind.

We've got a show today.

The first show of our North American tour, to be specific.

I can tell from all of the security and Do Not Enter signs around my hotel and the dressing rooms at the venue. There is always loads of security for everything always but the second we landed in America it's almost as if it doubled.

I had a bit of time to myself before soundcheck this afternoon. I took the hour to rest in my hotel room and update myself on what the boys have been up to these past few days. In other words, I went searching for all of the most recent pictures I could lay my eyes on and ended up getting more than I bargained for.

Basically, I wasn't expecting to find as many shirtless pictures of the boys as I did.

Namely, Harry.

Yet, there he was at their resort in Mexico. Tanned and shirtless, displaying his endless array of tattoos and covering a bare amount of what should be covered in his too-short jean shorts. He looks different in real life than he does in pictures, as do all the boys. I don't know how to explain it but it's true. Like, the images still look mostly like them, just not entirely as I know them.

Strange.

After a solid twenty minutes, I managed to draw my eyes away from the stunning images and make it to soundcheck early, tweeting something totally unrelated like:

@Scarlet_Ryder: America is my home away from home. Don't tell England.

The moment I found Harry in his dressing room, however, I confronted him about the pictures; shoving my phone in his face with a flustered, "Care to explain this?"

All he did was smirk and chuckle with a simple, "We went to Mexico...!"

And the only response I could muster was, "I can fucking see that!"

With that said, I still can't decide which was worse. The shirtless pictures of Harry in Mexico or all of the fucking mind-blowing images of Louis all over the internet.

I'm saying this now and never again.

Never google Louis Tomlinson beautiful.
You will cry.

It's legitimate suicide.

Not like I also did that today or anything.

"An article claimed I was tweeting from a dance club last night," I overhear Liam chuckling to Zayn in our large group dressing room.

"Where were you, mate?" Zayn questions absent-mindedly.

"On the fucking toilet," Liam laughs out loud, taking a seat in front of a mirror so Louise can work on his hair.

Zayn snorts, pulling out his phone and shaking his head to himself, "Media."

I've been keeping an eye out for Louis all day but I have yet to see him. Keith and Pete are on stage, testing the guitars and basses with the sound crew, along with Niall. Elijah and I are sat on one of the dressing room couches, sharing stories about our strange encounters with housekeeping staff. And as for Harry, he's passed out on the couch adjacent to mine and Elijah's.

That boy really can fall asleep anywhere.

It's taking everything in my control not to climb in and curl up next to him in front of everyone. It's a strain just trying to ignore the slack-jawed beauty. I can barely look away.

"Scarlet Ryder," a voice chimes from the dressing room doorway.

I look up to see Louis walking in with a twinkle in his eye and security at his side.

"LWT," I sing back to him, remaining on the couch next to Elijah.

"How'd you know those were my initials?"

"It's called the internet."

"Yeah, yeah," Louis voices with a peculiar smirk on his face. "Heard you discovered some cheeky shots of us while we were gone."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"This one," Louis motions to Harry with his thumb, sitting across from us by Harry's feet. "Did you happen to find any pictures of Zayn? That's a hot and spicy body if I've ever seen one."

"Thanks, mate," Zayn raises his arm from the styling chair without bothering to look back.

"Hot and spicy?" Elijah repeats with a trebled giggle. "That's one way of putting it."

"Sorry, 'Lij," Louis chuckles, leaning back on Harry's legs. "Forgot you were so keen on the lad."

"I'm not-!" Elijah begins a bit too vocally before clearing his throat and finishing off in a whisper. "I'm not keen on Zayn, thank you."

I turn to Elijah beside me, surprised at the new information, "You're into him?"

"Oh my god!" is all Elijah can muster before stuffing his face into his hands.
Zayn laughs out loud, evidently having heard the whole thing, and yells back to the drummer, "It's alright, darling, I'm quite keen on myself too!"

The lot of us fall back in laughter. I'm surprised Harry hasn't woken up from all of our noise, not to mention, Louis using him like a fucking pillow, but at the same time I'm not surprised. I reckon it has to do with that habit of being able to fall asleep anywhere.

Sleepy Harry really is my favourite.

When he allows his eyes to shut, making his long lashes fan over his soft cheeks. When he allows his breaths to become deep, making his chest slowly rise and fall. When he allows his lips to relax into a soft pout, making my urge to kiss them stronger than ever.

Although I know I could never do that.

Absolutely no way.

No way.

Being back on stage is the best feeling in the world right now.

The lights scorch my skin and the shouts of the crowd deafen me and all I can smell is sweat from the bare breeze of air we're getting and I have never been happier in my life than I am up here.

"Elijah, give us a beat," I voice into my microphone, strumming a quick riff on the electric guitar around my shoulders.

Elijah nods down to me from the drum stand and begins with a few solid kicks to the bass drum before hitting along his toms, forming a beat similar to that of Led Zeppelin's *Immigrant Song*.

"Hot and spicy," he smirks into his microphone, making me choke out in laughter at the phrases' original intent. And although the other lads laugh along with the crowd, I'm the only one on stage who truly gets it.

"Geordie, over to you," I chuckle, throwing the beat over to Pete who walks along with his bass, making up a catchy rhythm to match Elijah's drums on the spot.

"Hell yeah," I continue to strum my original riff along with Elijah and Pete before looking over at Keith. "Ireland, polish us off!"

Keith sticks his tongue out at me, then goes on to improvise some leads with his distorted electric guitar.

"Everybody in the front!" Elijah yells into his microphone. "We wanna hear you scream!"

The massive sounds from the arena noticeably separate as hundreds of screams emanate from the centre of the crowd, obeying Elijah's demand without a further thought.

Pete and Keith mimic the requests, each taking on the left and right sides of the arena, until the majority of the attention lands on me.
"Everyone in the back!" I step up to the microphone, continually strumming the same melodic riff along with my band as the back of the arena suddenly erupts in sound. I nearly stop playing, I'm so caught off guard, but I hold tight and humouredly play on. "I wasn't done yet!" the entire crowd audibly laughs and yells back to me, making my laughter echo throughout all of the speakers. "You guys are rad! Everyone in the back! I want you to be as quiet as you can until I give you the sign..." the lads and I play quieter to emphasise our show and play it up for the fans a bit. "Three... Quieter... Two... That's good... One!" I shout as we end on a loud, extended series of notes. "LET ME HEAR YOU SCREAM!"

And with that, the back of the arena is the fucking loudest I've heard it yet during this segment of the show, ever.

It's moments like these when I realise just how lucky I am to be here, doing what I'm doing. Especially with the people I'm doing it with.

I love touring with the boys and my band but at this point I'm pretty certain I love the fans just as much. I've met so many people from this dream of an experience and we're barely a third through the tour.

They're what keep me balanced, really.

The fans bring me down to earth and help me forget about the stresses of this job. The stresses of my tight schedule. The stresses of my personal life and romantic life.

Big shoutout to Louis Tomlinson and Harry Styles.

And I will never admit who I happen to daydream over while singing the next slow song on our set list.

But I will say one thing.

It's the exact opposite of who I expected.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, voting and all of your lovely comments :)

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"Excellent show tonight, Scarlet," one of the lighting guys passes me, giving me a spirited high five.

"Thanks to you, Tom," I grin softly, watching him walk along with a woman I don't recognise.

"Have a good one, yeah?"

"Course!" he yells back at me. "Open bar!"

I laugh to myself, taking a laboured sip from my beer bottle.

The boy's team has rented a beach house in Miami for the next day or so, overlooking a prime spot along the beach. The backyard patio is full of people. It still continues to be packed in as assorted crew members finish their shifts; tearing the massive set down and packing up all the equipment back at the Florida arena.
Everyone here is either part of the entertainment or the crew. It's a giant party to kind of kick off the start of the American tour, considering we all have a day off tomorrow. Literally. The only thing anyone is doing tomorrow is driving to Kentucky. Well, sleeping while driving to Kentucky sounds more like it.

Harry and I have dropped the drink-for-drink rule just for tonight since I do plan to smoke. Harry is bound to have a couple of extra drinks in place of that anyway, so it kind of works out for us.

"I like those earrings, Scar," Zayn walks up to me amid the large group of people. He's got a red cup in one hand and is wearing a sleeveless shirt that shows off his canvas of countless intricate tattoos. "Are those real diamonds?"

"Yeah, how about yours?" I ask, noticing his earrings look quite similar to mine.

"Yeah, wanna try them on?" he offers. I can tell he's already smoked from the blissed out smile he's so casually wearing.

"Sure," I chuckle, fitting my bottle of beer between my knees so I can remove my earrings with two hands.

"We'll trade them back at the end of the night, yeah?" he hands me his as I hand him mine.

"Sounds good, Zayn," I fit both of his earrings in my ears as he locks mine in his own ears.

Then he's weaving through the party.

And then he's out of sight.

I'm left with what I can only figure is a humoured expression, retrieving my beer bottle from between my legs to take another swig.

It's a new feeling, to trade earrings with someone. It's so personal. Like the first time someone says your name. Or the first time someone calls you their friend. It's a good feeling, no matter what it is. Especially with someone as magnificent as Zayn.

Sometimes I wonder what pulled me in with Louis. Harry, too. I mean, each of the boys are lovely in their own way and I just imagine sometimes what would've happened if any of the other lads were to have made a move on me first, if it hadn't been Louis. I think about that now and again, although I'm sure that the tattooed, grungy style that Harry and Louis possess is more my type, regardless.

I guess.

I've been thinking a lot about that.

And although I hate to admit it, I've also been thinking a lot about tattooed, open shirt Harry. Just as he is now, wandering the backyard party among a cadence of remaining light of the setting sun and the glowing light of the rising moon.

I can vividly remember how soft, smooth and warm his skin was. I can only imagine how electrifying it would feel to place my lips over the wings of his butterfly tattoo. To elicit a soft moan from his pink, plump lips. To cause his body to involuntarily shudder from the tedious, mounting pleasure I could bring him.

"Love, have you seen Niall?" Pete joins me on the deck overlooking the beach.
"Haven't seen him," I shrug, watching as he gulps down whatever liquid is in his red cup. "Have you seen Louis?"

I'm not quite sure why I asked, to be honest. I reckon it's just out of habit.

"He's by the bar with the new trainee," Pete gives a nod over to the small bar counter along the outdoor patio.

I follow Pete's gaze until my eyes land on Louis. He's chatting with a pretty girl. She's got straight, dark hair and her mixed caramel skin stands out against the cropped white blouse she's wearing. I recognise her as Caroline's new assistant stylist. From what I've heard, she's American and she has just started working on our tour in the fashion department.

A sick feeling of what I can only describe as jealousy bubbles in my stomach, just looking at Louis and the girl. From how I'm feeling, you'd think the two are in love and getting married.

Then again, that could just be my foggy, liquored-up mind speaking.

Yeah, that's definitely it.

I thank Pete and make my way over towards the bar area.

"Hey, Lou," I smile once I reach the two. "Not drinking tonight?"

"No, actually I just arrived! Just met up with Lana, here," he motions to the petite girl by his side.

"Hey, Lana, I'm Scarlet," I shake the girls hand politely.

"Hi, I know, I- um, I'm a big fan," she retreats into herself, shaking my hand delicately.

"Thanks, love," I let out a chuckle. Maybe there was less of an intent than I originally imagined. I turn back to Louis, not really caring to stand here long. "Would you like something? Beer?"

"Yeah," he sings huskily. "How about something mixed? Rum or summat."

I give Louis an agreeable nod and tell Lana it was nice meeting her.

Although there is an outdoor bar, most of the stronger alcohols are located inside. The patio is home to mostly pre-bottled beers and coolers, while the kitchen holds all of the larger, more expensive bottles.

I walk through the doors of the breezy beach house, stopping for quick chats with a few crew members I happen to run into along the way. I even find Keith by the kitchen sink. He rinses a glass before pouring himself a pint of someone's homemade cider. The two of us spite jokes with each other and have a good laugh before I remember my true intent of coming here.

Louis.

I'm pretty sure all Louis drinks is tea and beer. However, there are those times where he will opt for a glass of wine or a strong mixed drink. Times especially like these.

I've grown to know a lot of little facts about the boys, I realise as I'm rifling through the stacked refrigerator for rum or anything similar. Like, how Harry's favourite pizza topping is sweet corn and Louis' is ham. How Niall's favourite shower gel scent is Lynx Africa and Liam's is Molton Brown.

I finish pouring Louis' drink, considering that it may be a bit strong but I shrug off the matter as I exit
the kitchen. I find Louis in the same spot as I left him, except this time he's standing alone.

"Don't feel like being social, Tommo?" I smirk as I reach the lad.

"Hey!" a grin widens across Louis' face as I hand him the drink. "Just making sure you didn't get lost. I didn't wanna have you searching the whole party for me."

"It is a massive party," I smile along with him, watching as he takes a sip.

"Whoa," Louis breathes, pulling the glass away from his face, letting out a tiny cough. "That's strong."

I laugh out loud, discarding my empty beer bottle on the counter next to us, "I know."

"What?" he quirks his head at me, testing another small sip.

"When I was making it, I was in there thinking — whoa, this is a strong drink," I chuckle liberally.

"Babe, you're the only one who can read me like this," Louis slings an arm around my shoulders, mumbling into my hair.

So Louis has started calling me babe again and I haven't entirely rejected the idea.

He thoughtfully grabs me a new bottle of beer from the counter, already figuring I'm bound to anyway. I accept the drink, cracking it open using a nearby opener and taking a deep sip.

I'm about to cuddle deeper into Louis' side before I realise what kind of company we're with, so I pull away instead, "Maybe we should, er...

"Yeah, let's uh-" Louis clears his throat, glancing around the patio nonchalantly, "wander."

The two of us decide to navigate the party separately so we don't draw any unwanted attention. We're also separating from each other so we don't become as attached as usual. But neither of us brought up that idea.

While Louis turns in the other direction, I begin to make my way through the increasingly dense crowd. I weave past countless familiar faces and even more friendly smiles. I plan to take a seat on one of the patio chairs lined up by the back of the yard, really needing to rest from all of the physical stress I've been under lately. It's only to my surprise when I see a curly head sat there next to a blond one.

"Lads," I greet the two boys as I plant myself in an empty seat next to them.

"Hey, Scar," Harry smiles, raising his drink to mine.

"Hey, love," Niall beams. He's wearing a grey zip hoodie with nothing underneath. It's taking some effort not to scan my eyes all over his bare chest. "What's up?"

"Pete's been looking for you," I tell Niall, sending Pete a quick text saying that I found his boy.

"Has he?" Niall asks and I nod, drinking from my bottle. Before I can respond, a medium-sized dog runs up to Niall, who pets it as it happily tries to climb up his leg. "This dog's as horny as a pet wildebeest, ya know? Just keeps comin' back fer more."

"A wildebeest, Niall," Harry critiques with a sardonic expression, raising his head from his phone.
"Stuff it, Styles! What are ye even doin' on yer phone? We're at a party for god's sake," Niall chuckles, gulping down a good third of his drink in humour. When Harry doesn't respond, Niall sees it in himself to lean over Harry's shoulder and peer over at his mobile. "Harry, the internet is for porn and lookin' up younger pictures of yer friends' mums! Not for searchin' lyrics to fuckin' Rock the Casbah!"

"Never underestimate Rock the Casbah," Harry states as if it were written so.

"I didn't know you were so into Rock the Casbah, Harry," I smirk, watching the way his eyes follow the words on his screen.

"There are many things you don't know about me," Harry shrugs lightly.

And it's true.

Although we're best friends, there are still a number of secrets that lie between Harry and me. Nothing too drastic, as far as I see it, but there are certain topics we choose not to touch on. Intimacy, for one. Sure, I'll talk about Louis with Harry but only in passing. I'd never get too into detail or even refer to the thought of myself and Louis having sex. Just as I'm sure I wouldn't care to hear about anyone Harry's currently shagged either.

"Lads, lads- and Scarlet!" a high, raspy voice joins our circle as Louis walks up behind me and sits next to Niall.

So much for splitting up.

Louis has somehow obtained a water gun. He's secretly spraying it at innocent people's backs every other second, even as he chats with us, making it the most difficult task in the world for the lot of us to keep straight faces as the random people look back.

"Why have you got a water gun?" I ask Louis, keeping my voice down and trying to keep my laughter held deep in my lungs.

Honestly, I didn't even have to ask.

I know the real answer is because it's Louis.

"I feel like ruining something beautiful," Louis responds, scrunching up his face as he sprays the ground over and over. "Ah, a dry spot! Fuck you, dry spot."

Louis viciously shoots a number of streams of water at the ground, soaking nearly every inch of the patio circle we're sat in.

"What has that dry spot ever done to you?" Harry frowns at Louis, though it doesn't take long for his accusatory expression to soften.

"Nothing," Louis tells him with a wink. "I just like making things wet."

The evening has fallen upon us and the stars are starting to show their lights all over the night sky. There are at least two or three joints being passed around the large circle of people I'm among. Zayn is sat next to me, toking from one of the numerous spliffs. He's using an abandoned beer bottle cap as
an ashtray and it's putting me in a daze just watching him.

I'm stoned.

Louis and Harry have been a pair nearly all night. I've seen them have at it before but, tonight especially, I can genuinely see why they're best mates. Neither of them will shut up. There have been jokes all night about either of them pissing themselves from laughter. At this rate, one of them is bound to soon enough.

I've been keeping to myself, mainly. Sharing the magnificent evening with our massive tour family and casually bonding with the lad next to me. I'm so baked that even my speech is noticeably slower. Zayn has only been talking as much as I have but the two of us have grown to that level of comfort where we don't necessarily need words to comfortably understand each other.

Zayn passes me the last roach of a joint. I have to hold it at the tips of my fingers, it's so small. It's still visibly lit. I bring the roach to my lips, drawing in whatever amount of drug there is left. A warm sensation fills me, like gravity isn't entirely holding me down as it usually is. I take another toke and the joint burns out just as I pull it away.

"I think it's done," I hold the roach out to Louis on my left side.

Louis flicks the joint out of my fingers, "It's done."

"I found it!" Niall bends down, picking up a small rolled up paper. "Though it could just be another roach. There's a lot of weed going on... at this address."

Zayn, Louis and I cough out in laughter at the bare truth of Niall's statement. I smile, gazing foggily around at the boys. I don't think I've felt as calm as I do tonight in quite a while. Since Cheshire, probably. It's a fantastic feeling.

"Scar, you high?" Harry stands from his seat next to Louis, stumbling a bit as he gets up.

"Yeah, you drunk?" I look up at him.

"Yeah," he holds a hand out for me and I take it without questioning. "Get on my back."

"Why?"

"'M giving you a piggy back," he slurs as if it's obvious.

"Not too sure about this," I huff with a smile, although I still allow Harry to pull me up out of my seat.

"Don't break her," Louis quips, sipping from his drink, "she's quite valuable."

Whenever Harry and I are close, Louis acts as if he is okay with it. We don't really talk about how close we are because nothing is really in the open yet. Even for either of us. However, despite our mutual agreements that nobody is serious with anybody, Louis still tends to spite jokes at Harry, making him seem dopey or loserish, because deep down he really is jealous.

"I'm quite strong, Lou," Harry smirks, positioning himself in front of me and pulling my legs up around his torso. "Dunno if you've no'iced."

Harry boosts me fully onto his back and begins walking across the lawn in front of Zayn and Louis, who are still in their seats. I wrap my arms around Harry's chest and shoulders, resting my head in
the crook of his neck and pleasantly drawing in the minty scent of his shampoo.

I'm almost about to voice how good of a driver Harry is, until I belatedly witness Louis sticking a foot out in front of the lad, making him stumble in his stride.

Harry only slightly trips but it's enough for him to fall on his ass. I roll next to him, completely unharmed, but I'm suddenly swallowed up in an impulsive fit of giggles. Harry himself can't even help but laugh at his friend's cheeky nerve.

"You fucking jerk," I swear at Louis amid my laughter. "Get down here!"

I get up onto my knees and snatch Louis by the front of his shirt. I pull him forwards, making him tumble off of his seat and fall onto the ground next to Harry.

"No, Scar!" Harry laughs out loud. "You're bringing trouble!"

"Get him!" I yell.

The people around us have begun to notice what's going on. We have more than a few onlookers. Most of them cheer us on, laughing at our laboured actions.

Harry grabs Louis' shin, unsure whether to wrestle him to the ground or help him up. I push Louis even further, feeling Harry fall half on top of me and half on top of his mate. Louis, on the other hand, is busy dying of laughter; so much he can't even speak. The lad couldn't even utter a word if he tried.

We're literally stuck.

None of us can move, we're so fucking drunk and high.

That is, until Louis begins exaggeratingly pointing at Harry's hand around his shin. He's trying to speak but he's laughing so hard he's put himself into a paralysed spirit. It seems he's about to say something a few times but each time he tries to voice whatever's going on in that brain of his, he's thrown under an endless fit of laughter and no words are getting through that filter.

"Shin-dler's List!" he finally manages to crack, making the entire group around us howl out in laughter.

"I gotta know..." Liam runs through the crowd and up to our group, noticing our sudden manic activity. "Is he wet between the legs?"

"I'm gonna fucking piss!" Louis squeals.

Literally, fucking squeals.

"Maybe- you need- a leg up," Harry chokes between his laughter.

"God, someone help me up!" I practically starfish from my priceless exhaustion, laying over Louis' and Harry's tangled limbs. A tear rolls down my cheek from the unbearable hilarity of the whole situation and I literally can't stop fucking laughing.

Then my hand is gripping around a tattooed wrist as Zayn helps me up.

"Better than cable," Zayn remarks.

And if Louis and Harry hadn't already pissed their pants from laughter earlier tonight, they've both
definitely done it now.

"Thanks, dude," my head spins as I reach a full standing position. I still feel silly and delirious from the riot of the situation but I wouldn't take it back for the world.

"Wanna listen to music with me?" Zayn murmurs to me. A slightly husky tone has overtaken his voice from the amount of smoking he's done tonight. But fuck, if I'm not the same.

I give a single look back to Louis and Harry — wrestling on the ground and laughing until their chests are flushed with bliss — then I nod up at Zayn, letting him drape an arm around my shoulders and lead me away from the chaos and toward unknown wonder.

A little curiosity never hurt anyone.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, voting and all of your lovely comments :)

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Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"What do you mean, you don't know that song?" Liam gapes.

"I've just never heard it," I chuckle lightly, looking around at the lads in the living room of the Miami beach house. "I dunno."

"Come on, Scar," Zayn draws his voice out. "An oldies fan like you hasn't heard of The Doobie Brothers?"

Harry laughs and tilts his head at me, siding with both Liam and Zayn, "Even I'm surprised, babe."

Babe.

I'm gonna fucking punch myself in the face.
"Play it, I wanna hear it," I nod over to Liam, holding his phone in his hands.

"Play it, Liam!" Harry grabs Liam's closest shoulder and begins shaking him spiritedly.

"I got it!" Liam chuckles, shoving Harry off as a tune begins to play from his phone. "Listen."

An electric guitar strums a light, catchy riff. Then the drums kick in. And I think that's a bass I hear. Then the vocals start and I'm entirely drawn in. The tune transitions to chords I wouldn't expect and the vocalist experiments with rhythms that catch me so off guard and wow, I really can't stop fucking listening to this song.

But it's when the chorus kicks in that I almost lose it.

Liam, Zayn and Harry all sing along as the chorus plays from Liam's phone. There are about three harmonies being sung at once and the boys' voices are blending in perfectly and it's just bloody fantastic.

I don't know if I've fallen in love with the song or with the three boys who are singing it to me.

"Whoa, whoaaaa, listen to the music," Harry sings along with the lads. He points his finger in the air to match the beat of the drums.

"Just a bit wasted, yeah?" Zayn smirks at Harry, stretching his arms over the back of the couch. "How's it, H?"


Liam, Zayn and I all burst out in laughter. My vision spins at the sudden rush of adrenaline sent straight to my head but it's a pleasant feeling at that. I'm fairly drunk and very high and yeah, Harry looks good no matter how smashed he is. And Zayn. And Liam.

I have no idea where that came from.

"Nearly f'got!" Harry slurs cheerily, looking straight at me amid his two band mates. "I 'ave t' take a wee!"

"Remember to lift the seat, Harold!" I shout after him as he goes scurrying away to the toilet.

The lads and I share a laugh, then Liam turns to me.

"You like him, don't you?" he watches me from his settee.

I laugh, sipping the beer from my bottle, "It's Harry."

"Yeah, but you must have a little crush on him," Liam persists cheekily.

"It's Harry!" I repeat, feeling myself blush all over.

"Is that your answer for everything?" Zayn smirks, sharing a look with Liam that speaks for itself.

I shrug noncommittally, "Piss drunk Harry is my favourite."

The boy comes back into the room in no time, parting his way through a few familiar faces before he plops back on the couch next to me. It's only now do I realise that he's not wearing any shoes or socks. His feet are completely bare, showing off his tattooed ankles hovering by the hems of his jeans.
And that's it, I've decided.

Barefoot Harry is my favourite next to piss drunk Harry.

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As the night goes on, I expected Harry to become less intoxicated. But as it goes, he's become more drunk than I've seen him in a long while. I'm definitely still drunk and undeniably quite high but I've stopped the drinks for the night and I'm by no means anywhere near Harry's level.

I've still got at least somewhat of a brain on my shoulders.

The boys’ director of photography and one of Harry's good friends, Cal Aurand, has recently taken to Harry's side, making sure he doesn't do anything too crazy in spite of his excessive intoxication. But it's Harry. And as wild as he is, it's mostly just talk tonight.

"Y' know wha' else I don' understand?" Harry continues to slur, furrowing his brows adorably. "Bananas. They, like... grow on trees!"

"Alright, Harry," Cal chuckles, patting his knee. "Think you can make it to bed now?"

"Yeah, s'about that time," Harry yawns just for show, stretching his arms past either side of his body. His actions make me yawn as well, my sighs only ceasing as I watch his long arms reach past my figure.

"Come on, then," Cal kindly stands up to help the boy but Harry distractedly tells him to wait.

"Scarlet," Harry leans on my shoulder. My name sounds like pure poetry emanating from his swollen lips. "A' you coming with me?"

I look around at Zayn and Liam, who make absolutely no effort to hide their awaiting, expectant glances. Then up at Cal, who has more of a staggered air about him.

"I'll help you upstairs, alright H?" I voice softly to the boy hovering beside me. "I'm staying up for a bit, though."

"'Kay," the wasted boy can barely keep his focus straight. "'S'go."

I follow Cal out of the living room. He slings an arm around Harry's shoulders to prop him up. The three of us make our way up the staircase of the house. Cal drags Harry up the steps as humanely as possible as I help support him from behind, pushing him along.

Cal has opted to stay the night with Harry, promising to look after him and sustain his health as he sleeps. He's sworn to make sure no one disrupts him and to ensure he stays alive through the night, basically.

Cal and I discover an empty guest bedroom at the end of the upstairs hall once we pass through a small gathering of a few people. Cal takes one of Harry's arms over his shoulders as I hold the other. We somehow sideways-shift our way into the bedroom and turn the lights on low before guiding Harry to the premade bed.

Cal pulls back the covers as I help Harry sit himself on top of the fitted mattress.
"Are y'gonna sleep in your jeans, love?" I rub my thumb over Harry's bicep as Cal watches us from above.

"Take it off," Harry looks down at himself in a childlike manner. He tries fiddling with the button in the middle of his waistband but his fingers are failing him like rubber.

"D'you want some help there, pal?" Cal voices, watching Harry carefully.

"It's alright," I tell the man, looking up at him despite my own flush of vertigo, "I've got 'im."

Harry sits back against his hands and lets me undo his jeans for him. I try to unbutton his clasp and zip down his fly as quickly (and platonically) as possible but – even with Cal standing here, watching us – I can't help but get the least bit turned on.

Let me make it clear that the last time I was this close to Harry's c ōck was during that one night we shared in Cheshire.

And there's no forgetting that.

I tug Harry's jeans down his waist as far as they will go in his position until Cal helps me stand him up, making them drop fluidly to his ankles. Harry steps out of his jeans one foot at a time, rendering his lower half bare aside from his tight boxer briefs, then he's sat back on the bed.

"You good?" I sit next to Harry once more before leaving. He nods his head compliantly. "Alright, I'm gonna go now. Goodnight, H."

Harry and I pull one another into our arms at the same time. I can't help but smile at how much we've grown to know each other to such a point where – even in our inebriated states – we still have that mutual, spiritual connection.

"Stay wi' me," Harry murmurs into the crook of my neck.

"Harry, you have to go to sleep," I chuckle, looking up at Cal for some reassurance. The man nods, simply smiling in response.

"Mmm..." Harry pulls away and looks at me curiously. Then, instead of obeying my request, he decides to rekindle his place above my shoulder; warmly pressing his lips to my skin. Harry begins marking his way down my neck, leaving a trail of drunken, wet kisses. And in his deep, raspy voice, he whispers, "Come on, baby..."

I shiver.

I tremble.

I nearly fucking moan.

"Please- Harry-" I stutter out in the shakiest breath.

Never in my life have I ever had to resist a temptation so perfectly trepidatious.

I warily push the boy away as Cal enforces my actions with a gentle, "Time for bed, mate."

I kiss Harry on his forehead before leaving him with Cal. The two men call out their sweet goodnights as I gingerly shut the bedroom door behind me.

And that's when I finally fucking breathe.
I lean back against the door, exhaling thoroughly and tilting my head back. I close my eyes, trying to make sense of everything that just happened. Although, I know I'm in no condition to try rationalising a single thing right now.

But, Harry.

Every time I want him, it's with more passion than the time before.

It's bad.

It's probably going to get to the point where we're alone together in a lift and I'll end up pressing all the buttons at once just so I can touch the little shit and from there I know I'll end up doing something I'll really regret.

It's that bad.

And — without assuming I'm taking advantage of him or anything — I probably could've had Harry tonight. But Cal was there and this is more than a public house and everyone we know and work with is within a few hundred feet of us at all times so nothing major could've happened anyway.

Not even a real kiss.

But, still.

I huff out a breath, straightening myself up and proceeding through the upstairs hall. I pass a few people I recognise but I simply flash them polite smiles and carry on my way. I'm definitely not in the right headspace to make any sort of decent conversation right now.

I couldn't manage that shit if I tried.

I only realise how tired I am as I'm walking back downstairs.

It's nearing three in the morning. This is honestly the latest I have stayed up all week. Tears are forming in my eyes from the amount of yawning I'm doing and, oh my god, I'm going to have to go to sleep.

It's just too late.

I take my last few steps down the stairs, stumbling into a compact body as I reach the landing.

"Shit, sorry-" I choke.

"Fuck, no that was my-" he drawls, then pauses. "Scarlet?"

"Louis?" I gaze up at the lad I just tripped over.

"I was just looking f'you," he chuckles, pulling away from me but only slightly.

"You were?"
"I do owe you a drink," Louis leads me through the massive beach house, weaving past countless intoxicated bodies.

"You do?" I call after him, really feeling my drunk and high take me on.

Louis reaches the kitchen, stopping at the fridge immediately, "Y' made me a drink. I have t' make one for you."

He says it like it's obvious.

To him, it probably is.

"Rum mix?" I lean on the counter by his side.

"Y'got it," he winks, making his advancement visible to no one but me.

Louis pours me a drink, then makes one for himself, mixing them both with pure pineapple juice. Alcohol has helped me make — and forget — so many bad decisions. Might as well carry on the legacy. I take one sip of the drink that he hands me, then pull it away as I make a face.

"Y' sure this isn't poison?" I smirk at Louis amid the harsh burn of the alcohol. "Bit strong of a drink, innit, Tomlinson?"

"Why d'you always insist I'm trying t' drug you?" Louis snorts out an adorable giggle.

"Call it intuition," my eyes bore into his. I chew on my lip before taking another sip.

"Call it payback," Louis raises his eyebrows over his twinkling blue eyes. "F' that strong drink y'made me back there."

"It was quite strong..." I tilt my head, downing more of the drink despite its incessant burn. "Y'got me. So's this one, pal."

"Pal," Louis rolls the word around his tongue. He drinks deeply from his glass before looking back at me. "Wanna help me with something?"

I gaze around the full kitchen. I watch as everyone is involved in their own group conversations. I glance around at the people that are chatting more one-on-one with each other. I skim my eyes over the smooth granite countertops that are more of a grey blur than anything.

And then I look at Louis.

"Help y' with what?" I have to focus on my speech so much that it doesn't come out as one long slur. Though, it's not really working out.

"I, uh- think I left m'phone in th'other room?" Louis responds airily. "Maybe y'could help look with me?"

"Mhmm," I hum into my drink, downing the last bit of pineapple rum before setting my glass on the counter. "Where'd y' leave it?"

"This way," Louis' voice is husky, causing goosebumps to tickle their way up my arms. He gulps down the remains of his drink, slamming his glass on the counter quite loudly before directing me out of the kitchen and down the main hall once again.

We come to a doorway near the front of the house with an artsy little sign on it, titled Laundry Room.
Louis opens the door, flicking on the light and evading the stares of anyone who happens to pass us by. He gently takes my hand, pulling me into the room behind him before closing the door shut.

Louis' hand is warm and not sweaty at all.

His fingers fit through mine like sculpted clay.

Then his hand is sliding away from mine and he's looking around the sizeable room.

"Why were y'in here anyway?" I frown, humouredly looking around the clean, white shelves.

"Was rolling some papes with Zayn earlier," Louis shrugs, turning around to exhibit a ludicrous display of lip-biting. "Find anything?"

I shrug my shoulders, drawing in a shaky breath as I face the lad.

Louis's mouth curls up at the sides as he steps towards me, "Found you."

"Found you," I mimic him, slipping my fingers into the front pockets of his jeans. My left hand closes around an object that — without a doubt — feels like Louis' "lost" phone, but I silently keep the discovery to myself.

Louis chuckles, wetting his lips with his tongue.

I shamelessly stare.

The world is a blur to me aside from Louis' lips.

He places his hands on either side of my hips, bringing me close enough to feel the warmth emanating from his toned, curvy body. My eyes scan over his chest, his neck, the stubble perfectly etched along his delicate jaw.

He's way too gorgeous to even exist.

But he does and it's a marvel just to look at him.

Louis closes the distance between our lips before I can manage another breath.

My eyes flutter shut. I pull Louis into my figure by his jeans; our two bodies becoming one. His arms snake around my waist, squeezing my back as he kisses me deeper. The room is spinning and the only thing keeping me grounded is Louis and the hold he's got on me.

I fall into his taste; his touch.

I kiss him back, although I know it's not entirely the best move to make.

This, all before my conscience decides to make an appearance for the second bloody time tonight.

"What about being friends?" I murmur against Louis' lips.

He sighs.

Reluctantly agreeing, he slowly pulls away.

"You're right," he says.

And for once, Louis isn't the pushy yet seductive enchanter I know him as.
I look the lad up and down, sensing the truth in his eyes. His grip has loosened on me, yet his eyes still roam over mine. And even considering the amount of weed and alcohol we’ve both consumed tonight, he firmly lays low.

This time I kiss him.

Because what no one has to know, no one has to know.

Chapter End Notes

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My head is light.

My body shakes among its limitless throbbing.

I've got my mind set on my destination and that destination is anywhere but here.
"Drink a lotta water," Keith holds the gym door open for me. "And get some rest. Chill out a bit, na'da mean?"

"Yeah," I breathe.

Light trickles of sweat bead down my temple. I'm perspiring from the workout I just went through, matched with an equal amount of icy cold that uncontrollably flashes over me.

"You fine, sunshine?" Elijah walks along at my laboured pace.

Again, "Yeah."

My stomach is light but my head and toes are heavy. It's an incredibly unbalanced sensation and it's sickening just to breathe. I'm really not fine at all.

We meet Mitch just before we reach the lobby.

"There are some young people waiting for you near the front," he says. "They've been waiting for a while. They're really keen on meeting you."

"Oh, fuck," I huff to myself.

"Hey, let's stick to our adage," Mitch looks directly at me, raising his eyebrows. "A fleeting moment for you can mean a lifetime to someone else."

"Yeah, so long as we make those moments really fucking fleeting, I'm down," I grimace at the feeling of my stomach in my throat.

"Scarlet!" my manager scolds. "What's-?"

"Let's just do it."

I walk ahead of my band, ignoring the scattered comments around me, really just wanting to meet the fans in the hotel and get it the fuck over with. My knees shake as I round the corner to the lobby but I manage to plaster on a smile as about twenty teenagers whip around to face me all at once. Squeals are heard and adrenaline fills the air as the young girls and boys surround me. There is a jumble of them all asking for pictures and throwing out comments that I can only assume are positive. But I'm less than thrilled.

My band joins me in no time. The group is messy and unorganised but we manage to make light of the situation despite their eager chaos and my imminent nausea.

It's a flash of chilling perspiration that signals for me to leave. I can't stay here any fucking longer. I make sure that I've taken a picture with absolutely everyone, then I boot it to the lifts.

"I think I'm gonna puke," I murmur along the way, unable to speak in a louder tone.

"Ha! Yeah," Pete chuckles as we enter the lift, "that was pretty mad."

"No... I'm not-"

A shudder courses throughout my body.

I can't even finish my sentence, I'm in such a fucking daze.

"Deep breaths..." Keith reaches out to me, rubbing a hand up and down my back.
"Hang in there, you're okay," Elijah coaches me. "It could always be worse, yeah?"

I nod, not wanting to say anything further.

It could be worse. It could always be worse. But that doesn't make this horrid feeling any less shit. I could be like Niall and freak out in mobs because of claustrophobia. Or I could be like Harry and have to keep an inhaler nearby at all times while on stage because of asthma. However, saying things could be worse doesn't automatically make any situation better. At all.

With that said, it's not like we can control any of what happens.

They're just problems we have to accept and deal with when the time is right.

I do feel like shit because of what happened; I'll admit that. I never want to come across as rude to anyone. Fans, especially. In the words of Liam Payne, I do really appreciate their support and love them all but sometimes it all gets too crazy for me.

I just wish One Direction were staying in the same hotel.

We've been staying in separate hotels since we arrived in America and it's been pulling at my heart right where it hurts. It's like this because I'm not as popular and rich as the boys. I know that. Though, it's also a quick and easy way to split the fans up so they don't all go mobbing the same hotel. I obviously miss the boys but there's nothing I can do to fix that. Not even Mitch could alter that fate.

It's just that it's a new country and they're so far away. I wouldn't even know where to go if I wanted to find them and it's not like any of us have much free time to sort that out, anyway.

It's something that's really been bothering me.

"Watch out, Scar," Mitch says, stepping beside me. He reaches towards the large panel of buttons as the door to the lift closes us in.

Keith furrows his brows in confusion, "I already chose the floor, boss."

"This is an express service in hotel lifts," Mitch explains, soberly holding down two buttons on the panel at once. "If you press the close button and the floor number at the same time, you'll skill all the floors in between in a flash."

"Kinda handy..." Elijah chews on his lower lip pensively.

We make it up to our floor in no time.

But no time couldn't come quick enough.

Instead of booking it to my own room – which is considerably further away from the lifts than the lads’ – I have Pete unlock his own door and let me in right away. I don't even have time to thank the guy before I'm locking myself in the hotel bathroom and scrambling over to the large toilet.

The white porcelain is cold on my hands as I lift the seat and grip onto either side of the toilet bowl. The smell of the water and the fresh bowl cleaner is so distantly familiar to me, although I hate to admit it. I spit into the water a few times, feeling my stomach rise to my throat. My head is dizzy and my vision fails to focus itself no matter how hard I try.

As much as I genuinely need to expel the contents of my stomach, I can't.
I cough and spit and pant and gag but nothing is fucking happening.

And it wasn't my first choice. But subconsciously, maybe it was there all along. So with a single motion, I raise two fingers to my lips and insert them into my mouth enough to graze the back of my throat. I wiggle my digits, tickling that single sickening spot that sends electrifying shivers down my spine.

My stomach lurches.

My eyes clench shut.

And that's when it all comes out.

My back arches as I throw up into the porcelain bowl. Tiny beads of cold sweat form on my forehead. My shudders echo around the inside of the toilet amid my constant gagging. And then it's over.

It's over.

I feel like shit.

But it's ten fucking times better compared to how crummy I was feeling moments ago.

Standing up, I flush my remains down the toilet and set its seat back down. I look at myself in the mirror, sighing deeply before rinsing my face with water and washing my mouth out. Twice.

Keith and Pete are chatting with each other as I exit the bathroom. Elijah and our manager are having a talk on the other side of the room as I come out but even they turn to me almost immediately. I feel my face flush with heat. But honestly, I'm not as embarrassed as I could be. I don't care as much as they think I do.

"You okay?" Keith reaches a hand out to rub my arm.

"Ten times better," I nod.

"You sure?" Pete frowns. "Sounded like you were throwing up in there."

"Yeah," I huff, taking a single step back. "I was. It's fine. It happens now and again."

"That kinda thing shouldn't happen now and again, Scar..." Keith nears me again, "unless yer ill."

"I'm fine," I raise my eyebrows, trying to make a point.

"Scarlet..." my manager determinedly gets up from his seat and crosses the room, "you're not-"

"Look-" I cut him off rather crudely, "don't worry about it, okay?" I grit my teeth together to constrain my imminent anxiety. "I just worked out too hard. That's it. End of story."

No one says a further word.

Mitch gives me a silent nod then closes the space between us, pulling me into a soft hug. I let out a breath into his shoulder. He kisses me on the cheek, potentially lingering there a bit longer than he should. Although, we've always been close and he's always been quite a tactile person.

It's nothing new so I don't give his actions a second thought.
That's just the kind of person he is.

The lads and I meander through the backstage corridors of Louisville, Kentucky. We haven't seen any members of One Direction yet today but that's expected considering our high levels of security. In this country, especially.

With all of the meal plans I've been assigned and all of the working out I've been doing, I've begun to notice that my waist has become slightly smaller. I can feel it in the way I move. The way I walk. Even my breathing has become more fresh.

I still feel a little light-headed but I'm trying not to think about it.

My band is serving as the perfect distraction.

"Fuck, I think my underwear's fucking backwards," Elijah fidgets and squirms in his jeans as he walks along.

Pete laughs out loud, clapping the lad on his back, "Elijah wears his underwear backwards to give guys easy access to his pooter!"

"Lick my duck butter," Elijah grimaces at Pete playfully.

"What is going on?" I stop in my tracks. A furrowed grin spreads wide across my face among my sudden confusion.

"Wee 'Lij can't take a joke," Keith chuckles.

"No, I mean-" I give my head a shake, blatantly staring straight ahead at our dressing room door. "What is going on?!"

The three lads turn to face where my attention lies. And that's when they burst out in sudden, uproarious laughter; throwing out cheeky comments, left, right and centre.

Harry Styles is stood by our dressing room door. He's wearing an extra-tight pair of black skinny jeans along with a loose, white tank top. His hair is pushed back in a long mess of curls and his tattoos are resilient against his tanned skin and he looks fucking incredible. He's currently working with what looks like bright yellow caution tape, along with a roll of black duct tape. He's already got half a roll of the yellow tape wrapped around the door and he's working with the other half much too casually for someone that is doing such a task.

I walk up close to him as my band lags behind.

"Hey, babe," I smile, amusingly admiring his obscure handiwork.

Harry turns to face me. A peculiar expression is painted over his face, "You're calling me babe now?"

I shrug, reaching out to play with a strand of caution tape around the door, "I call everyone babe."

"Is that so...?" he asks. I nod in response, smirking and innocently looking up at him. Harry hums, visibly distant in his thoughts before he licks his lips and raspily whispers down to me. "With me, you
meant it," he winks.

Fuck.

Oh, fuck.

"What- uh," I manage to clear my throat, clenching my fingers into my palms, "what are you doing?"

"My biggest prank yet," Harry claims with a grin, focusing his attention back on his task.

"And what's that?" I chuckle.

Keith suddenly barks out a laugh from behind us, "Tapin' up our dressin' room door so we can't get in?"

"Exactly that, sir!" Harry spreads his arms out in joy.

Harry takes a step back to look at all he's done but a strand of the yellow tape accidentally wraps around his ankles, sending him to trip over his own feet and nearly fall to the ground in front of us. He clutches his chest in horror, laughing out loud at his own gawkiness.

"Class act, Styles!" Elijah claps his hands together in a showy one-man applause.

"Those big feet of yours getting you in trouble again, H?" I mask my smile, crossing my arms in front of my chest as I watch the boy.

"What do you know about my big feet?" a twinkle flashes in Harry's eyes a split second before they darken. I have to recollect my thoughts and focus on my breathing before I get lost in his depths.

"Clunkers," I utter plainly. "That's what they are."

Harry tilts his head back in laughter before suggesting we all get ready for the show tonight. Then Pete makes a comment about how he would love to but also that Harry's kind of made the situation difficult for all of us. Harry clues into what he's just done. A light blush forms on his cheeks before he enthusiastically begins tearing down the tape he so thoughtfully put up.

I take a moment to send out a tweet about Harry's large feet as he rips down the plastic wall. As expected, the word *clunkers* begins to trend almost immediately. Not to mention, a fresh wave of ridiculous hate comments is sent my way, matched with a separate strew of penis jokes about Harry's excessively large feet thrown in with the chaos.

And even though many of the more positive jokes are pretty clever, I have never enjoyed signing out of Twitter as much as I do now.

Harry joins us in our dressing room once he gets the door open. As the lads disperse to separate corners of the room, I follow Harry over to one of the vanity mirrors at the back. He picks up a pair of black Ray Bans off of the table and puts them on without further questioning. He looks at himself in the mirror, then turns to me and gives his head a cheeky tilt.

To put it bluntly, he looks hot.

"Fuck," Harry chuckles when I don't say anything, "I look like such a weirdo in these."

"No," I continue to stare at him, biting my lip, "you don't."

I like him.
I think I was so slow to have the hots for Harry because I met him in the winter. That's not to say he isn't perfect and adorable in too-big jumpers and thick woollen socks. But to see him now in the American heat of June with his hair pushed back and his muscles on display is an entirely different story.

With that said, it's so difficult to drop my guard with Harry. There are so many things that he does that makes it so clear that he's still the boy I became best friends with all those months ago. I see it in him every day. It's hard for me to be fully, sexually comfortable around him since I haven't always seen him as a possible love interest. It's just weird because we've always been such good friends and now things have changed more than I ever could've imagined and I really don't know what to do.

And I could never forget about Louis.

It's always been Louis.

Lou and I had a chat about what happened between us at the party in Miami. Which surprised even me, considering Louis isn't usually one to voluntarily talk about that kind of situation. Basically, we concluded that — although, we do like each other and definitely have an interest in hooking up again one day — we were both quite drunk and high and sharing a spontaneous make out session in the laundry room wasn't exactly the best idea for us. It was loads of fun and neither of us would take it back, we agreed, but we still both want to get to know each other. As friends. Without strings. And shit.

I like Louis a lot and I like where things are headed. I enjoy not having to deal with the stresses of a physical relationship on hand, as imbalanced as that sounds. For once, I'm content with focusing more on my career and taking things day by day, rather than being distracted by boys in bands.

It's like I'm an entirely different person.

And it's all worked out so far, thanks to the similar chat Harry and I had before we left Cheshire. What, with everything that happened. Everything that fucking happened. All in that tiny bed of his.

"What do we tell the lads?" I asked him the day after Louis showed up so vicariously. "Like, what would Louis think at this point? And the others?" I remember watching his pensive expression as he watched mine. "I know none of us are serious... but like..."

"I don't think they'd mind..." Harry said to me and we shared a look. "Well, maybe we don't have to tell them right away," his charming dimples had burned into my memory at that point, "but I don't think we should hide anything. Nothing's set in stone, you know?"

I agreed then and I still agree, though not much has progressed between us since our holiday.

Even considering the talk we had, Harry and I are still dubious if it's safe to flirt openly — or even if either of us wants it as much as the other does, I'm sure — but that's just how it goes. The thing is, none of us are serious and it's all just harmless fun and this kind of shit would be so much easier if feelings didn't have to get involved.

"Hey," Harry playfully nudges my arm, clearly noticing I'm thinking too much. "Let's trash this place."

Before I can question him, he runs over to the refreshment table and gingerly knocks down two water bottles before running back to me.

I laugh, shaking my head at the amiable boy, "You're too nice."
And that's the thing.

Harry is bloody nice.

So much so that it's hard to find a single flaw in him and it's gotten to the point where it's almost irritating how much he frustrates the fuck out of me.

Maybe I'm too much of an asshole to warm up to Harry's charms entirely.

Maybe it was right of me to fancy someone like Louis all along.

Or – and I think this is the one – maybe I'm just a fucking dickhead.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

[Ramones - She Talks To Rainbows]

[Wattpad Link]

See the end of the chapter for more notes
"Tell me a story."

Niall has got his acoustic guitar casually rested in his lap. He's mindlessly strumming a pleasant tune as he glances warmly between me and Harry.

"A story?" Harry repeats.

"Why not?" Niall shrugs, continuing to strum a few chords at a laboured pace.

I chuckle, looking between the two lads, "I've got one."

"Go on, then!" Niall spiritedly nods over at me.

"I'm not gonna name names..." I smirk, licking my lips, "but I went on Twitter yesterday to find that a verified pornstar sent me a picture of his d**k," I bite down on my bottom lip. "Like, I appreciate the offer but that shit's already all over the internet, mate..." I break out beaming as the lads burst out howling. "That's it... That's my story."

"Well done!" Niall praises amid his loud shout of laughter.

"Thanks, pal."

"His willy must have gone through the pencil sharpener a few times..." Harry ponders out loud.

"Oh, god," I feel my face flush at Harry's mere mention of such a topic.

"Now you, Styles!" Niall continues to strum the simple riff on his acoustic.

"Ah," Harry sighs out loud. "I don't have a story."

"Yes ye do!" Niall insists. "Go on!"

Harry huffs, staring straight ahead at his bandmate, "One time I laughed so hard my left nut started to hurt."

I nearly choke, as does Niall, "What were you laughing at?!"

"I don't even remember, you know?" Harry chuckles, dimples digging deep into his cheeks. "As soon as it started to feel a little tingly I just started laughing."

I nearly tear up at how ridiculous of a thought it is. The fact that it's Harry just makes it even more hilarious. I've come to know him so well that I have the ability to laugh at him, with him and as him, all at the same time. It's the kind of thing that doesn't make sense until it happens. And man, is it ever spectacular.

"My turn!" Niall sings. He rests his arms on top of his acoustic now, without playing it, as he clears his throat. "So, I was in the toilet yesterday..."

"Here we go..." Harry groans endearingly.

"So I walked in and I saw one of th' crew guys' feet in a stall. And there was an absolute wretched smell. Like, really fuckin' bad. So I'm only assumin' he was takin' a major dump," Niall pauses to let out a laugh of his own before continuing. "So I got real quiet for a bit and let everything settle down... All I could hear was this faint, like, gruntin' sound or somethin' and the ever so slight *plop* of his fuckin' turd droppin' into the toilet," Niall snickers, visibly fond of the story he's telling. "Other than this guy's shit, you could hear a pin drop. I'm not fuckin' with ye!"
"Is this going anywhere?" I ask, unsure whether I should laugh or cringe.

"It's Niall," Harry reassures me, smirking. "It's always going somewhere."

"Yeah, buddy!" Niall howls, clapping the curly-haired boy on his thigh. "So, listen! I let out the loudest fuckin' war cry ye've ever heard in yer life and slammed meself against the lad's stall door! The bang was so fuckin' loud, I'm tellin' ye! Bet that guy has never been so scared in his life! He started yellin' and cursin' and I could hear 'im tryin' te stand up 'cause his belt buckle was makin' a hell of a lotta noise..." Niall huffs out loud, shaking his head at the wild memory. "I was long gone before he made it outta that stall, though! He prob'ly still doesn't know it was me!"

Harry and I crack up, practically screaming. If we weren't both sat in sturdy armchairs, we'd both undeniably be on the floor by now.

"And the lads think you would die first in a horror film!" I laugh out loud, feeling my eyes start to get teary from all the incessant laughter.

"They think what?" Niall chuckles.

"Don't worry about it," I choke out another laugh.

As much as Harry and I are both trying to contain our hysterics, we're just ending up bursting out at every little reminder of Niall's story. It's so something Niall would do, too. That's what makes it so hilarious.

Niall is such a d*ck.

I love him.

Honestly, Niall could be the biggest asshole in the world to me and I would just laugh.

"Shit," the Irish boy pats around his chest and trousers pockets. "Where's my pick?"

"Dunno," Harry swallows down another chuckle, still not over the priceless story. "Where's the last place you had it?"

"My mouth..." Niall frowns in thought, then his eyes widen in horror. "Oh my god, did I eat it?"

"That's the first thing you think of?!" I blurt out, hardly able to breathe at this point.

"Honestly," Niall shrugs, "sometimes I swallow things without even noticing."

The room drops to a still silence.

Harry and I both turn to the lad, simultaneously staring at him in laboured humour.

"You do realize what you just said..." Harry voices.

Niall's eyes become clear and vivid as he gradually clues into what just happened.

"Ha! My apologies, Styles!" Niall enthusiastically gives the younger boy an extended, cheeky wink. "Didn't mean to blow our cover!"

"Great, now I'm the one losing shit..." I hastily rummage through the small clutch I brought along with me. "Do either of you have like, lip balm or chapstick that I could use?"
"Don't think I do, darlin'," Niall pouts.

"But my lips hurt real bad." I huff, immitating a line from one of my absolute favourite movies.

"Alright, Napoleon," Harry picks up on my impression almost immediately. "I've got some."

"Thank you," I sigh, accepting the small tin of balm that Harry pulls out of his pocket.

"It's from France," he tells me.

"You're so weird, H," I smile, rubbing the balm over my lips with a single finger. I press my lips together to find that the taste is more than familiar. I look up at Harry with a cheerfully surprised grin. "So that's why you always taste so minty."

"Oh my god," Harry alertedly looks between me and Niall.

I choke the moment I clue in.

Literally, fucking choke.

"Shit," I bite down hard on my lower lip, probably causing my skin to break and bleed out a little but that's the least of my concerns.

"Okay..." Niall sits back in his seat, "what the fuck was that?"

"Shit," Harry falters in his words, "we, uh-"

"No-!" my mouth gapes open, "I mean, it's not like-"

"Guys..." Niall presses.

"It's, um-" I turn to Harry, which was a big mistake because my heart rate increases almost immediately.

"We..." Harry trails off, not knowing just how to put it. "Scarlet and I..."

He locks eyes with me.

The greens and the blues and the hazels send me into an entirely deeper mindset than I expected. I've never had such dynamic eye contact with Harry since we so heatedly made out on his old bed in Holmes Chapel. It's something I didn't know I could be so addicted to. Until now.

"Fuck!" Niall barks out a laugh, noticing the sudden heavier exchange of glances between me and Harry. "It's not like I give a shit! But, you two! Why didn't ye say anythin'?"

"I dunno," Harry voices curiously, not straying his gaze away from me. "Wasn't like we were asked."

"That's kinda true," I keep my smile hidden among my constant blush.

"But ye were," Niall scrunches his face in confusion. "I asked ye's loads of times."

"We hadn't kissed then," Harry states simply.

"Wait... so have ye guys-?"

"Niall!" I scold.
"Hey, don't mind me askin'!" Niall holds up his hands in innocence, emitting a rough chuckle. "It's, uh- it's good t' know."

We all share a laugh; Harry and I blushing our cheeks off and Niall beaming at us like a proud brother.

It's curious how it happened like that. I'd never imagined actually being found out by any of the lads. Any intimacy between me and Harry had always seemed so distant. So surreal. Yet, the moment I admitted it – Niall here with us and all – it suddenly became so easy.

Easy but so, so, so, so, fucking concrete.

Before any of this happened, I could've played off the moments I've shared with Harry as just a dream. Something imaginary and fantastical and locked safely between the two of us. But now that it's all out in the open – now that another person knows – it's hitting me hard that this is my life and these dreams are nothing less than real.

"Can I just say...?" Harry rests back in his seat. "It's quite funny that you're the only one here, Nial."

"Why's that, pal?"

Harry gives a nod to the lad, "You're the first one to know aside from your girlfriend."

"Niall has a girlfriend?" I furrow my brows.

"Naomi," Harry clarifies.

"Whoa!" Niall barks out comically. "Who said anythin' about a girlfriend?"

"Who said anything about Naomi knowing?" I cut in.

"You two tell each other everything. Of course she's gonna know," Harry says as if it's obvious. Maybe it is. I watch as he licks his lips. "That, and she told me."

"Naomi told you and she didn't tell me?!" Niall suddenly rises out of his seat, nearly knocking his guitar from his own grasp.

"What the hell?!" my jaw hangs loose as I glassily stare between the two boys. "She didn't tell me she told you!"

"I didn't tell you she told me either," Harry smirks at me steadily.

"Who cares if she didn't tell Scar she told you!" Niall rages. "She didn't tell me Scar told her or that she told you!"

"Shut up," Harry blinks.

"I thought we were goin' with the thing..." Niall sets his acoustic on one of the hotel beds. "Ah, nevermind."

"Okay, wait..." I clear my mind, trying to sort through this mess of a conversation. "I know we're supposed to be freaking out about me and Harry- well..." I can't even say it with him fucking staring at me like that. "But um, can we talk about what else is going on here?"

"What else is goin' on here?"
"What's the else?"

"Your lovely lady friend," I raise an eyebrow at Niall, who simply frowns in response.

Harry leans forward, pressing his knee into mine. My breath almost hitches at how close he is and how perfectly his hair curls down his neck and how I hadn't realised that he has the tiniest freckles flecked across the bridge of his nose until this very moment.

"Most guys are really bad with subtlety, Scar," he murmurs to me, still smirking all the while. "You need to be almost completely blunt with them."

I stare at Harry's mouth while he's talking to me.

And – although, I hate to admit it – I almost forget to respond, I'm in such a trance from those swollen, cherry-stained lips.

I'm the worst person.

"Niall," I bashfully shove Harry in the arm, needing to get him out of my aura and coincidentally making him fall back in laughter, "what's the deal with Naomi?"

"Yeah, what's the deal with Naomi?" Harry repeats in an adorably accusatory tone.

"Really?" Niall's eyebrows raise. "Ye really wanna know?"

Harry and I nod, making Niall smile.

"I like 'er," his voice softens as he says it. "She stole me favourite hat last month. I let 'er keep it and I t'ink she still sleeps with it but... ye know," he shrugs it off.

"Niall, oh my god." "You like her?" Harry questions precisely.

"I do, but like," Niall pauses apprehensively, "we're friends and I do sleep wit' other people on th' road and so does she back home and- Christ, I dunno why I'm tellin' ye's this! I've only kissed her once!"

"You're saying it because you like her," Harry soberly confirms.

"I do," Niall agrees, "just don't tell anyone I said anything. Naomi, I mean. I kinda want t' do this one on me own."

"That serious?" a warm feeling spreads through my belly, causing my grin to radiate bliss.

"Well..." Niall shrugs again, "ye know."

I know exactly what he's getting at.

It's not always grasping what you want that matters; it's the journey you take to end up there and the memories you create while striving for your goal that makes it all worthwhile.

The little things, essentially, are the most important things of all.

"Niall?" I voice.
"Yeh?" his eyes perk up.

"I know you're both friends but..." I'm unable to hold myself back from asking the question I've long waited to ask, "would you ever wanna take things further with Naomi?"

Niall laughs.

Fucking laughs.

Then he says, "Yeah."

Followed by, "But we're kinda tourin' so there's not much I can do about it."

And that's when Harry loses it.

"Christ, do you not have any balls down there?" Harry breaks out suddenly. "Do you just have a pair of shrivelled up prunes instead?! The girl has kissed you already! Just fly her over! What are you waiting for?"

"Harry-" Niall astoundedly tilts his head at the boy.

"Don't Harry me," he visibly refuses to look at the lad. "I don't wanna hear it."

Niall gapes at Harry in a brief silence, until he slowly speaks up again, "...Ye think I should?"

"Do it," Harry raises his head to look Niall dead in the eye. "Do it before you can't. You say you like her now but you have no idea what she might mean to you until it's too late. She's a good catch, Niall. You don't wanna make the same mistake- You don't wanna make a mistake, is all I'm saying." Harry's eyes bore into Niall's before he reckons that the rips in his jeans are more worthy of his preoccupied attention.

"Do it," I concur, staring at the soft head of curls so beautifully displayed in front of me. Although, Harry doesn't once look up from his lap.

Niall clears his throat, hesitantly gazing between the both of us, "Nashville?"

And that's when Harry finally looks up at his bandmate and nods decidedly.

"Nashville."

Chapter End Notes

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It's raining.

The wheels of the black suburban are slick over the dark pavement. The hazy streetlights illuminate the tiny beads of rain, harshly scattering over the deeply tinted windows and rolling down, down, down. The vehicle rolls slowly past a cluster of no less than forty teenagers, all huddled around the alley leading to the hotel's rear entrance.

"Get down," Louis murmurs, pressing his side to me and slinking lower in his seat.

The windows are dark and we can barely see ourselves, although Louis and I still keep our backs slumped and our heads down. The mob of teenagers crowds around the vehicle as the two of us throw on the hoods of our jumpers. A few girls cup their hands to the windows to try and see inside but Louis and I lay low. Even if our vehicle wasn't getting mobbed, we would still undeniably have to be hidden as we are. We can never afford to underestimate the power of flash photography. Especially at a time like this.

The driver pulls around another corner, ridding us of the chaotic murmurs of the crowd. We're alone. Alberto, Louis' personal security guard, jumps out of the passenger seat and runs around the car to open the door to my side. I hop out of the vehicle first with Louis close behind me. The raindrops patter on the hood of my jumper the moment I place my feet on the ground.

I begin speed-walking towards the hotel's rear entrance but Louis calls out for me to wait.
"If you get wet, you'll get sick," Louis approaches me, extending a large black umbrella in front of the two of us.

Louis lifts the umbrella over my head, barely covering his own self as we walk together through the lamplit alley. It's pouring symphonies but somehow it seems as if the raindrops miss us.

Alberto opens the door for us and gets us into the hotel lifts unseen. Alberto is such a genuine man. The first word that comes to mind when thinking of him is strong. He's strong, not just in physicality, but in willpower. He was once the personal bodyguard for the king of pop, Michael Jackson. Now, for the past few years, he's dedicated his life to protecting none other than One Direction's loveable loudmouth, Louis Tomlinson.

Louis and I opted to share a ride back to his hotel from the arena, just to see what it was like to share the rousing experience together. We're close and protective of each other, and we're the type of people who are always keen on trying something at least once in our lives, so we decided to give it a shot. As it turns out, it wasn't so bad. Except for the inevitability of being mobbed, of course.

Alberto, Louis and I ride up the private staff lifts in silence. I look at Louis and he's already looking back at me. I give him a soft smile but it's all I can muster.

It sucks, having to hide away your personal life when you're in such a public position like mine. Louis and I, for one, have only ever genuinely communicated when there's no one else around. It makes our closeness feel so empty sometimes. Like something's missing. I just wish we could run through the rain, laughing and hugging and enjoying being free with each other. Though, at the same time, I don't know if I would truly want that.

It's like once you've been hurt by someone, you're so scared to get attached to anyone anymore. Like, you have this fear that every person you start to feel close to is going to break you in ways you never want to be broken again.

It's a fucking drag.

We gradually make it to Louis' suite. Alberto bids us goodnight at the door and Louis keys us inside.

I make a beeline straight for the bathroom the moment I step through the door. I unzip my hoodie — which is now soaked, regardless of how skilfully Louis sheltered me with his umbrella — and let it fall to the tiled floor with a sickening plop.

"I think it's time to smoke a joint now," Louis' voice chuckles from somewhere deep in the suite.

I laugh to myself, stripping off my soaked jeans before discarding them on the bathroom floor along with my drenched jumper, "Sounds good, Lou."

All of us could take a lesson from the weather.

It pays no attention to criticism.

"You've got to be kidding me..." I snort out laughing as I round the corner into the suite bedroom.

There Louis stands in nothing but a custom red and black jersey and a patterned pair of boxer briefs.

"No pants party!" he excitedly points between me and himself.

"A bong, really?" I near Louis, singling out a large glass bong on the table he's so casually stood by.
"Why not?" he chuckles in his light, gravelly tone.

"A bong's gonna fuck me up, you know," I raise my eyebrows at the lad.

"It's just weed," Louis shrugs, licking his lips. "It's not like you're gonna have a hangover tomorrow or anything."

"This is true," I voice, considering the option. It's already late but the night is still alive. "Are you alone?"

Louis shakes his head, "Harry's out drinking with Nick Grimshaw, the twat. His curly head'll be passing out here if he's still got half a brain by the time he gets back."

"Do you not like Grimmy?"

"He's just a bit of a wanker," Louis rolls his eyes. "Just a bit."

I scoff out a bemused laugh. I already knew Harry would be rooming with Louis tonight. The younger boy already told me he'd be coming back here after he gets his face plastered all over the tabloids for the evening. I only asked Louis if he was alone to see what kind of a response I would get.

Yeah, we're still working on this whole friends thing but with both of us feeling like we do, I couldn't say when we might have another sporadic laundry room moment. And that shit needs to be controlled. Especially with someone like Harry on his way.

Even still, I absolutely love that Louis and Harry still tend to room with each other. Each of the lads usually stay in their suites separately but since Harry and Louis were so impossibly close during their first few years together, they often like to relive tradition and spend close, quality time together. Even if they're both wiped for the night.

Nobody is ever too old for sleepovers with their best friend.

It's from Harry and Louis that I learned that differences are often in degrees – not always night and day. The two lads are already quite similar as people. They're the best of friends and they so naturally pick up on each other's traits. However, there is a lot that is unique about Louis and Harry as individuals as well. It's always so interesting to find those similarities and differences between the two. I notice them more every day.

My mind, at this point, is just a giant Venn diagram of louisandharry.

"Elvis or The Beatles?" Louis ponders out loud. "I can't choose, I love both."

He walks through the bedroom with the bong; his perfectly round arse in my full view as he saunters ahead of me into the living room of the suite. It's not like I specifically chose to stare at his arse – it just sort of happened. It's not the easiest thing in the world to ignore. Let's be honest.

"How about Elvis?" I suggest. "We've mossed to The Beatles loads of times."

"Yeah, yeah," Louis sings. He switches on the sound system in the corner of the room. Moments later, a vintage, fast-paced rock song is seeping through the speakers and a soft smile is pleasantly spreading across my face.

I help break up the sticky bud on the living room table as Louis prepares the bong, filling it with fresh water and rinsing out the bowl piece.
We make small talk.

He carelessly packs himself a bowl.

He smiles darkly.

He gives me a wink.

I watch Louis in a daze as he places his lips to the top of the mouthpiece. He sparks the bong, sucking up a wispy cloud of smoke, sending the water to bubble fiercely in the base.

I'm usually not the type to be attracted to guys wearing sports jerseys or sports attire of any kind but _fuck_, Louis.

His muscles are on full display and he has these little goosebumps tickling all over his skin and don't even get me started on his fucking tattoos. He lifts his head and blows out a long stream of smoke into the suite, coughing only slightly.

Then he hands the bong over to me.

"Wow..." I breathe.

"I know," Louis huffs out a laugh. His throat has become so wrecked from all of the strong hits he took. His voice is a hot, raspy fucking mess. And I'm not complaining one bit.

I can't remember if we packed four or five bowls in total. Whatever it was, it was a fucking lot. We're so entirely baked, we've just been sat on the couch for the past ten or fifteen minutes, staring at the ceiling and listening to Elvis.

The most active Louis has become so far is when he was sharing a string of curses aimed at the users who have been harassing his younger sisters online. That's the thing about Louis — he's so little and thoughtful and sweet and hilarious but if you insult his friends or family he will snap your neck in a matter of seconds.

"Alright?" I turn my head to the scruffy lad beside me. He screws his face up, crossing his eyes and sticking out his tongue, making me laugh out loud at his ridiculous expression.

"Yeah, I'm bored," Louis chuckles deeply, sitting up and readjusting his jersey over his bare shoulders. "Do you wanna throw things at each other like knives or something?"

I press myself against Louis' thigh, gaping playfully at the lad, "Do you have to ask twice?"

This time it's Louis who laughs out loud, "This is exactly why I like you, babe."

My heart catches in my throat and I can feel my eyes widen along with my stunned fucking grin.

"I mean-" Louis hastily retracts what just came out of his mouth. "I know we're doing the whole friends thing and that's great, I- it's, like, it's fun and I like it and I like that we're hanging out now and I- I like you," Louis leaves his lips parted slightly as he looks at me. "Is that okay?"

A warm, swelling feeling pours through my chest, sending me to literally jump on top of Louis;
attacking him in a huge hug as he amusingly links his arms around my waist. I press my lips to his stubble, kissing his rough cheek before I pull away, "Let's watch a movie."

We decide to order *Airplane!* from the hotel cable while we smoke another bowl. I almost declined it, I'm so fucking ripped, but Louis did it and he looked so hot while doing it and I couldn't resist his face when he asked me to do it as well so I caved and yeah. I did it. And I'm glad I did, because *Airplane!* is a laugh riot, even when sober, so naturally it's sending me into fucking hysterics, in light of the state I'm in.

It's only until we're halfway through the film that we realise we don't know the name of any of the characters.

I laugh along with the plot but I know I'm way too gone to finish the film. I know I'll end up falling asleep before it's over. Like, if I were to blatantly stare at the screen for the next ten minutes, I'd probably be passed out within four.

So I look at Louis.

And he looks back at me.

There are oceans in his eyes.

"*Don't call me Shirley,*" he whispers adorably, poking me in the cheek and making me smile.

It's times like these when I wish I hadn't shut Louis out like I did. I'm incredibly emotionally and sexually frustrated. Louis has been nothing but sexy and sweet tonight and I'm fucking horny and I really can't do a thing about it. Well, I could. But I've set myself up in such a way that if I fuck Louis now, I'd probably find myself waking up tomorrow as his actual girlfriend. Like, I couldn't not date him if that happened tonight. After the way things have been going lately, especially.

It looks like Louis is about to say something but instead his face clenches into a tight ball and he sneezes. Fucking sneezes. Like, a tiny, little *achoo* and I almost melt right here.

"Well!" he stares at me, entirely taken aback. "My ab workout is done for the day!"

His eyebrows are raised and his eyes are bloodshot and glossy and he's never looked so beautiful.

"You're not getting sick, are you, Lou?" I elbow him in the side and he laughs, shaking his head. "You should've covered yourself from the rain."

"If I covered myself, I couldn't have covered you, then, could I?" he nudges me back, softer this time.

I'm so high I feel like my left arm is my right and my right arm is my left.

"You're great," I tell him honestly.

"And tired," Louis yawns and I agree.

"Let's fall asleep for five minutes," I smile at him sleepily, "then *wake each other up!*"

I curl my feet up on the couch and lower my head to rest in Louis' lap. He accepts my gesture graciously; petting my hair away from my face and stretching out so we're both more comfortable.

Our bliss lasts all of thirty seconds before the door of Louis' suite is kicked open.
Literally, kicked.

"Hellooooo, Ohiooooooo!" a very drunk Harry Styles appears in the doorway, sharing a bittersweet goodnight with a very amused Marco Gastel by his side. "I love Christopher Columbus!"

He walks towards us with open arms, letting the door shut carelessly behind him. He says something about me and Louis both being in our underwear but it's barely a mention. I sit up from my position in Louis' lap to get a good glimpse at the lad.

Harry is wasted.

Like, so entirely wasted that I'm surprised he's walking on his own. He's wearing a fitting plaid flannel and a Green Bay Packers beanie and he still looks undeniably good amid his drunken stupor. If I was checking him out. Which I'm not. And didn't.

Fuck.

He bends down and gives me a kiss on the cheek once he nears me, right before sharing a too-long-to-be-natural hug with Louis who reciprocates it just as instinctively.

Louis and I poke fun at Harry's blitzed state before the three of us decide to watch the rest of Airplane! as it's still playing on the flat screen. It's not long before Harry's face inevitably pales and he's dragging himself to the toilet as quickly as his long, awkward legs can move him.

We expected it but it's still a thing we're conscious about.

Louis turns to me after minutes on end of us being zoned into the retro movie, "He's been in there for ages. Should we go check on him?"

"I don't think he's in there anymore," I peer through the suite towards the bathroom at the end of the hall. "Looks like the light's off."

"He's probably knocked out with a boner and his knickers 'round his ankles," Louis laughs, sending himself into a fit of giggly hysterics.

"In that case, I'm definitely going to check!" I tease Louis, cheekily squeezing his thigh and receiving a smouldering, yet laughable, wink as I get up.

I reach the end of the hall and switch on the bathroom light. And to my fucking shock, there he is. Harry is lying on the tiled floor, right next to my pile of damp clothes, struggling to help me open his door.

"Oh my god," I rush to his side, kneeling on the hard tile below us. "Harry. Are you okay?"

Harry nods. He sits up and wraps his legs around the toilet, hugging it with his arms. He constantly spits in it a number of times, assuming he hasn't thrown up just yet.

"Did I really just spit in there?" Harry questions incredibly slowly, pointing at the water in the toilet.

"You did, love," I rub up and down his back soothingly.

"You love me?" Harry looks up at me with stunningly wide eyes.

The question is written blatantly across his face.

And I can only respond with, "Of course, H."
It doesn't take a further moment until Harry is retching over the toilet, heaving and spewing the memories of tonight's drinks into the white, porcelain bowl. I tuck his hair under his green beanie, making sure nothing gets in his way while his body is relieving itself. I'm still entirely fucking ripped but Harry is so important right now that assisting him to my full extent doesn't phase me one bit.

I stay by Harry's side until he's puked most of it out.

It's such a personal situation. I don't want to try and comfort him only to find out that I'm just comforting myself. But it's Harry. And no matter how low he's feeling, I know I'll always be there for him through all that shit and more.

"Feeling a little better, sweetheart?" I run him a glass of water from the sink once he's finished.

Harry nods, "Tummy's better."

I sigh at his words.

I nearly fucking melt, is what happens.

This boy is so fucking precious, I don't even know how to handle him anymore.

I let Harry gulp down the entire glass of water before he hands it back to me, thanking me deeply. I know Louis is still out in the living room but I also trust that Harry is the priority for both of us right now.

"Did you have a good night?" I ask him generally, before adding a quick; "Earlier?"

"Yeah," Harry leans his elbows atop the closed toilet seat, "Grimmy's a madman."

"Do you even remember getting here?" I smirk, trying to make light of the situation despite my current foggy state.

Harry chuckles tiredly, "I r'member I was sat on th' couch across from Louis. Then I looked at 'im and alluva sudden there were a million Louis' goin' around... down th' line... That's when I realised I had t' go t' the toilet."

"You're something," I blush at him endearingly. "Let's get you up."

Harry and I lock arms and I pull him up off the floor. We laugh off the matter. Though, Harry's still drunk as fuck and I'm still high as shit. But we manage.

"Thank you again," Harry slurs, running the tap and preparing some toothpaste to wash his mouth out. "There's not enough thanks t' give, Scarlet," he draws my name out as he says it.

"Don't worry about it," I smile, shaking my head to myself at his natural charm. "I'm, uh, gonna go see how Louis' doing. You just chill out for a bit and wash yourself up, yeah?"

"Yeah, wait," Harry stops me from leaving the bathroom. "A' you staying?"

"I dunno," I shrug, "I was planning on going back to my hotel when the movie's done."

"Scar, it's late," Harry says calmly. "Stay."

"For someone with as much alcohol in their system as you, that was really fucking rational."

"I know," Harry nods self-assuredly, "it's 'cause I said it."
I chuckle at the lad, pulling him into a warm hug. My hands grip onto the soft flannel stretched over his muscular back as he buries his face into my shoulder.

"Uhhhhn, sleep with me," he groans obscenely into my shoulder.

I really should pull away but my fists only grip onto him tighter.

My eyes wander all over the walls of the bathroom until they land on the image of Harry and I hugging in the mirror. I've only seen Harry and myself in pictures; never in a reflection. To see the two of us in such a comforting embrace in the moment, as it's happening, is something so new and beautiful. I really didn't expect it at all.

I pull away from the boy to smile at him with care.

"You should sleep with Louis," I suggest lightly. "Like old times."

"I know," Harry presses, adorably furrowing his brow in frustration, "I wanna sleep with both of you."

I nearly lose my footing and I'm fucking stood still.

"Both-?" my throat suddenly dries, making me cough out. And it's not just because I'm still in my underwear. "Both of us? I don't think we'd fit... I mean, all three of us... in one bed..." I'm rambling now and I know it. "Harry, you're- that's not-"

"It'll be like a Scarlet sandwich," he nods, already decided in his own head that this is a real thing that is going to happen.

"Tonight? I-" I lick my lips, huffing to myself. "I dunno, H. You'll be more comfortable on your own."

"Please," Harry nearly whines, voice lowering as he fluidly places his hands on my hips, "it'll make me feel better."

My heart doubles up in speed and I know it's not just from how much of the bong I smoked earlier. And somehow, the next thing I know, I'm stood in the living room in front of Louis, blinking and gaping like an absolute idiot because of this boy.

"Harry wants us to sleep with him," I tell Louis, all in a jumble, "but... uh-"

"What...?" Louis smirks intriguingly, awaiting my answer. "Come out with it."

"He wants- a..." I bite my lip, laughing. "He called it a fucking Scarlet sandwich."

Louis' body perks up at the offer, whether he notices it or not.

"A Scarlet sandwich Harry wants," Louis purses his lips together in a suggestive grin, "a Scarlet sandwich Harry's gonna get."

Chapter End Notes
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Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

[Brian Hyland - Gypsy Woman]

[Wattpad Link]

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It doesn't hit me until Harry strips himself down.

In a matter of minutes, I'll be in bed with two boys. And to make my heart pound even fucking faster
than it already is, let's ponder over the quick reminder that those two boys are none other than Louis Tomlinson and Harry Styles.

The bed by the window lies untouched as Harry crawls under the covers of the king-sized bed closest to the door. He rolls himself into an uncomfortable-looking position but he's out within moments. I wait until Louis enters the room before I join Harry under the covers, not wanting to make it seem like I'm overly eager for whatever I'm getting myself into tonight.

Harry curls up to my side the moment I reach the centre of the bed. I rest on my back, feeling Harry's heat to my right. His light snore is pleasant among the sculptured silence of the room.

Louis stretches showily by the side of the bed. The muscles of his arms bulge as he stretches them up, up, up. A flash of skin is visible as his shirt lifts over the lower bit of his stomach. His groin is covered only by his tight, patterned briefs and normally I would say it's taking everything in me not to stare but this time I could honestly give less of a shit.

"Alright," he sings pleasantly, smiling down at me. "Time to crawl in with you and Joe."

"Did you just call Harry Joe?" I chuckle hazily as Louis joins us under the covers.

"No."

"I swear you called him Joe."

"I didn't."

"Heard ya too," Harry voices beside me, groaning out an excessive yawn before nuzzling his head into my shoulder.

"You're mad," Louis shakes his head, faking a comical, self-assured pout. "This is why I don't drink alcohol."

"You always drink alc'hol," Harry murmurs sleepily into my skin, making my stomach bubble with intrigue.

"I'm on drugs," Louis specifies, lying on his side to face me.

"Drugs, drugs, drugs," Harry corrects himself lazily. "'S'why I don't hang out with guys like you."

"Guys like you always wanna hang out with guys like me," Louis huffs out a laugh, casually resting a hand over my stomach.

"I know, Lou, 'm kidding," Harry pleasantly smiles and hums. "You're the greatest."

It isn't long before Harry is passed out again and snoring lightly against my side. I haven't ever heard him snore before tonight. I reckon he must be that drunk.

"Did you know that I'm a fucking legend in bed?" Louis cheekily hisses to me once he's settled to my left.

"Are you?" I find myself pressing my lips together out of intrigue.

"Mmm," Louis hums. "Once, I slept all the way to noon. It was fucking mind-blowing."

"You jack-off," I smirk, elbowing him in his stomach, careful not to disturb the sleeping Harry wrapped around my right side.
"Let's move a little closer, yeah?" Louis suggests, seemingly out of nowhere.

"We're already pressed against each other..." I breathe, my pulse noticeably rising.

"*Not in the places we should be,*" he whispers, deeper this time, teasing my skin with his hot breath.

A sudden flash of electricity warms my chest, stomach and groin all at once. I roll over, carefully letting Harry's arm fall over my side. I press the back of my body flush against Harry's abdomen so we're spooning. Though he's so gone, he takes no notice whatsoever. I pull my feather pillow under my head to support my neck as I finally come to face the stunning lad in front of me.

Even in the darkness of the hotel bedroom, I still sense the icy blue of Louis' eyes.

The marijuana still in my system causes my cheeks to rise to my eyes in a mischievous smile as I take in all of Louis' unique features, "Wanna play a game?"

His calloused fingers trace soft patterns across my exposed hip.

"What kind of game?" he questions deeply, still equally as high.

"It's called *Go and Stay,*" I explain as my eyes never leave his. "I made it up years ago. At the party where I met Elijah."

"Go on," Louis draws his lower lip under his straight teeth, waiting for me to make a move.

"Licking your lips has to go," my heart races as I watch him, "but lip-biting can stay."

Louis almost licks his lips out of habit as I say so, but he catches himself and ends up dragging his teeth over his pink lips instead. His eyes remain on my mouth the entire time, making my mind fire of countless thoughts about kissing or not kissing Louis.

"My turn?" Louis questions and I nod into my pillow. "Hmm... *Your bra has to go,*" he whispers arousingly, lips curling up at the sides, "*but your pretty shirt can stay."

I almost buck my hips back into Harry's crotch until I remember that he's still there. It's only now do I recognise that I was so high, I forgot to take off my bra before getting into bed.

"*One sec,*" I whisper to Louis, caressing over his stubbled chin with the pad of my thumb.

I turn onto my back, only resulting in Harry rolling deeper into my torso and gripping me tighter in his arms. I smile endearingly, rolling onto my side and shifting my body into him so we're lying face to face.

I take a moment to gather my breath.

I trace my eyes over Harry's visage. The beautiful curve of his forehead draws a perfect line down his long nose. His plump, cherry lips contrast with his defined, pale jawline. His cheeks are flushed lightly amid his drunken slumber and it takes me a moment to remember why I'm actually facing him and why my back is to Louis.

I roll Harry onto his back without a further thought.

Louis muffles a raspy giggle behind me as the younger lad begins snoring again almost immediately.

I sit up in my position, reaching behind myself and unhooking my bra with my shirt still on. I pull the straps of my bra through each sleeve of my tank top and weave my arms through them, one by one.
Keeping my clothing in tact, I reach under the front of my shirt and pull my bra completely out of the garment, rendering myself braless under my shirt.

With a single wink at Louis, I throw the lingerie in my hand onto the floor right next to him.

"How'd you do that?" Louis asks, visibly in awe.

"Magic," I hum, lying back on my side to face the lad. My body naturally cuddles up close to Louis', although I had less than a thought in controlling my advances.

Louis lets out a deep, tense breath, "Isn't it your turn, then?"

"By the sounds of it," my eyes flick between his eyes and his lips. "Let's see what you've got," he rouses, biting his lip as he recognises my gaze.

I firmly have to hold myself back before I fucking kiss the guy. He's just making it so hard when he's lying here so expectantly, looking so hot and smelling so good and fuck, he's still wearing the jersey that I hate to love and I shouldn't want to rip it off as much as I do but my mouth is fucking watering at the thought. And that's saying a lot, considering the amount of weed I just smoked and how pasty my mouth has become since then.

And suddenly, it hits me.

"Your shirt has to go..." I whisper tediously, gripping the front of the material covering Louis' chest, "but you can stay."

Louis presses his forehead against mine and smirks, removing his jersey within seconds and throwing it to the floor behind himself. His face nears mine once more as both of my hands instinctively go to his bare chest.

I roam my hands all over Louis' body. I wantonly feel my way down his warm chest and abs, then caress up his side and over his firm biceps, finding my way back to his breathtaking pectorals. My fingertips graze over his small nipples, perking them up almost instantly. It's almost by accident that I did so but, curiously enough, I don't stop myself.

I play with his nipples for the first time in a long time — rubbing the tips of my thumbs over his tiny nubs and pinching them and rolling them between my forefinger and thumb — until they are shockingly hard.

The breaths that leave Louis' lungs have become shaky and desperate.

The raw need inside of me is only steadily growing.

"You're still in your pants," Louis sighs into my touch.

"How could you guess?" I smirk sarcastically into the darkness.

"I can feel your thighs against mine," he whispers, shifting impossibly closer to me.

"Mmm," I tease him quietly, pressing my palms flat against his heated chest, "it's almost like I'm wearing nothing."

Even in the darkness, I can see Louis' skin flush and his pupils dilate.

"Well," he breathes; hot air grazing my lips. "That's quite a nice little nothing you're almost
wearing."

I skim a hand down his smooth side, lightly pinching his skin once more. "You totally stole that from James Bond."

"How do you know everything?" Louis huffs with a smile in his tone.

I chuckle, painting my lingering fingertips all over Louis' chest, "I'm not as incredible as you think I am."

"You are, though."

"Oh, Louis..." I sigh wistfully.

"Maybe we should-" Louis tauntingly licks his tongue over his lips, "maybe we don't have to cut out touching," he trails his hand along my exposed arm, beckoning me closer, "or kissing," his thumb rubs over my lower lip; fingertips cupping my jaw.

His eyes scan over mine. There are countless questions swimming in his depths but all I can do is stare. His lips mesmerise me. They're barely a breath away from mine and they're so perfectly traced by his stubble to the point where it's getting harder to breathe.

"Louis..." my palm rests flush against his tanned chest, "you're high and you're turned on and you're way too suggestive for your own good," I knit my brows together, looking deep into his eyes, "and you're completely right."

"I am?" Louis has to lean back to take in the genuine expression on my face.

"What, are you second-guessing yourself now?" I chuckle lightly.

"No, that's-" Louis starts out a bit loudly; shutting himself up to glance over at Harry who's still snoring so comfortably behind me. "That's so good, Scarlet."

I rest my hand in the soothing curve of his waist, "I don't wanna have any more silly rules to determine if we should or shouldn't do something. We're only human. If we feel like doing something, we should do it. If we don't, we don't," I tell him simply. "I do still really wanna get to know you and be your friend, Louis. But I don't wanna be left always wanting more. I can't stand that," I muster. "Not even for another second."

That's when he kisses me.

And that's when I kiss him back.

Louis' hands feather into my hair, gripping me firmly as his lips chase mine. I sigh into his mouth, pressing my full lips into his thin pair. I mouth hot, steamy kisses along his stubbled jaw and down his flushed neck before hastily reattaching my lips to his own. Our tongues meet and the high I was feeling moments ago is nothing compared to the high Louis is bringing me now.

Louis' hands roam my body, squeezing my waist and teasing my bare skin under my thin top. I keen my hips into his, sliding my legs between his muscular pair and feeling my hands all over his fully nude torso. Our lips slide together in a perfect rhythm, sparking nothing less than ecstasy between the two of us.

I bite down on Louis' lip, tugging at his skin before sweetly sucking him to take the edge off. Louis whimpers lustfully, sliding a hand under my shirt and up my stomach. He snogs me deeper as his
rough hand finds my tits. He gives a prolonged squeeze to my right, then my left, then both at the same time, making my lips part in a silent moan.

It's all so much. I've wanted Louis for way too long. Even our laundry room session wasn't near enough, just fucking snogging all night.

Louis rolls one of my nipples between his fingertips as he continues to kiss me. I whine into his mouth, not wanting to cause the slightest disturbance but also hardly being able to control my urges. Louis massages my breasts with his one hand. Then he does the unthinkable and lifts my shirt.

Harry is beside us and Louis' got my fucking top off.

Louis goes between both of my nipples, sucking on one and playing with the other. He nips me a few times, making my urge to roll over and fuck him almost unbearable. Minutes pass with Louis' mouth on my tits – licking and sucking and teasing – until he playfully squeezes my waist, mouthing his way up my torso to meet my lips once more.

I'm so fucking, fucking, fucking, fucking, fucking built up.

I haven't had sex since Louis and I ruled it out.

And now we're able to but we can't.

I nearly lose it when he sucks my tongue into his mouth and licks around it tauntingly.

"I'm so hot for you," I whisper against Louis' lips, giving his nipple another pinch as he does mine.

"Your nipples and your lips are my second favourite things," he smirks, kissing me once more.

"Second?"I kiss him again, running my tongue over his lower lip. "What's your first?"

Louis exhales serenely, pressing his lips to mine and holding me tight even as he pulls away.

"You."

My lips are back on his before either of us have a chance to understand what is happening. He modestly covers me back up, kindly pulling down my shirt. He continues to feel around my chest despite the thin material of my tank top but his touch is still equally as hot.

We make out for what feels like hours.

Kissing and licking and biting and tasting.

And Louis.

So much Louis.

It's only until we're feeling burnt out from our high and exhausted from our full day that we agree to take a sleeping break.

I give Louis one last kiss before rolling onto my opposite side.

I scan my eyes over Harry, just to make sure he's alright. And just as I'd imagined, he's still passed the fuck out. There's no way he's waking up any time soon. I smile at the boy's natural magnetism. Even in his sleepy state, he's still a charmer.
I curl up against Harry's side, craning my neck to look back at Louis, "Spoon me?"

The second the question leaves my lips, a wave of guilt flashes over me. Louis welcomingly accepts my offer, pressing the front of his body against the back of mine, oblivious to any strain I might be feeling. But I still feel entirely off.

The last time I said something so familiar was just before Harry – to put it so bluntly – got off on me during our holiday. And it's weird. To be so close to Harry yet say something so intimately alike to Louis.

I do get past it once I soak in the ultimate comfort of these boys and this bed, but that doesn't make the situation any less queer.

Louis' face nuzzles into my neck as his arms wrap securely around my waist. I press myself into Harry's side, weaving my limbs around his abdomen and gradually resting my hand on his bare stomach.

It's the first time I've touched him there.

Or, it's the first time I've really noticed it, if that's any more accurate.

Harry's skin is fiery under my palm and I can feel his light heartbeat under the rise and fall of his lungs. I gingerly rub over his skin with my thumb in a soothing manner, deciding that it's only out of comfort that I'm doing so.

I firmly hold myself back from touching Harry even a fraction more than I'm doing now. There's no doubt in me that I would want to feel him all over as we speak but he's fast asleep and Louis is my current priority and practically everything contradicts such a provoking desire.

Eventually, Louis' breathing slows and Harry's snoring ceases and sleep has begun to take us over.

We're all a mess of kissed lips and tangled limbs.

And the last thing I think of before I fall asleep – other than breakfast and much needed sex – is the general notion of what the actual fuck do I do now?

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, voting and all of your lovely comments :)

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