### The Art of Being a Gentleman

**by frosteddream**

**Summary**

Out of all four of the Styles children, Harry has always been the most adored. He is the handsome, intelligent, and oh so charming golden child of the family, the perfect son who will soon be married to the perfect woman, a beauty queen named Victoria Astaire. Despite how loved he is among all who reside in the affluent town of Alton, his siblings absolutely despise him. In order to stain his squeaky-clean reputation and get their traditional, old fashioned parents to despise him as much as they do, they devise a plan that involves Harry’s giving nature, the desperation of a mother and father, and a mischievous boy who doesn’t give a damn about what’s proper.

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**Notes**

*Shimmies to the left* Back at it again. *Shimmies to the right* With another fic.

BEFORE YOU PROCEED: Please keep in mind that this story has depictions of homophobia that people may find upsetting (Strong language, internalized homophobia, and certain actions driven by homophobia.) If you find any of this too upsetting to read, then take care of yourself and back out, but if you DO choose to read.... I hope you enjoy!

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Chapter 1

The past three days have been nothing short of chaotic. Every single visible and nonvisible surface of the Styles manor has been sanitized at least twice, the backyard has been manicured to perfection and is dotted with bright pink begonias that were planted just last week, the cobblestone pathway leading up to the front of the home is practically sparkling against the afternoon sun, and the heads of the family, Carter and Gwendoline Styles, have been spoon-feeding their three eldest children information on how to behave on this, in their words, *blessed day*, the arrival of Victoria Astaire and her family.

The three eldest children, Margaret, Preston, and Eli, are standing outside, whispering among themselves as they impatiently wait for their parents and younger brother.

“I certainly don’t remember all this fuss when I got betrothed.” Eli scoffs.

“The golden child gets all the fanfare,” Margaret sighs with a roll of her eyes. “Same old shit, different day.”

Preston snorts. “I’m surprised mother and father didn’t hire an entire orchestra for the occasion.”

“Gwendoline almost did, but Carter stopped her.” Margaret laughs, calling her parents by their first names as a sign of disrespect.

The three siblings instantly quiet down when Carter and Gwendoline wordlessly join them outside the house. As usual, they regard their older children with small nods and emotionally detached greetings.

Inside the mansion on the second floor, Harry’s in his bathroom sitting on the tiled floor and trying not to vomit. He’s fully aware that the Astaires should be arriving at any moment, but he can’t seem to get up from his spot, his nerves won’t allow him to do so. He flinches when he hears rapid knocking on the door followed by the shrill voices of Pam and Sam, the twin maids.

“The Astaires will be here any minute!”

“Your parents will hack off our heads and serve it on a platter if you’re late!”

“Oh hush, Sam!”

When their coercing turns to a loud argument that starts to grate on Harry’s nerves, he gets up from the floor and yanks the door open, instantly getting met with the sight of two short, identical red heads with wide, silvery blue eyes bickering back and forth with each other. Harry used to struggle with telling them apart when they first started working at the mansion twelve years ago, but eventually, he started to notice the small, subtle things that differentiated them, such as Pam’s hair being a couple of inches shorter than Sam’s, Sam’s voice being just a few octaves higher than Pam’s, and the differing placements of the freckles that covered their faces.

“Ladies!” Harry shouts, causing the twins to snap their attention towards him.

“Are you alright, Harry?” Pam asks.

“If you’re worried about Victoria not liking you, then I want you to know there’s no need to be.” Sam assures.
“She’s right,” Pam interjects. “You’re an amazing man and I bet she’s thrilled to have you as a suitor.”

“So there’s nothing to be worried about!” The twins shout in unison.

Harry just stands there for a moment, blinking at them. He doesn’t think he’ll ever get used to… whatever that was.

“I’m fine,” Harry lies. “I’m just a bit nauseous.”

“Would you like some club soda?” Pam asks.

“To settle your stomach?” Sam adds.

“Sure,” He answers. He honestly doesn’t have any desire for club soda, he just wants the twins to leave him alone for a minute.

“Yes, sir!” The twins shout with mock salutes. They scamper out of the room in a way that reminds Harry of two hyper active puppies.

He steps out of his bathroom and sits on the edge of his bed, going over various breathing exercises in an attempt to calm down. It’s rare for him to get nervous at all, let alone nervous to the point where his entire body is trembling, but he’s been waiting on this day for so long, the day he finally meets the woman he’s going to spend the rest of his life with. He’s only seen Victoria a hand full of times at special events his parents organized, but he’s already completely gone for her. Her beauty, class, and kindness are all the things he’s ever wanted in a wife and he’s deathly afraid of making a fool of himself in front of her. It’s crucial for both the reputation of his family and his pride that he makes an excellent impression.

Harry doesn’t know how long he sits there, letting himself be soothed by the light chirping of the birds outside his window, until he hears heels frantically clicking against the floor in the hallway. The twins hurry into his room, both seeming to be out of breath. Pam hands Harry a glass of club soda.

“Thank you, ladies.” Harry says, taking the glass.

The twins give him dazzling smiles and proudly place their hands on their hips.

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After tossing back the club soda, which did slightly calm his stomach, giving himself a small pep talk in front of his mirror, and fixing his hair and fitted suit, Harry is finally standing proudly outside the mansion, his feet together, his shoulders squared, and his head held high. His family and all the maids and butlers of the house are standing behind him on the porch.

“Look at him, darling,” Gwendoline says to Carter with a blinding smile. “Our precious baby, all grown up.”

Carter doesn’t say anything, he just gives her hand a squeeze as a matching smile takes over his face. He’s practically bursting with pride for his youngest child. Margaret, Preston, and Eli all roll their eyes at the exact same time, mentally preparing themselves for yet another day revolved around Harry.

“Don’t worry,” Preston whispers. “I have a flask we all can share.”
“I’m gonna need more than that shit to get through this day.” Margaret sighs.

Just as those words leave her mouth, a sleek, black car appears over the horizon behind the wrought iron gate. As it approaches, the gate automatically opens, letting the car inside the estate. As it rounds the stone fountain right at the center, Harry can feel his nerves slowly leaving his body. The part of him that has a constant need to succeed, to show that he’s the best person in the room, beats the nervous part of him into submission. He feels confident and just a tad bit arrogant as the car stops right in front of him. The driver gets out of the car and hastily opens the back door. Gregory and Jillian Astaire, Victoria’s parents, step out of the car, covered head to toe in clothes and accessories that scream wealth. They step aside to allow Victoria to get out of the car. When Harry first sees her, his heart starts pounding in his chest as if it’s a prisoner trying to get out of its cage. Victoria’s blonde hair, which looks pure white as it reflects the afternoon sun, is hanging in loose curls, her fierce, hazel eyes are shining as they pierce through Harry’s very soul, and she’s dressed in a lace, mint green gown that hangs off the shoulders. In short, she looks absolutely breathtaking. Acting as if he isn’t fazed by her very presence, Harry approaches Victoria and gingerly takes her hands in his.

“It is lovely to meet you, Ms. Astaire,” He says. “Forgive me if I am being too forward, but you are by far the most gorgeous woman I have ever seen.”

A blush covers Victoria’s porcelain cheeks. “Thank you, Mr. Styles.”

Harry gives her hand a gentle kiss before he turns his attention to her parents. “Mr. and Mrs. Astaire, it is an honor to meet the both of you.”

“Likewise,” Gregory says with a blank expression. He’s analyzing Harry's every action, sizing him up. Harry smirks, seeing this as yet another challenge to win rather than a setback.

“We have heard so many great things about you, Harry.” Jillian says with a huge grin. It’s clear to Harry that he already has her approval.

He takes Victoria’s hand and guides her up the steps. Her parents trail behind her, marveling at the architecture of the mansion. When they reach the top step, Harry places a hand on the small of Victoria’s back and gestures towards his family.

“Victoria, I would like you to meet my parents, Carter and Gwendoline Styles,” He introduces.

Carter and Gwendoline step forward to give hugs and small greetings to Victoria before they do the same with Gregory and Jillian, talking about how thrilled they are for their families to join together.

Harry guides Victoria over to his siblings and gives all of them a huge smile. “These three are my older siblings, Eli, Preston, and Margaret.”

The three of them are only able to spare quiet hellos and half-assed waves. Harry gives a slight cough before he ushers Victoria to meet all the maids and butlers. Upon their request, he saves the twins for last because, in their own words, you must save the very best for last.

After everyone becomes well acquainted, they start to file inside the house. Harry walks with his arm locked securely around Victoria’s. As they make their way to the veranda for lunch, Harry notices Gregory’s thumb ring, a glimmering sapphire stone.

“Mr. Astaire,” Harry calls. Gregory regards him with a raised eyebrow. “I could not help but notice your class ring. You’re a Johnstone man?”
Gregory nods as he unconsciously runs his index finger along the ring. “Class of ’87. Most people don’t take it too seriously since it isn’t the most upscale university, but it’s a fine institution with exemplary students and teachers.”

“I attended their campus tour three years ago when I was considering colleges,” Harry says. “I ultimately chose Kingsford, but I adored Johnstone’s small town charm, and I am not much of a sports man, but their football team is top notch. My friends and I would sneak off campus just to attend the games.”

Lies… lies… lies.

Harry absolutely loathes Johnstone. He thinks the place is an intellectual waste land only filled with students whose parents have given up on them. Plus their football team is awful. They haven’t even qualified for a championship in decades.

Gregory’s entire face lights up. “Well we do have quite the team! I was on it myself, you know.”

“I figured you were, sir,” Harry chuckles. “You have quite the build.”

Jillian laughs. “Please don’t inflate his already swollen ego.”

Gregory gives her a light slap on the arm. “Quiet, darling, I’m actually starting to like the boy.”

Victoria gives Harry’s arm a squeeze. “You’re quite the charmer.”

“Wouldn’t be your fiancé if I wasn’t.” Harry says with a smirk.

The families take their seats as soon as they reach the veranda, falling into casual conversation as they wait for their food to be served. Harry serves lie after lie to satisfy Victoria's parents and they just eat it all up. Carter and Gwendoline gush about Harry and Victoria’s courtship, inflating each other’s egos for thinking of such a lovely union. Harry and Victoria sit with their knees pressed together as they quietly talk about their interests. Margaret, Preston, and Eli sit in silence, discreetly passing around the flask. When the food comes out, a variety of sandwiches, soups, and refreshing raspberry lemonade, the conversation veers off into blissful silence.

“I truly am grateful for this day,” Gwendoline says while one of the maids pours her a glass of lemonade. “By the grace of God, Harry finally has a fiancé. We realize we are a little bit late in choosing one for him, but we just had to take our time. You do not set up a man as exceptional as our Harry with just anyone.”

Harry blushes and ducks his head. “Mother, please.”

Victoria giggles and places her hand lightly against Harry’s cheek. “I’m thrilled that you waited, Mrs. Styles. I wouldn’t be sitting here right now if you hadn’t.”

“How convenient of you to wait until Victoria was of age to marry.” Jillian says. “Fate is such a wonderful thing, isn’t it?”

Gwendoline laughs. “It definitely is.”

“Shit, the flask is empty.” Preston whispers.

“It wasn’t working anyway,” Margaret sighs. “Leave it to you to carry the weak shit.”

“Oh, fuck off.” Preston snaps.
Eli shushes them.

“Harry, why don’t you take Victoria out to the garden.” Carter suggests.

Harry nods before he takes Victoria’s hand and leads them away from their families. He guides her down the cobblestone path lined with bright poppies covered in dew from this morning’s fog. She gasps when they finally make it to the garden, a vast area filled with bright, eye catching flowers, stone statues of cherubs and saints, and monarch butterflies flying from place to place.

“Harry,” Victoria breaths. “Everything is… God, everything is so gorgeous.”

Harry places his hands on her waist. “Not nearly as gorgeous as you.”

The color of the poppies isn’t nearly as red as the blush currently dusting her cheeks. Harry excuses himself for a moment and heads over to the bench. His camera is exactly where he left it yesterday. He picks it up and goes back to Victoria.

“No pictures!” she laughs, covering her face as the camera starts to flash.

“But you’re my muse, darling.” Harry says with a pout.

Unable to resist his cuteness, she sighs and grins widely for the camera. Throughout their entire tour of the garden, Harry takes numerous pictures of Victoria. In each one, her eyes are alight with curiosity and joy and her skin is given an otherworldly glow by the sunlight. Harry has never felt more endeared.

When the sun disappears completely under the horizon, leaving behind a cool blanket of navy blue sky and twinkling stars, the Astaires finally leave the Styles residence. Before they left, they and Harry’s parents planned a, no doubt extravagant, party next Saturday to celebrate Harry and Victoria’s courtship. Margaret, Preston, and Eli had to bite their tongues to keep back long suffering sighs.

Later in the evening, when it’s nearing midnight and everyone is sound asleep in their bedrooms, Preston and Eli leave their rooms and head over to Margaret’s. She requested their presence for an impromptu meeting. When they enter, she’s sitting in front of her vanity combing the knots out of the mess of blonde curls atop her head.

“What a pain in the ass this day was.” She scoffs, not looking away from her reflection.

Preston flops on top of Margaret’s bed, messing up the immaculate state of her powder pink covers. Eli just stands by her vanity and leans back against the wall. Margaret’s room is truly a reflection of her personality. All the furniture is soft and satin and powder pink, but her walls are covered with all kinds of war paraphernalia such as swords, daggers, muskets, and maps detailing the locations of bunkers and checkpoints.

“Another day dedicated to celebrating the golden child,” Eli chuckles. “And it’s not even over. Part two happens next Saturday.”

“There goes my shopping spree in Paris,” Margaret sighs miserably. “I was looking forward to drowning myself in expensive things with my friends, but celebrating Harry’s greatness is so much better.”

Preston’s eyes widen in genuine shock. “Surely you’re joking.”

Margaret and Eli just stare at him.
"Your stupidity is almost awe inspiring." Margaret says, looking mesmerized. Preston grits his teeth and looks away from them.

"No need to act petulant," Margaret chides, turning around in her seat. "Look, I don’t know about either of you, but I have had it."

Eli raises an eyebrow. "That look on your face, that’s your scheming face. What’s going through your mind?"

Margaret grins as she gets up from her seat and paces the room. "Boys, I think I have a plan to knock the prince right off his throne."

“What do you have in mind?” Preston asks.

“I’m getting to that!” Margaret snaps. “Anyway, do either of you remember the name… Howard Casey?”

The room grows quiet as the name echoes through Preston and Eli’s skulls. Preston has no recollection of such a name, but for Eli, it jogs a memory, a scandal, that Gwendoline and Carter Styles have been hiding for six years.

“How could I forget?” Eli answers monotonously.

“Who’s Howard Casey?” Preston asks, ever the odd man out.

Margaret rolls her eyes. “You don’t remember because you were in military school when it happened, but our sweet little golden child was once caught in a very compromising position with a man named Howard.”

Preston gasps. “He’s a fag?”

Margaret shrugs. “I don’t know if he’s still having those… thoughts, but we can confidently say that he used to. Mother and father were so in denial until the reality of the situation crashed down on them. They wouldn’t even look at Harry for an entire month.” She smiles. “It was glorious. They paid more attention to us and finally, for fucking once, he was the outcast.”

“Howard suffered the most, though,” Eli sighs. “Thanks to father, his family’s business was ruined. They had to move away. Far from here… far from Harry.”

“Taking their filth with them.” Margaret sneers. She ceases her pacing and faces her brothers.

“I’m confused.” Preston says after a moment of silence.

“What a shock.” Margaret says.

Preston ignores her comment. “How the hell did Harry bounce back from such a thing? Doing something so sinful… how did he get back into Mother and Father’s good graces?”

“He’s the golden child,” Eli chuckles without a trace of humor in his voice. “Forgiveness for abominable things is one of the perks of such a title. They kept his mistake under wraps and went on pretending that it didn’t happen. I wouldn’t be surprised if they’ve suppressed it to the point where they forgot about it.”

Preston turns his attention back to Margaret. “What does Howard have to do with your plan?”

“He doesn’t have anything to do with my plan,” Margaret says. “My plan has more to do with
Harry’s flaw than anything else.”

“Are you going to out him?” Preston asks.

Margaret scoffs. “And get branded as a liar and a shit starter by our entire family? I think not!” she grins. “Boys, have either of you ever heard of the Tomlinson family?”

“Yes!” Preston shouts, excited that he’s finally able to add something to the conversation. “They’re the quiet ones!”

When people speak of the Tomlinson family, they refer to them as the quiet ones because they’re the most unsociable family in all of Alton. They never attend any parties or gatherings, mostly because they’re never invited, they have no friends, and they rarely speak to anyone unless they’re doing business with them.

“You are correct, Preston,” Margaret says. “But do you know why they’re so aloof?”

Preston furrows his eyebrows. “No, I don’t.”

“The oldest son is… problematic,” Eli says. “Or so I’ve heard.”

“A good friend of mine confirmed that he is very problematic,” Margaret chuckles gleefully. “He’s also a very important pawn in my little game.”

Preston still looks like a lost puppy while Eli gives Margaret a small smile, knowing exactly what’s going on in her sinister mind.

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A week later, the Styles hold a party celebrating Harry and Victoria’s courtship exclusively attended by the elite of the town. The ballroom is filled with music from a fifty-piece orchestra and some of the most vain, superficial conversation a human could ever hear. Harry and Victoria are attached at the hip all evening, practically glowing under all the compliments and well wishes they receive. Their parents are never too far behind them, making sure they're being respectful towards each other and not wandering off somewhere.

“They’re responsible adults, but they’re still young,” Gregory had said on the matter. “We must make sure they’re not engaging in any activity only reserved for a married couple.”

Harry’s eyes widened at that while Victoria chastised her father for saying such a thing.

The event is going off without a hitch. Everyone seems to be enjoying themselves, with the exception of Margaret, Preston, and Eli, who haven’t left the buffet table since the start of the evening, and Harry and Victoria only have eyes for each other, which is a good look for their individual families.

Two hours into the party, the double doors of the ballroom open, which catches the attention of each and every guest. Margaret, Preston, and Eli give each other knowing glances as everyone quiets down. The room is now filled with music and low whispers as Ezekiel and Marie Tomlinson walk in the room, hand in hand. To the satisfaction of the conniving siblings, Carter and Gwendoline look horrified. They look as if Satan himself has just crashed their precious party, completely obliterating the entire evening. Nevertheless, they approach the Tomlinsons with plastered on smiles and eyes that practically scream kill me.

“Well, this a surprise,” Gwendoline says, her voice rising several octaves. “I… we did not expect
“You two to come.”

“We didn’t expect to get invited,” Marie giggles, obviously happy to be there. “I’ve always loved your home. It’s so gorgeous.”

“Thank you so much,” Gwendoline replies tightly. “Um, may I ask who invited-”

“Marie!”

Carter and Gwendoline turn their heads to see Margaret pulling along a very confused Harry. Victoria is right behind them looking equally confused. Margaret stops in front of Marie and pulls her into a tight embrace.

“I’m so glad that you could make it!” Margaret exclaims.

“Wouldn’t have missed it for the world,” Marie says with a grin. She turns her attention to Harry and Victoria. “Congratulations on your courtship! Such an exciting time.”

“It, uh, truly is, Mrs. Tomlinson,” Harry replies, squeezing Victoria’s hand. “How is the family?”

“Good.” Ezekiel answers before his wife could say anything. He doesn’t want to be here. His tense shoulders and tight expression are evidence of that.

An uncomfortable silence passes before Margaret speaks again. “Marie, Ezekiel, I must make a confession. There’s a reason why you two were invited.”

Ezekiel raises an eyebrow and tightens his grip on Marie’s waist, an unconscious action he adopted due to the confrontations they tend to face.

“Why did you invite us?” He asks.

Margaret gives Harry’s back a firm pat. “Why don’t you tell them, Haz?”

Harry’s eyes widen as he looks at his sister in disbelief. Everyone’s attention is now focused on him and he has no idea what to say. It’s rare for him to be so unprepared and he doesn’t like it one bit. He’s silent for a long time, opening and closing his mouth as if he’s a fish gasping for air. Margaret gets such a sick satisfaction out of watching him squirm, but she’s aware that it can’t go on forever.

“Oh, doesn’t it just bring a tear to your eye how modest this kind soul is?” Margaret sighs. “Let me explain then.” She leans closer to Marie and Ezekiel and lowers her voice. “I can only imagine how hard it must be to harbor the burden of… a problematic child.”

Marie tenses and clenches her fists. Her evenly tan skin is now becoming increasingly pale and her thin lips are set in a tight line. Ezekiel is staring at Margaret with a harsh glare, stepping forward as if to shield his wife from her words.

“I think it’s time for us to head back home.” He says, his voice low and gravelly. Harry audibly swallows as he takes a step back. Ezekiel Tomlinson is a terrifying man.

“Now hold on, big guy,” Margaret chuckles. “You’re not here to be ridiculed.”

“What on earth are you doing, Margaret?” Gwendoline asks. The smile she’s been working so hard to maintain is starting to slip.

“Harry here wants to do something that might make your lives a little easier,” Margaret says. “You
see, we feel like what your son needs is a little direction, a little push down the right path. Harry can put him on that path.”

Marie and Ezekiel look at Harry and he just blinks at them, completely unsure of what to say.

“Harry can act as a mentor to your son,” Margaret continues. “Now, before you start to think of this as some sort of charity, I just want the both of you to know that none of us pity you. We just care about the future of a young man who has obviously lost his way. Please, for your son, accept Harry’s help.”

Harry has lost the ability to speak. He’s not sure what he’s supposed to do right now. Does he call out Margaret’s lie? Does he go along with it? Does he run out of the ballroom and lock himself in his room for a couple days? The voices surrounding him are all muffled and seem to drone on forever. Victoria, sensing his distress, is pulling on his arm, trying to grab his attention, but he’s too far gone. Eventually, he snaps out of his trance when everyone once again stares at him.

“I am sorry,” Harry apologizes with a shake of his head. “Can you repeat that?”

“Is Margaret telling the truth?” Gwendoline reiterates slowly. “Do you seriously want to act as a mentor to their son?”

Harry looks at Margaret to see that she looks completely at ease. Her posture is relaxed and her expression is neutral. When she notices Harry’s stare, she gives him a kind, almost encouraging, smile. He loves his older sister just as much as he loves his older brothers. While he’s suspicious of her lies, he’s confident that she’s not trying to sabotage him in any way. He has always been the type of person to offer his help to anyone who needs it, so he assumes that’s the reasoning behind what Margaret is doing. With that in mind, he gives his answer.

“Mr. and Mrs. Tomlinson, I would love to guide your son down the right path.”

Marie and Ezekiel stare at Harry, seeming to size him up, before they look at each other. They whisper among themselves for a bit. Harry can’t hear everything, but the things he can hear lead him to believe that these people are desperate. They love their son with all their hearts but they obviously want him to change and have tried everything for him to do so. After they reach some sort of agreement, they direct their attention back to Harry.

“That would be greatly appreciated, Harry.” Ezekiel says, smiling for the first time this evening.

Margaret gives everyone one last smile before she turns around and heads back to the buffet table. Preston is staring at her in awe while Eli is picking his nails.

“You are good.” Preston praises.

Margaret grins. “I know.”

The party continues with an undercurrent of tension that wasn’t there before. The guests smile in Marie and Ezekiel’s faces when they pass by, but talk all sorts of shit about them when they’re out of ear shot. It disgusts Harry how fake and judgmental these people can be, but he would never voice that opinion. He just continues flashing his smile, which isn’t as genuine as it was before, and mingles with all the guests with his future wife by his side.
Chapter 2

In the days leading up to the arrival of the oldest Tomlinson child, Harry splits his time between going on small outings with Victoria and developing lesson plans. He’s determined to take this problematic boy and mold him into a model citizen of high society. Along with everything he knows, Harry plans to teach him knowledge straight from the most notable books pertaining to good manners and proper etiquette in all kinds of scenarios. Naturally, his parents feel immense pride, constantly bragging about how seriously he’s taking his project to their friends and colleagues. His older siblings are annoyed as always about the praise he’s receiving, but they aren’t as obvious as they usually are about it. They just sit back and wait for Margaret’s plan to unfold.

It’s a brisk Sunday morning when Harry is sitting on the steps of the mansion, patiently waiting for the arrival of his guest. He’s dressed casually in a pressed pair of jeans, shiny brown boots, and a crisp white button up. His parents wanted to wait outside with him, but he wouldn’t allow it. He doesn’t want his guest to feel the slightest bit of discomfort. Harry taps a little beat against his knees as his eyes remain glued to the gate. He’s not at all nervous, but he is curious. He’s curious of what this man is like, why he’s been deemed problematic by practically everyone in town. It’s a mystery he’s about to solve in any moment and he can’t say he isn’t excited.

Just a few minutes past nine, he finally sees a car appear over the horizon behind the gate. The closer it gets, the more he can make out its shiny, electric blue paint job, immaculate rims, and tinted windows. When it enters the property through the open gates, Harry can faintly hear music blasting from it. Harry grimaces at the gaudiness of the entire display. The car rounds the fountain and stops right in front of Harry as he slowly descends the steps. He stops when it shuts off and stands frozen in place as he waits for someone to get out.

A beat passes before the driver side door swings open and a ridiculous cloud of smoke is released into the air. A brunet who looks around the same age as Harry steps off the car. He’s decked out in tight fitting, high waisted pants, a black shirt that shows just a sliver of his midriff, black sneakers, and a gaudy, white fur coat. His hair is messy and sticks out all over the place, indicating that he just rolled out of bed and put on whatever he could find in his closet. His harsh blue eyes are glazed over due to whatever drug is flowing through his system, and they stare at Harry, seeming to analyze him. Harry swallows to soothe the dryness in his throat. The thoughts running through his head about this man’s physique and facial structure are not the type of thoughts he should be having. He digs his nails in his palms and approaches the man with an easy smile.

“That’s quite a set of wheels you got there.” He says.

The man raises an eyebrow, looking almost confused, before he speaks. “Gets me around, I guess.”

Harry’s nails dig harsher into his palms as he feels a blush start to rise in his cheeks. The man’s voice is sweet, raspy, melodic music to his ears and that annoys him to no end.

“So, uh, what’s your name?” Harry asks, cursing his voice for slightly wavering.

“Louis.” The man answers with a smirk. “So, you’re gonna teach me how to be proper and polite and all that other shit?”

Harry winces. “Um, can you please refrain from using any swear words?”

“Can you please answer my question?” Louis counters, amusement playing across his features.
It becomes obvious to Harry that Louis is trying to provoke him, to get him to snap. However, Harry isn’t the type of person who loses his cool so easily.

“I will happily answer all of your questions when we get inside.” He says with an award-winning smile.

Louis grimaces at that, and Harry takes that as a win.

Upstairs in Eli’s bedroom, Margaret and Preston are looking out the window and watching the entire scene unfold. Eli is leaning carelessly against the windowsill, paying no mind to whatever’s going on in favor of texting one of his associates.

“Jesus Christ,” Margaret sneers. “He’s the embodiment of trash. I mean, look at those clothes. Did he raid a pornstar’s closet?”

“If Harry doesn’t take the bait then surely his failure should embarrass him,” Preston laughs. “There’s no way in hell he can make a gentleman out of that.”

“No,” Margaret says, her tone dark. “If he fails, mother and father will just pin the blame on the problem child, further ruining the Tomlinson family’s reputation and making Harry look like a saint. And even if the failure hurts his pride, it still won’t be enough. He has to take the bait.” Her gaze zeroes in on Harry’s smiling face as he and Louis enter the house. “I want him to suffer.”

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Louis is silent as he follows Harry into the house and up the stairs. Harry can feel his stare. It’s piercing and a tad bit haunting. It’s as if a judgmental deity is watching over him, analyzing his every move. Harry swallows as he stops outside his bedroom door. He opens it and ushers Louis inside.

“Make yourself comfortable.” Harry says, motioning towards two armchairs separated by a wooden coffee table at the center of the room.

Louis walks past Harry, intentionally brushing his hand against Harry’s stomach. Harry curses himself for shivering at the small, brief action. Louis takes off his coat, giving Harry’s greedy eyes a better view of his body, and sits down on one of the armchairs. Harry wrinkles his nose when he sees tattoos all over Louis’ arms. He loathes tattoos. To him, they’re just a creative form of body mutilation. Louis keeps his eyes on Harry as he sits down in the armchair across from him. They’re silent for a moment. The only sound that can be heard is the incessant ticking of Harry’s antique grandfather clock.

“I originally wanted to be in the library,” Harry explains. “But mother’s having her book club today.”

Louis doesn’t say anything. He just keeps blankly staring at Harry. It slightly scares Harry that Louis seems to have the inability to blink at the moment.

Harry sighs, feeling more than just a little uncomfortable. “Um, so, I’m not sure how much your parents have told you about this process, but—”

“I only have to do this shit once a week for six months,” Louis interrupts. “In that time, you’re gonna attempt to mold me into a son they can proudly call their own.”

Harry’s eyes widen at how blunt Louis is. He doesn’t appear to be the type of person who has a filter. That or he doesn’t pay any mind to it. Harry has to force himself to not wring his hands or
clench his fists.

A smirk slowly spreads across Louis’ face. “Am I making you nervous?”

“No,” Harry lies, shaking his head. “Of course not. Anyway, since this is only our first day, I think we should just take the time to get to know each other.” He reaches forward and grabs a notebook and a pen from the coffee table. “I compiled a list of questions for you. At the end, if you’re curious, you can ask some questions about me.”

Louis’ smirk turns into a full-blown grin. “Alright.”

Harry nods once before he flips through his notebook and lands on his page of questions, all written down in different colors of pens.

“Alright, let’s begin,” Harry says. “What is your full legal name?”

Louis rolls his eyes and crosses his legs before he answers. “Louis William Tomlinson.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-three.”

“What are the names and ages of your siblings?”

“Rose is nine, Angelica is seventeen, and Carmen just turned twenty-five.”

“Highest form of education?”

“High school graduate.”

Harry wrinkles his nose at that. “You… never went to college?”

“College ain’t for everyone, mate.” Louis chuckles without a hint of humor.

Harry nods once before he looks back down at his notebook. “What’s your greatest aspiration in life?”

When Louis smiles, it contains no trace of mischief or bitterness. It’s an easy, genuine smile that makes Harry’s heart falter its beating.

“I would love to travel.” He answers simply.

A judgmental comment is just begging to be free from the tip of Harry’s tongue, but he bites it back, wills it away. Harry goes through his entire list of questions, jotting down each and every answer Louis gives. Louis’ favorite month of the year is October, his favorite movie is either Ruby Sparks, The Godfather, or Grease depending on his mood, his favorite color is orange but he has a soft spot for pink, he loves horror and murder mystery novels, his favorite food is pizza, and his music taste is all over the place, ranging from A Tribe Called Quest to ABBA to Stevie Wonder. All of that isn’t even half the information Harry learned, but they’re the only pieces of information that were accompanied by lively and in depth commentary. Harry listened carefully, absorbed in the way Louis expresses himself when he talks about things that he enjoys. There’s just something about Louis that makes you want to learn every single thing about him. He’s a book that you just have to annotate, analyze, and read until the very end.

“I’m done interrogating you,” Harry says humorlessly, putting his notebook and pen back on the coffee table. “So, is there anything you want to know about me?”
Louis bites his bottom lip to contain the huge grin that’s threatening to break out. “There is.”

Harry leans back in his seat, making himself more comfortable. “Ask away.”

Louis uncrosses his legs and leans forward to rest his elbows on his knees. “What is your full legal name?”

Harry snorts. “Harry Edward Styles.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-one.”

“What are the names and ages of your siblings?”

“Margaret is…” Harry pauses, trying to think. “Well, um, I know Eli is the oldest. And well, Preston…”

Harry grows silent. He… doesn’t know how old his own siblings are. He doesn’t even know what day their birthdays are. He tries to remember any birthday parties but he can only remember his own. He tries to remember his parents mentioning anything about their ages, but he is truly drawing a blank. Louis looks at Harry in disbelief. He wants to ask Harry why he doesn’t know such basic family information, but he decides to drop it.

“Highest form of education.” Louis continues.

“College graduate.” Harry breathes, grateful that Louis decided to move on.

“Good for you. What’s your greatest aspiration in life?”

“To take over my father’s company.”

“Which is…?”

Harry’s eyes widen, feeling genuine shock that Louis doesn’t know what business his father is in. “Um, does the name Styles Banking Company mean anything to you?”

Louis raises an eyebrow. “I use regions, babe.”

Harry doesn’t quite know how to respond to that, so he just remains silent and waits for Louis to continue. To his surprise, Louis gets up from his seat with a blank expression on his face. He begins to circle around Harry as if he’s a vulture, making Harry feel intimidated. He stops right behind Harry after three complete circles and places his hands on Harry’s shoulders.

“What’s your favorite month of the year?” Louis asks nonchalantly.

Harry takes a deep, subtle breath to calm his growing nerves. “Um, I would say the month we’re currently in. There’s just something magical about May.”

Louis hums, lightly squeezing Harry’s shoulders. “What’s your favorite movie?”

Harry bites his lip. “I-I don’t really have a favorite, per se. My favorite *genre* would have to be romance.”

Louis leans down, placing his lips right by Harry’s ear. “What’s your favorite color?”
“Blue.” Harry breathes, trying to think of anything else but the sensual rasp of Louis’ voice.

Louis is silent for a while before he asks something that makes Harry’s blood boil. “Are you a virgin?”

Harry jumps out of his armchair and faces Louis with a disapproving glare, completely broken out of whatever spell he was under. “I do not appreciate how inappropriate you’re being, Mr. Tomlinson.”

“Oh, so it’s Mr. Tomlinson when you’re pissed, eh?” Louis laughs.

Harry sighs in exasperation. “Look, I understand that there’s a million things you’d rather be doing than this-”

“Damn straight.” Louis scoffs.

Harry scowls at him. “But I promised your parents that I would act as your mentor and turn around your abhorrent behavior. You may not like it here, you may not like me, but you know what? That’s too bad. I made a promise and I intend to keep it. You will not deter me with your childish actions. If you want to act like a little brat the entire time then fine, be my guest, but you’re only making yourself miserable. Now, I suggest that you sit back down and cut the… crap!”

Louis glares at Harry for a moment before he pouts, stomps back over to his seat, and sits back down. Harry sighs at his petulance and pinches the bridge of his nose.

“Are you going to pout the entire time?” Harry asks.

Louis doesn’t answer, though his pout stays on his face. Eventually, the clock strikes twelve, wrapping up their three-hour session, and Louis truly did pout the whole time.

“I truly can’t believe that guy.” Harry complains.

Right now, he and Victoria are relaxing on a bench in the garden. She’s half immersed in her third romance novel this week and half listening to Harry as he rants about, in his own words, the personification of a migraine. It’s been two days since his disastrous first meeting with Louis and he’s still pissed.

“I didn’t think he was going to be that bad,” Harry continues. “But my God is he a piece of work. No wonder his parents don’t go anywhere. How can you walk around this town with such a huge failure on your shoulders? I honestly don’t know if I can do this. There’s no way I can get this guy to change.”

Victoria saves her place in her novel with a bookmark, closes it, and places it on her lap. She turns to Harry with a sympathetic expression on her face.

“I understand your frustration,” She says softly. “However, you can’t let a bad start get you down. You knew this guy was problematic, you knew this wasn’t going to be easy.”

“Yes, but-”

“Harry, you took this responsibility and now you have to see it through to the end,” She continues. “You can and will get him to change. If anyone can do it, it’s you. The lord will guide you and he will help you succeed in this journey. Have faith.”
Harry gives her a small smile and laces their fingers together, grateful that he has someone like her in his life.

“Harry!”

Harry and Victoria turn their heads to see Pam and Sam scurrying towards them. They’re both red in the face and completely out of breath when they get to the bench.

“The Tomlinson child wrote you a letter!” They yell in unison.

Harry furrows his eyebrows. “A... handwritten letter?”


The twins shrug before Pam hands Harry an envelope. He examines the plain, white envelope before he opens it and takes out the piece of folded up, beige paper inside. Victoria watches as Harry carefully unfolds it and gasps at what’s written in big, bold, red letters.

**FUCK YOU.**

**With love,**

**Mr. Tomlinson**

Harry is so excited he can barely stand to sit down. Eli’s wife, Evelyn, and Preston’s wife, Madeline, are finally coming back from their vacation in Colorado. Harry loves his sister-in-laws and wants to do something really special for their arrival.

“Bernard!” Harry calls as he walks into the kitchen.

The head chef in question pops up from behind the counter and regards Harry with a huge grin.

“Yeah, boss?”

“Can you whip up your specialty this evening?” Harry asks. “Evelyn and Madeline are coming home!”

“The angels are getting back together!” Bernard cheers.

Harry, Evelyn, and Madeline have a strong bond over their love for Charlie’s angels. They marathon the show at least once every two months and recite the lines verbatim.

Harry nods enthusiastically. “Yes, sir.”

“Alright,” Bernard says, rubbing his hands together. “Chef’s special coming right... wait.”

Harry raises his eyebrows. “What?”

Bernard is silent as he walks around the kitchen, opening cabinets and refrigerators and peeking inside of them, before he stops and shakes his head. “I need a couple things. You mind making a run for me?”

Bernard would never ask anyone but Harry to do any kind of labor. Harry can be snobbish, but he’s still very approachable and doesn’t act too good to lift a finger.
“Not at all,” Harry answers. “What do you need?”

Bernard jots down a small grocery list and sends Harry on his way.

Whenever Harry goes out to do anything, he always drives himself around. The community has always found it weird considering the norm is to have a driver, but Harry just doesn’t see the need for it if he’s just fulfilling small tasks like going to the store, which is also against the norm considering he has hired help.

Harry walks through the grocery store, engaging in small talk with every person who greets him, and picks up all the items Bernard needs. When he’s done, he heads over to his favorite cashier, a high school senior named Muriel.

“Afternoon, Harry!” She greets with a wide smile that shows off her braces.

“Afternoon, Muriel,” Harry says, smiling back at her. “How are exams going?”

Muriel sighs as she starts to scan his items. “They are kicking my ass. I study, I really do, but as soon as I get an exam, my brain is like, I don’t know what to tell you, kid. So annoying!”

“I get the feeling,” Harry says sympathetically. “I heard about your scholarship, by the way. Congratulations!”

“Why thank you.” Muriel says as she does a small victory dance.

After all his things are scanned, Harry collects his bags, says goodbye to Muriel, and leaves the store. He’s halfway to his car when he suddenly stops, squinting his eyes at the alleyway across the street. He can see Louis laughing with a group of three men and two women. One of the men has his arms around Louis’ waist and his lips attached to Louis’ neck. Louis welcomes the man’s actions, revealing more of his neck for the man to take with flushed cheeks and parted lips. Harry looks away from the shameless display and practically stomps the rest of the way to his car. He’s disgusted, he’s very disgusted by how brazen and promiscuous this guy is. Not to mention he’s openly doing those things with a man. Harry thought from the very beginning that Louis is attracted to men, his actions support that thought, but he still feels shock due to such an in your face confirmation. There’s also another feeling lingering in the back of his mind… but he’s much too scared to acknowledge it.

~

As soon as Harry enters the house with his grocery bags, he’s instantly bombarded by tight hugs and excited chatter. He grins and wraps Evelyn and Madeline in a group hug.

“How was your vacation?” Harry asks.

“Splendid!” Evelyn answers, her voice reminiscent of silver bells. “I didn’t know a thing about skiing, nor did I want to, so I just stayed in the hotel and enjoyed the spa the entire time.”

Madeline rolls her eyes. “She’s no fun. Anyway, when are we going to meet that fiancé of yours!”

“I’ll tell you what,” Harry says. “We’re going out to dinner in a couple of days. When we’re done, I’ll bring her around here so the three of you can get acquainted.”

“A dinner date,” Evelyn sighs. “Young love is truly majestic.”

“Evy!” Eli’s voice calls from somewhere upstairs.
“I’m in the foyer, darling!” She calls back. She rolls her eyes when she turns her attention back to Harry. “I swear, your brother is so impatient.”

“What do you have in the bags?” Madeline asks, trying to grab the objects from Harry’s hands.

“Stuff for dinner, nosy!” Harry laughs, keeping the bags away from her.

“What’s for dinner?” Madeline asks, still trying to get the bags.

“It’s a secret!” Harry shouts, running away from her grabby hands. She runs after him, leaving a highly amused Evelyn.

Later on in the evening, at approximately six PM, the Styles family are served grilled steaks with herb butter and a side of red potatoes covered in a glaze of butter and sea salt. Their drinks are tall glasses of non-alcoholic sangrias. Gwendoline forbade alcohol at the dinner table after Margaret had a bit too much one time and called Carter a dickhead.

Carter is sitting at the head of the table. Gwendoline, Evelyn, and Eli are on his left while Harry, Madeline, Preston, and Margaret are on his right.

“How was your vacation, girls?” Gwendoline asks as she cuts through her steak. Carter half listens to the conversation around him in minimal interest and half focuses on his food.

“It was very fun!” Evelyn answers. “Would’ve been even more fun if the husbands were with us.”

Eli sighs as he places a hand on Evelyn’s knee. “Now, darling, you know I had some business to do.”

“Oh, I know, you workaholic.” She laughs, pinching his cheeks.

“Would’ve been nice if you brought him along,” Carter mutters. “Get him out of the house for a bit.”

Eli grits his teeth to keep himself from saying something he might regret later. Preston and Madeline keep their mouths shut as they eat, all too familiar with how ugly Carter and Gwendoline can be if they make their presence known.

Gwendoline turns her attention to Harry with a bright smile. “How was your day, love?”

Harry smiles back at her. “It was great. I had time in the morning for some yoga and I texted Victoria. She got a new romance novel and she just had to tell me about it.”

“The girl does love her romance novels.” Carter chuckles. “Did you not invite her to dinner or was she busy?”

“Our presence isn’t enough, I suppose.” Margaret mutters so lowly that only Preston can hear her.

“She was busy,” Harry answers. “Her parents are having dinner with the senator tonight.”

“Oh remember when the senator came over here, Carter?” Gwendoline asks.

“I remember,” Carter answers. “He’s quite the man.”

Everyone is silent for a while. The only sounds that can be heard is utensils scraping against plates and ice clinking against glasses. Eventually, Gwendoline breaks the silence.
“You know, Margaret,” She begins. “Seeing Evelyn and Madeline here has made me think about something. Are you actively looking for husband number two?”

Margaret clenches her fists but her expression remains even as she looks at her mother. “Not at the moment, Gwen.”

If Gwendoline’s upset about her daughter referring to her by her first name, she certainly doesn’t show it. She just nods and gives Margaret a small smile.

“Why?” She asks. “Are you afraid of running the next one off, too?”

Margaret’s patience is getting thinner with each passing second. “No, I just-”

“It is shameful, you know,” Gwendoline interrupts. “An unwed woman in her mid-twenties. Shameful.”

Margaret doesn’t say a word as she gets up from her seat and leaves the dining room.

~

Harry and Louis are in Harry’s room yet again because Margaret and her friends have congregated the library. Harry knows he has the power to take the entire room with just one complaint to his mother or father, but he doesn’t want to do that. He wants Margaret to enjoy her time with her friends, especially after the dinner fiasco yesterday.

The two of them are sitting across from each other in their arm chairs. Louis is once again dressed provocatively. He’s wearing a sheer, long sleeved shirt that reveals his shoulders, leather pants, and black boots.

“Today, we get down to business.” Harry says.

“Oh, I am just ecstatic.” Louis mumbles with a roll of his eyes.

“Do not mumble, mutter, or chew your words,” Harry instructs as he crosses his legs. “You have to speak up. In case you have not noticed, our first unit is speech.”

Louis scoffs. “You ain’t-”

“are not,” Harry corrects.

Louis huffs. “You are not gonna-”

“Going to,” Harry corrects again.

“What’s wrong with contractions?!” Louis shouts.

“What is,” Harry snorts. “And nothing is wrong with them. I use them all the time. However, when you are in the company of a public figure or a person of high status, eight times out of ten, they will not use contractions and will not appreciate those who do use them.”

Louis’ eyes widen. “That’s so fucking-”


“What’re you gonna fucking do if I fucking continue to fucking swear!” Louis yells.
Harry uncrosses his legs, leans forward, and places his hand on Louis’ thigh, squeezing it harshly. “I am in no mood. Cooperate.”

Louis bites the inside of his cheek to keep in a snarky remark. A soft pink is dusting his cheeks as he looks away from Harry and nods. Harry is never this testy, and always tries to keep up his normally positive mood, but he didn’t sleep a wink last night, and as everyone knows, no sleep equals a very aggravated Harry.

Harry leans back in his seat as he grabs a book off the coffee table. “Glad we are on the same page. Now, the book I am holding in my hands is your textbook. You will read the pages I tell you to read and we will have tests based on what you read.”

Louis raises an eyebrow. “What kind of tests?”

“I will place you in a public setting and you will use what you learned in that setting,” Harry answers. “You will be graded on a scale of one to ten. Do you understand?”

Louis nods. Harry holds the book out towards him and he reluctantly takes it. He turns it over in his hands and runs his fingers across the gold letters of the title.


Harry shrugs. “That may be, but everything you learn will be from that book. Now, let’s begin. Turn to page-”

“I saw you, you know.” Louis interrupts.

Harry sighs, slowly losing the little patience he has left. “Saw me where?”

“Across the street,” Louis answers. “You saw one of my friends pleasing me and you didn’t seem to like it.” He smirks. “Why? You don’t like a little guy on guy action?”

“It’s inappropriate,” Harry huffs. “It has nothing to do with your… preference. Victoria and I would be burned at the stake if we did such things in public, especially since we’re not married.”

“Oh, Victoria,” Louis drawls as he puts his feet up on the coffee table. “Your beauty queen.”

Victoria is often referred to around town as the beauty queen since she enters a lot of pageants. Ever since she was young, probably around two or three, she has been competing and winning pageant title after pageant title and she is very proud of her victories.

“Is she as narcissistic as people say she is?” Louis asks.

“She’s the sweetest person you’ll ever meet.” Harry snaps. His patience is completely gone. “I suggest you shut up before you say something you might regret.”

“Ooh, what are you gonna do, teach?” Louis asks, getting up from his seat. Harry gets up with him, not wanting to be as vulnerable as he was last time. They both just stare at each other, seeming to have a conversation with just their eyes before they both sit back down.

“Are you done?” Harry asks. “Can we continue?”

Louis shrugs. “Go ahead, baby.”

Harry would be a damn liar if he said the pet name didn’t affect him.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

I am SO sorry for the wait. I am the laziest bitch. Please enjoy!!

Harry delays his date with Victoria until Friday in order to get his sleep schedule back where it needs to be. He doesn’t want to be snappy with her or anybody else he happens to meet in public. It would not be a good look for the Styles family if the golden child acted out in public.

Harry arrives at the Astaire residence, a Victorian style home that has a modest charm to it, at around four in the afternoon. Victoria is standing outside wearing a bright yellow sundress, a pair of flats, and a smile brighter than the harsh sun. She waits for Harry as he gets out of the car and opens the passenger side door for her. She gives him a kiss on the cheek before she climbs inside the car.

As Harry drives down the winding road into town, his hand resting on Victoria’s knee, he can’t help but think about Louis. He’s been doing that a lot lately, thinking of Louis whenever he has a quiet moment, and he’s not sure what that means. Hell, it might not mean anything at all. After all, Louis is his student. At the end of their second session, he assigned Louis to read five through ten of his textbook, a long list of words and their definitions, in order to expand his vocabulary. Harry can’t help but smile as he thinks about the severely low likelihood of Louis actually reading those pages.

“What are you smiling about?” Victoria asks, snapping Harry out of his thoughts.

“Just… thinking about how happy I am to spend the evening with you,” Harry lies. “I can’t wait for you to meet Evelyn and Madeline. They’re like my best friends.”

Victoria nods. “You know, I’ve never seen you smile like that.”

Harry furrows his eyebrows. “Like what?”

“Like… you’re at ease,” she answers. “Like nothing else in the world matters but whatever’s on your mind. It’s lovely.”

Harry doesn’t dwell too long on Victoria’s words. He doesn’t stop and think about why he might look so at ease. The feeling he’s too scared to acknowledge flares up and he has to grit his teeth to keep himself from doing so.

After a short drive, Harry pulls up in the parking lot of Mildred’s Corner, an upscale restaurant with a lovely, rustic feel to it. He and Victoria exit the car and walk hand in hand inside the crowded building. As soon as the host sees Harry, she gives him a smile and directs him to his and Victoria’s reserved table. It’s located in a partially closed off space lit only by candles. Harry pulls Victoria’s chair out for her before he sits in his own chair across from her.

“This place is so lovely,” Victoria praises. “The ambience is so peaceful.”

“That’s one of the reasons why this is my favorite place,” Harry says. “Just wait until you try the food.”
Victoria smiles giddily as she opens her menu. “There’s so much to choose from. What do you recommend?”

“Well, I might order the braised duck…” Harry trails off, scanning the issue. “And I think you would like… Oh, you should definitely try the roast. It’s amazing and they aren’t too stingy on the gravy. I also suggest you try their apricot tea. It’s sweet but not terribly so.”

Victoria nods as she closes her menu. “Then I will have that.”

Their waitress, a bubbly brunette with a smile that screams please tip generously, comes to their table and gets their food and drink orders. After she leaves, Harry and Victoria fall into easy conversation. They talk about how their weeks are going so far and trade recent stories about their families. When their food and drinks come out, they eat silently, occasionally coming up for air to compliment the food. Harry has a mouth full of rice pilaf when Victoria speaks up.

“Harry?” She calls.

Harry swallows his food and regards her with raised eyebrows.

“Um, what do you want to do?” She asks.

Noticing his confused expression, she clarifies her statement. “Like… how do you imagine your future? We’re going to get married one day soon, so I think it’s important that we have this conversation now.”

Harry is silent for a moment, collecting his thoughts to answer such a heavy question. “Well, I do want to have two, maybe three, kids.”

Victoria nods. “So do I. I don’t want just one but I also don’t want a ridiculous amount.”

“That’s exactly how I feel,” Harry says. “How do you feel about owning our own home? My siblings live with mother and father, but that’s definitely not what I want.”

“I definitely want us to have our own place,” She answers. “There’s no sense in raising our children in either of our parents’ homes when we have the means to be on our own.”

Harry’s smile has a certain warmth to it as he thinks about marriage, kids, a big house with a big yard… a future so bright that you can barely see it. “I completely agree.”

The two of them are engulfed in deep conversation until their plates are clean. Harry locks arms with Victoria and gives small greetings to people he knows as he guides her out of the restaurant. They don’t even make it halfway to the car before they hear a shout of Harry’s name. They turn their attention across the street to see Louis staring right at them. His eyes are hooded and his arm is wrapped around a blond’s neck in order to keep his balance. It’s obvious that he’s drunk.

“Harry, do you know that man?” Victoria asks warily as she reaches for the pepper spray in her purse.

Harry sighs. “Hold your fire. That’s Louis.”

Victoria’s eyes widen as her gaze cuts sharply to Harry. “Are you kidding me?” she turns back to Louis and grimaces. “Why does he have rips in his clothes? Can he not afford good clothes?”

“Some clothes come like that,” Harry answers. He has to bite his lip to keep himself from laughing at the look of pure amazement that crosses her face.
“Come say hi to me!” Louis yells, not at all caring about the nasty looks he’s receiving from all the dignitaries trying to enjoy a quiet evening.

Harry rolls his eyes and releases Victoria’s arm. “Get in the car. I’ll be right back.”

She nods and gives Harry a kiss on the cheek before she heads to the car. Harry ignores the wolf whistles and inappropriate comments Louis and his friends make as he crosses the street. Louis grins as Harry stops right in front of him and his group.

“How you doing, babe?” Louis asks.

“What do you want?” Harry sighs, already done with their little interaction.

“Just wanted to say hi,” Louis giggles. “Is your little beauty queen too good to talk to me?”

“Don’t yell at people across the street.” Harry scoffs.

Louis laughs. “I’m sorry. Tell her I apologize for my-”

“Cut the shit, Tomlinson.” A dark-haired man interrupts. A cigarette is hanging precariously from his lips and he’s leaning against the red brick wall of a building behind him.

“I mean it!” Louis whines. “I’m so genuinely sorry for offending the beauty queen’s delicate sensibilities.”

Harry bites his lip to keep himself from saying things that don’t need to be said, and begins to turn back around.

“No!” Louis laughs, stumbling forward to wrap his arms around Harry’s neck. “Don’t leave, babe. I wanna introduce you to my friends.”

Louis pushes Harry towards the group and waves a hand towards them. “This blond sack of sunshine is Niall, this guy is Liam, though you can also refer to him as my lap dog,” Harry bites the inside of his cheek, instantly recognizing Liam as the man who was kissing Louis’ neck the other day. “And this sexy bastard is Zayn! I’m afraid the girls couldn’t join us today, so you can’t meet them just yet.”

“How will I live?” Harry muses with a roll of his eyes. “Can I go now?”

“So, you’re teaching Louis how to be polite,” Liam smirks. “Gonna teach him how to open doors for people and eat with those fancy utensils?”

“Is he gonna waltz the night away with some chick?” Niall asks, biting his lip to contain his laughter. “Please say yes.”

“Fuck off!” Louis shouts, burying his face in Harry’s chest.

Harry tenses when he realizes just how close he and Louis are. Every time he inhales, he can smell spiced peaches, laundry detergent, cigarette smoke, and a splash of whiskey. It all mixes together so pleasantly in an aroma that’s so uniquely Louis, and Harry doesn’t think he’ll ever tire of it. Harry wants to wrap his arms around Louis’ waist, to just stand there and hold him, but he fights against the urge.

“Um, I’m gonna go now,” Harry says, stepping out of Louis’ hold. “It was nice to meet all of you.”

Louis pouts. “All good things must come to an end, I suppose. I’ll see you Sunday, teach. Have a
blessed day. May the lord-

“Oh, you are fucked,” Niall interrupts. “Let’s get you home.”

Louis and his friends all pile into Louis’ car with Liam at the driver’s seat. Harry heads back across the street with a very strange feeling coiling at the pit of his stomach. It’s that feeling he doesn’t want to acknowledge. He slides into the driver side of his car, blissfully unaware of Victoria staring straight ahead with a look of disgust on her face.

“That guy…” She trails off as her nose scrunches up. “He’s, uh, different, isn’t he?”

Harry tenses, shifting his gaze towards her. “I-I don’t know for sure, but I assume he is.”

Victoria seems to shiver with how disgusted she is, which leaves a sour taste in Harry’s mouth. He’s not at all shocked by how she appears to feel about… Louis’ preference, but he still feels slight disappointment by it. After a quiet drive, Harry drops her off back at her place before he heads back to his. The original plan was to bring her back to the manor so she could meet Evelyn and Madeline, but he feels much too tired to continue being social. His mind is clouded by so many thoughts and none of them have anything to do with his fiancée.

~

As Harry predicted, Louis didn’t read what he was supposed to read. He came right up to Harry, half inebriated, and insincerely apologized for not doing his homework. Harry’s a very forgiving person, but he’s also vindictive, which is why Louis is currently running laps around the garden while holding his textbook and reading aloud what he was supposed to read. Harry, dressed casually in shorts and a polo shirt, is in the shade of the veranda enjoying a cool glass of lemonade, occasionally correcting Louis whenever he mispronounces a word.

“Conspicuous,” Louis reads, slightly out of breath. “Standing out so as to be clearly visible, attracting notice or attention. Juxtaposition, the fact of two things being seen or placed close together with contrasting effect.”

“I cannot hear you, Mr. Tomlinson,” Harry taunts with a huge grin, sipping more of his lemonade. “You need to speak up.”

Louis huffs before he continues to read, his voice louder than before. “Superfluous, Unnecessary, especially through being more than enough! Conspirator, a person who takes part in a conspiracy! Harry, an asshole who’s totally abusing his power!”

“Who is,” Harry scoffs. “And no swearing!”

Louis is thanking all the Gods in existence that he decided to wear something somewhat appropriate for this activity, a pair of overalls that come down to just below his bottom, a yellow, flower-patterned crop top, and a pair of vans. He was so close to wearing something tight fitting and he’s glad he wasn’t that stupid.

“I crave death!” Louis whines.

Harry pouts. “Aw, are you tired? Maybe you will do your homework next time, yeah?”

“Harry!”

Harry turns his head to see none other than Pam and Sam barreling towards him. One of them is carrying an extra pitcher of lemonade while the other is carrying a tray of sugar cookies.
“More refreshments!” They shout in unison, placing the goodies on the table.

“Good morning, girls!” Louis greets, his steps slightly faltering.

“Morning, Lou!” Pam shouts with an overly enthusiastic wave.

Louis and the twins have developed some sort of friendship under Harry’s nose. The twins have gone from detesting the very mention of Louis’ name to defending it and holding it with the highest honor. It’s such an alarming shift and Harry wonders how Louis managed to charm them so quickly.

“Why are you running?” Sam asks.

“Your boss is a jackass.” Louis answers, coming to a stop. His breaths come out in desperate pants as he tries to control his breathing.

Harry sighs. “For the billionth time-”


“We’d join you two, but we have more work to do.” Pam says with a wistful sigh.

“So much to do.” Sam adds.

“Busy, busy bees, we are!” Pam giggles.

“The busiest of bees!”

“The-"

“Alright, girls.” Harry interrupts. He loves the twins to death but he’s in no mood for their energy right now.

“Off to work!” They yell in unison before they scamper back inside the house.

“Those two are just the cutest,” Louis gushes. “Can I adopt them?”


Louis scrunches up his nose before he sticks his face back into his textbook and starts running again. He starts to rattle off more words and their definitions with a certain hostility that wasn’t there before.

“I am such a good person,” Louis pants. “I do not deserve this.”

“You’re doing good!” Harry praises.

Louis stops and gapes at him. “You just used a contraction!”


Louis frowns but runs nevertheless. “This is just an excuse for you to see how my ass looks when I run, isn’t it?”

Harry is thrown off for a moment before he regains his wits and gives Louis a sly smirk. “Is it not, Mr. Tomlinson.”
Louis flips Harry off, which earns him two extra laps.

~

Louis flops down on his armchair with a long-suffering sigh. “My muscles… are so… sore.”

Harry takes the armchair across from him and puts his feet up on the coffee table. “Aww, poor baby. Would you like for me to massage your feet?”

“I’d flip you off if I had the energy and the will to live.” Louis huffs.

They’re both silent for a while. The only sound that can be heard is Louis’ heavy breathing. Harry’s eyes seem to gaze at Louis on their own accord, taking in the way his fringe is stuck to his forehead, the rise and fall of his chest, the flush of his cheeks, and the small spread of his thighs. Harry has thought about those thighs a lot more often than he wants to admit. He doesn’t realize Louis is staring back at him until their eyes meet. Harry bites the inside of his cheek and looks away.

“So, uh,” Harry coughs. “We only have fifteen minutes left together. We can just relax, I guess.”

Louis doesn’t say anything. He just purses his lips and nods, crossing his right ankle over his left knee. His expression gives away nothing as he seems to analyze Harry. Harry can’t help but feel vulnerable under his stare. He feels as if he’s being tested and he’s in no way prepared. Five minutes pass before Louis gets up and starts to wander around the room. He doesn’t look at Harry as he runs his hand across every surface he walks past and pauses when he notices Harry’s camera sitting on the nightstand.

“May I?” Louis asks, pointing at the camera.

“Go ahead.” Harry answers with a slight shrug. He usually doesn’t let anyone touch his camera, but he doesn’t have one issue about Louis touching it.

Louis picks up the device and turns it over in his hands. He walks back over to Harry with slow, graceful steps and asks a question that makes Harry choke on his own spit.

“Can you take some pictures of me?”

Harry opens and closes his mouth repeatedly, resembling a fish out of water. He doesn’t know what to say. Louis is just staring at him with a raised eyebrow, patiently awaiting an answer, and Harry doesn’t know what to say.

A slow smirk spreads across Louis’ face. “You can say no. I won’t be offended or anything.”

Harry shakes his head. “I- sure.”

Louis widens his eyes at that. He didn’t genuinely think that Harry would say yes. “Really?”

Harry gets up from his seat and stands right in front of Louis. Even though Louis’ shorter than him by at least a couple inches, he still has such an overwhelming presence that makes him seem bigger. Harry takes the camera from Louis’ hands and holds it properly.

“You, um, can sit by the window.” Harry says.

Louis gives a small smile and nods before he heads over to the window. He positions himself on the windowsill, crossing his legs and licking his slightly chapped lips. He stares right at Harry and
nods, signaling that he’s ready. Harry closes his eyes, counts to five, and gives a deep breath before he heads to the window and stops just a few feet in front of Louis.

“How do you want me?” Louis asks, avoiding Harry’s eyes. If Harry didn’t know any better, he’d say that Louis’ nervous.

“Um, this is fine.” Harry breathes. He positions the camera in front of himself, tensing a little when Louis stares at the lens through his eyelashes, and captures Louis in frame.

Harry snaps the first picture with the same, practiced ease he has adopted since he first took up photography. Louis relaxes more and more as Harry takes a few more pictures, his eyes practically sparkling as they gaze at the camera. It takes a few more pictures for him to feel comfortable enough to pose. He runs his fingers through his hair, lifts one of his feet on the windowsill, and, to Harry’s delight, even blows a few kisses.

“You’re a natural,” Harry chuckles as Louis cheekily winks at the camera.

“I honestly should go into modeling.” Louis jokes.

“You really should,” Harry says seriously. “You have the body for it.”

Louis’ movements falter as he takes in Harry’s words. Up until this point, Harry has always fought his urges to make his attraction to Louis known. This carefully crafted armor he’s been trying so hard to keep up is slowly chipping away, and Louis plans to take advantage of that.

“I do?” Louis asks, slightly spreading his thighs.

Harry swallows the growing lump in his throat, keeping his face firmly behind his camera as he snaps more pictures. He doesn’t say anything out of fear of his voice cracking or accidentally saying something he shouldn’t.

Louis cocks his head to the side and slides off the windowsill. He turns around, slightly arches his back, and looks back at the camera, his eyes catching the light streaming in between the closed curtains. Harry can feel his hands start to tremble as he takes yet another picture.

“Do I make you nervous, Harry?” Louis asks, turning back around and leaning back against the window. He loops his fingers around the straps of his overalls and bites his lip.

Harry shakes his head. “Not at all.”

“Liar.” Louis mumbles.

“You don’t,” Harry snaps, looking right into Louis' eyes. “It wouldn’t make sense for you to make me nervous.”

“Don’t get snappy, babe.” Louis scoffs.

“Don’t call me babe,” Harry sighs. “Tilt your head up a little.”

Louis does exactly what Harry says, revealing more of his neck and giving Harry a better view of the love bites that decorate it. Harry bites the inside of his cheek as he thinks about Liam, the man who, more than likely, gave Louis those marks. The feeling Harry doesn’t want to acknowledge is slowly starting to blossom into something he just can’t ignore. It burns in the pit of his stomach and annoys Harry with its presence.
“If you squeeze your camera any harder, you’ll break it.” Louis says. His tone has an edge of humor to it, but it still sounds wary.

Harry eases his hold on the camera and releases all the tension he didn’t know he was holding. Louis is affecting him in a way that he just shouldn’t be effecting him.

Harry snaps picture after picture of Louis in certain poses that are nothing but suggestive. He makes a mental note to delete these pictures later, but he knows he won’t follow through with that. With two minutes left of their session, Louis boldly slips the straps of his overalls off his shoulders, giving Harry a good view of his toned midriff. Harry knows he should chastise Louis for such an action but he's much too pleased to do so. He even goes as far as to direct Louis in certain poses that better show off his body.

Louis is giving Harry this look that Harry can’t tear his eyes away from. His lips are parted, wet, and red, his cheeks are ablaze, and his eyes are hooded and contain a certain fire, a certain fierceness. It’s such an erotic expression that Harry eventually has to look away.

He shifts his legs due to how hard he is and gives an awkward cough. "Stop that."

Louis isn’t fazed at all by Harry’s sudden harshness. “Stop what?”

“Stop looking at me like that,” Harry chides. “It’s not... just stop.”

Louis bites his bottom lip and takes a couple of steps forward. “Harry-”

The loud ringing of Harry’s grandfather clock sounds through the room, effectively cutting Louis off. The spell that Harry was under is slowly breaking, knocking him out of whatever Louis filled haze he was in. Louis seems to have been knocked out of the same spell, now staring evenly at Harry. They exchange no words as Louis places the straps of his overalls back over his shoulders, grabs his jacket from the armchair, and heads toward the door.

Louis pauses as his hand reaches the doorknob and turns back to Harry with a sly smirk. “Do the beauty queen a favor and tell her not to wear yellow. It washes her out.”

Louis leaves the room, successfully containing a boisterous laugh at the annoyed expression on Harry’s face.

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Louis’ first test takes place on a warm Saturday afternoon. Carter is hosting one of his monthly gatherings with a few of his associates, and Harry thinks it’s the perfect opportunity to test how well Louis’ speech is developing. A bunch of grown men smoking cigars, going over business, and consuming modest amounts of liquor should be an environment Louis doesn’t feel too nervous in. Preston and Eli are joining the gathering and will most likely remain seen but not heard like they always do. They catch wind of what Harry’s planning and promise to fill Margaret in on every mortifying detail.

“God, how I wish I could be there,” She had said. “He’s going to make an absolute ass out of Harry.”

Louis comes to the Styles residence in an impeccably tailored suit and a shiny pair of dress shoes. Harry feels slightly shocked considering he never thought that Louis actually owned clothes befitting a formal gathering. The shock is pretty evident on Harry’s face when he ushers Louis inside the house, which causes Louis to roll his eyes and swat Harry on the chest.
“Casual slut isn’t my only style setting.” Louis chuckles.

“I didn’t think it was.” Harry lies.

The two of them wordlessly head to Carter’s study. Louis is calm, cool, and collected, not giving any indication of being nervous, while Harry is pretty much a nervous wreck. Louis is a very unpredictable person, so of course Harry has thought about being made to look like a fool. His credibility and reputation is literally in Louis’ hands.

Harry flinches, too absorbed in his thoughts, when Louis places a hand on his shoulder and slows them down to a stop. His face is unreadable as he looks around the area, gets in front of Harry, and leans in to give him a lingering kiss on the cheek. Harry can feel his entire face starting to warm up and he knows he’s lit up like a damn Christmas tree.

Louis pulls away from Harry with an assuring smile. “Do not worry. I will behave.”

With a renewed confidence, Harry nods and resumes the journey to Carter’s study. When they enter the most sacred room in the entire house, they’re instantly greeted by the raucous laughter of business men and philanthropist between the ages of thirty and seventy-two. Carter sits in the middle of all the fanfare with a smug expression on his face and a cigar hanging from his lips. Preston and Eli are, as always, standing off to the side in a manner that makes them look like outcasts. Carter notices Harry and Louis’ presence and regards the two of them with a grin.

“Evening, gentlemen,” He greets, causing the other men in the room to turn their attention towards their new guests. “Take a seat. Make yourselves comfortable.”

In this moment, Harry is a completely different person. He is now the golden child, greeting every man in the room with his signature charm proudly on display. As he and Louis take their seats, Louis can’t help but feel grossly out of place. He was never under the illusion that he’d feel right at home in a room filled with pretentious old men, but he didn’t think he’d feel downright uncomfortable, especially since Harry is here with him. It’s especially unnerving when most of the men are staring at Louis with thinly veiled looks of disgust. It’s obvious that his reputation has truly spread to all parts of the city.

Louis feels anxious, practically vibrating in his seat, until he feels a hand caress the small of his back. He turns his attention to Harry to see that he’s already staring back at him. His expression is assuring, warm, and everything Louis needs in this moment. Harry gives a slight nod before he turns his attention to his brothers.

“Preston, Eli,” Harry greets his brothers with the love and adoration you would expect from a younger sibling. “How have you been? I feel as though we have not talked in ages.”

“What a pity,” Eli replies monotonously. “We have been well, brother.”

Louis raises an eyebrow at the underlying hostility in Eli’s tone. His gaze shifts to Harry, who still has a bright smile on his face, and he can’t help but feel confused. If he was able to pick up on Eli’s obvious animosity toward his own brother in five seconds, then surely Harry must know about it. He wonders if Harry just chooses to ignore it or if he’s seriously oblivious to it. He confirms to himself that it’s definitely the latter when Harry’s smile doesn’t waver as he continues to talk to his brothers. Louis feels an ache in his chest. He feels sympathy.

“It is nice to finally meet Harry’s brothers,” Louis says when the attention is brought back to him. “I have never seen your faces before. That is pretty odd considering you live here… with your parents.”
Preston and Eli both look appalled at the obvious jab at their pride, Harry looks scornful, and everyone else in the room doubles over in boisterous laughter. Carter’s laugh is considerably louder than anyone else’s.

“It is indeed a shock,” He manages to choke out. “You should teach me how you are able to do it. I cannot seem to escape these squatters.”

Preston looks as if he wants the earth to swallow him whole while Eli’s expression gives nothing away.

Louis accepts the glass of brandy that’s been handed to him and regards Carter with a sly smirk. “Now, Mr. Styles, we cannot give these men a hard time. Not every bird has the funds to leave the nest.”

Eli stiffens at that and clenches his teeth to maintain his even expression. “We can afford to have our own homes, Mr. Tomlinson.”

Louis cocks his head to the side as he takes a sip of his drink. “Oh? Well, that is understandable. Some parents want to keep their birds in the nest and that is just fine.”

“I have been trying to kick them out of the nest since their courtships.” Carter scoffs, eliciting more laughter from the room. This time, Eli isn’t able to hold back the sour expression that overtakes his face.

“So, Mr. Tomlinson,” Philip Hartford, the owner of a very upscale restaurant in west Alton, calls from his corner of the room. “I must say that it is a shock to see you here. I did not think that you were in to this sort of thing.” He takes a sip of his drink. “From what I hear, you are normally engaged in more… dishonorable activities.”

Harry’s head turns to Louis so fast that it’s surprising that his neck didn’t snap. The room is silent as everyone waits for Louis’ response, but if anyone were to listen close enough, they’d hear the incessant hammering of Harry’s heart. Preston and Eli look smug as they also await Louis’ response.

Louis takes a slow sip of his drink, places it on the side table beside him, and crosses his legs as he casually leans back into his seat.

“I have heard so much about you, Mr. Hartford,” He says, his voice even. “I have eaten at your establishment in the past and I must say, you serve some amazing food.”

“Thank you,” Philip replies, looking confused at the sudden change in subject.

“Which is why I am dreadfully sorry to hear the news.” Louis says, feigning concern.

“What news?” Carter asks. Philip looks equally confused.

“Oh, do not play dumb, Mr. Hartford,” Louis chuckles. “There is no shame in yet another unsatisfactory health inspection.”

A sea of audible gasps fill the room as soon as those words left Louis’ mouth. Philip looks scandalized, opening and closing his mouth as if he’s trying to figure out what to say.

“You-You are out of line, Mr. Tomlinson!” He shouts.

“I do not hear you denying it,” Louis says as he picks his drink back up and takes another slow sip.
“And paying off the health inspector to not say a word? How dishonorable, Mr. Hartford.”

Philip’s face is bright red and frantic as he looks around the room. No one looks back at him. Everyone finds greater interest in their liquor and side conversations. Philip knows that he has just been kicked out of this social circle. Wordlessly and without making any sort of eye contact, he slips out of the study.

“Corrupt bastard,” Tom Malcolm, a prominent business tycoon, says under his breath. Everyone else in the room voices their agreement with the statement. The news of Philip’s corruption will surely spread and cause immense damage to his business.

Louis almost laughs at the pure hypocrisy he’s observing. Every single man in this room is guilty of some kind of corruption and they’re acting as if they’re saints. Harry hasn’t stopped staring at Louis since they’ve entered the study, but now it’s even more obvious. He’s trying to come to terms with the fact that none of what just took place was a product of his overactive imagination. Louis ruined a man’s reputation and livelihood in just a few minutes, and he’s casually carrying on as if it didn’t happen.

“Close your mouth,” Louis mutters so lowly that only Harry can hear him. “You look stupid.”

The rest of the gathering goes so smoothly that Harry almost believes he’s dreaming. Louis is polite, engaged in every conversation he’s involved in, and displays flawless use of everything Harry has taught him. When the gathering is over, everyone files out of the study. The majority of the men in attendance spare a few more words to Louis as they leave the room. It’s obvious that Louis has completely won them over and Harry feels faint. When the crowd is long gone and it’s only Harry, Louis, Preston, Eli, and Carter left in the study, Carter walks up to Louis and places a hand on his shoulder.

“You’re doing good, son,” He says. “Keep it up and you and your family should climb up the social ladder real quick.” He then turns his attention to Harry and grins. “I didn’t think you could do it but you proved me wrong.” He gives Harry a firm pat on the back. “There’s no one more extraordinary than my boy!”

Harry can’t help but blush at that. “No need for all of that, father.”

Carter turns his attention to Preston and Eli and gives them a slight nod before he leaves the study. The room is filled with a tense silence for a while before Louis’ voice cuts right through it.

“Well,” He begins. “I should probably head back home.” He turns to Harry with a raised eyebrow and a small smile. “Walk me to the door?”

Harry nods. “Sure.”

Louis turns to Preston and Eli and nods at them. “It was lovely to meet you guys. Hopefully I’ll soon be acquainted with your sister.”

“Oh, she would love to meet you.” Eli says, sarcasm dripping from his tone.

Harry and Louis leave the study and walk through the dimly lit corridors of the manor. They’re silent as they journey through the maze of hallways, head down the spiral staircase, and walk out the front door. As soon as they reach the bottom of the steps outside the manor, Louis turns to Harry.

“What’s my grade?” He asks, amusement coloring his expression.
Harry licks his slightly chapped lips and gives a small cough. “Six.”

Louis looks genuinely offended at the grade. His mouth is gaped open, his eyes are as wide as saucers, and his face is red. Harry just stares back at him with an even expression, trying his best to hold back a laugh at Louis’ obvious dissatisfaction with his grade.

“Six?” Louis drawls. “I kissed all of that ass… for a six?”

Harry shrugs. “You were charming, you displayed proper use of your vocabulary words, and you didn’t use one contraction, but the incident with Mr. Hartford was uncalled for.” He leans closer into Louis’ space. “And don’t you dare disrespect anyone in my family.”

Louis looks confused for a moment before realization dawns on his face. He’s silent for a moment before he snorts and begins to laugh so hard he has to hold his side.

“You’re pissed because I upset your brothers?” He manages to breathe out. “You hold them with the highest respect yet they think-” Louis pauses and bites his tongue.

Harry raises an eyebrow. “They think what?”

Louis thinks hard about what to say next. On one hand, he can tell Harry how he thinks his siblings really feel about him, or he can just drop it. The former can drastically wreck Harry’s emotions since he practically idolizes his older siblings, while the latter allows Harry to continue living in denial. In the end, Louis concludes that Harry’s denial isn’t his problem.

“Nothing,” Louis answers. “You know, I find it really fucking hilarious that you don’t care enough to learn how old they are, but you care enough to defend their fragile pride. Classic lap dog. Doesn’t care for the details of the owner but is always ready to serve.”

Harry’s eyes widen at that. “You… You bastard.”

Louis’ teasing smile drops from his face. The insult is ringing through the air like a siren and neither of them know what to say. Harry has never cursed in front of Louis. Another chink in his armor has been revealed.

Still in shock, Louis decides to change the subject entirely. “So, uh, I have to go now. My friends are waiting for me at Wonderland. You familiar with that place?”

“The sleazy, low class night club on the rough side of town?” Harry sneers. “I know of it.”

Louis rolls his eyes. “Just because it’s not as nice and tidy as the streets you choose to walk down, doesn’t mean it’s rough.” He turns away from Harry and starts walking to his car. “Just be honest and say what you really mean. The poor side of town.”

Harry’s mouth drops open and he starts struggling with his words. “I-I’m not- you- I am not so superficial that-”

“Yes, you are!” Louis cackles as he enters his car. Before Harry can answer, Louis’ foot is slamming the gas pedal and he’s speeding away from the Styles residence, leaving Harry in a cloud of dust.

~

“Your fucking plan isn’t working!” Preston bellows. “You should’ve seen that bastard. He had everyone eating out of the palm of his hand!”
It’s nearing midnight and Margaret, Preston, and Eli are once again in Margaret’s room having a meeting. Preston is ranting and raging over this afternoon’s events while Eli is silently stewing in the corner. Margaret is sitting on the corner of her bed, twisting her fingers and staring off into space as she absorbs Preston’s words.

“And the comment he made about us still living here?” Preston grimaces. “Fucking humiliating! And Harry didn’t seem even remotely attracted to him! Your plan has failed! Congratulations for making the golden child look good once again!”

“Oh, fuck off!” Margaret snaps, standing up from the bed with an unwavering, practiced grace. “Were you honestly under the impression that they’d be fucking by the second week? These things take time, dumbass!”

“You’re full of shit!” Preston shrieks, making Margaret flinch at his harsh tone. He steps closer and completely invades her space. “Why can’t you just admit that this entire thing was a failure? You know it, I know it, and Eli knows it! I knew I shouldn’t have trusted your stupid plan. There’s no way in hell Harry’s risking his reputation for a common whore, a man whose wardrobe consists of clothes you’d find at a strip club!”

“Get out of my face.” Margaret demands through gritted teeth. Her fists are clenched by her sides and it’s taking every ounce of her strength not to lash out.

“You fucking failed.” Preston says, his tone much calmer. “What a dumb bitch you proved to be.”

Margaret’s fist comes up so quickly that Preston doesn’t even see it before it connects to his jaw. Preston stares at his sister in shock as he rights himself and cradles the bruise blossoming on his face. Eli’s eyes are wide as he observes the scene before him, not at all used to Margaret resorting to violence despite her love for learning the strategies and history of war. The room is silent with the exception of Margaret’s heavy breathing. She’s trembling as if the temperature in the room has suddenly dropped, and her knuckles are white from how tightly she’s clenching her fists.

“All my life,” She breathes, her tone eerily light and composed. “I have been disrespected. I’ve been disrespected by people in this town who act like they know a damn thing about me. I’ve been disrespected by my so-called friends who can’t understand my choice to remain unwed. I’ve been disrespected by my mother and father, the two people in my life that I’m supposed to just blindly respect no matter what they do!” she tries and fails to hold back the tears that have welled up in her eyes. “I will not stand here and accept disrespect from you or Eli! Talk to me like I’m your sister or shut up!”

Before the last few words leave Margaret’s mouth, Preston has his arms wrapped around her. He squeezes her frail body against his and mumbles his deepest apologies against the crown of her head. Eli remains frozen where he stands, still in disbelief by everything that has happened.

“What do we do?” Eli asks, breaking the tense silence that befalls the room. “Do we just forget about the plan or-”

“No.” Margaret firmly interrupts. “Like I said, these things take time. Harry’s gonna take the bait. I’ll force it if I have to.”

“How are you gonna do that?” Preston asks, pulling away from her.

Margaret smirks. “I have a few tricks up my sleeve.”

With that, Preston and Eli disperse from Margaret’s room and head back to their rooms to cuddle.
up with their wives. After she calms herself from her little episode, Margaret slips out of her room and heads to the kitchen. When she gets there, she flinches when she sees a mess of curls peering over the top of the open refrigerator door. Harry reveals his face to her and smiles.

“Evening, Margaret,” He says. “Getting a snack?”

“Yes,” Margaret sighs, internally begging every God in existence that their interaction doesn’t last long.

The two of them are quiet for a moment. The only sound that can be heard is the clattering of cups and dishes. Harry occasionally glances at Margaret, trying to work up the courage to say something else to her.

“So, uh,” he stutters. “I heard yelling from your room. Is everything alright, you know, between you, Eli, and Preston?”

Margaret nods. “Yes.”

A beat passes before Harry speaks up again. “What do the three of you talk about? I’ve always noticed how you have these late night discussions and…”

“Nothing,” Margaret interrupts. “Nothing of your concern.”

She collects her snack, a bowl of strawberries covered with whipped cream, and starts to leave the kitchen.

“Um, Margaret,” Harry calls, stopping her dead in her tracks.

She breathes a long-suffering sigh and looks back at him. “Yes?”

Harry bites his lip and looks down to avoid her harsh gaze. “Um, I just wanted to say that… what mother said to you the other night was very cruel. If you’re content with remaining single, then that’s perfectly fine. It’s your life, not hers.”

Margaret can’t help but scoff. “Didn’t have the stomach to say that to her face?”

Harry winces at how bitter she sounds and looks up to finally make eye contact with her. He doesn’t know what to say. He’s at a complete loss for words and he can’t help the frustration he feels because of that.

Ultimately, he just says the first thing that comes to his mind. “When’s your birthday?”

Margaret’s expression is the definition of unimpressed. She doesn’t say a word to her brother as she turns away from him and leaves the kitchen. Harry looks down at the tiled floor beneath him, an unmistakable feeling of shame materializing in the pit of his stomach.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

I... didn't mean for this to be so long. Enjoy! :)

“Judging from how you look, I can tell that you’re ecstatic about starting our second lesson.” Harry says, trying his best to hold in a laugh.

Louis is currently slumped back in his armchair and rubbing his temples. His hair resembles a jacked up crow’s nest, he’s dressed in sweats instead of the promiscuous clothing he always wears, and a pair of sunglasses are covering his bloodshot eyes. His night at Wonderland was a little too wild.

“Would you like some water?” Harry asks as a small chuckle manages to escape him.

“Please.” Louis whines.

Instead of calling out for Pam and Sam, Harry decides to have mercy on Louis’ migraine and texts them to bring up a glass of water. Not even five minutes later, the sound of heels frantically clicking against the floor can be heard before the twin maids burst into the room.

“Water!” They shout in unison as Pam thrusts a glass of water out towards Harry.

Louis groans at the volume of their voices and slides down in his armchair.

“What’s wrong, Lou?” Pam asks warily.

“Are you sick?” Sam muses, her tone riddled with concern.

“Are you hurt?”

“Are you mad?”

“Are you sad?”

“Are you-”

“He has a hangover.” Harry interrupts.

The twins glance at each other before they both let out a sympathetic, “How awful.”

“Just hand me the fucking water.” Louis grits out.

Harry rolls his eyes and hands Louis the glass. He doesn’t bother with reprimanding Louis for his language, not this time. Louis tips back the glass and drinks more than half of the water in one go.

“I’m never drinking that much ever again.” Louis groans. In the very back of his mind, he’s completely aware of how huge of a lie his statement is.

“Well, we would love to stay and talk…” Sam begins.
“But we have work to do!” Pam finishes.

The two scamper out of the room, their identical messes of red hair flying behind them. As much as Louis wants to acknowledge how cute their constant eagerness to work is, he feels way too awful to do so. The pounding in his head has a slow and steady rhythm that reduces him to a miserable mess.

“That’s what you get for drinking so much,” Harry chides. “I swear, hangovers are just God’s way of-”

“Spare me,” Louis groans as his head lolls to the side. “I do not want to hear whatever preachy, holier than thou bullshit you have managed to come up with.”

Harry raises his hands in mock defense, feeling only slightly put off by Louis’ candor. As time progresses, he’s growing more and more use to Louis’ personality. When they first started this process, Harry viewed Louis as a common spoiled rich kid simply acting out just because he can, but ever since the test yesterday, he’s been starting to rethink everything he’s ever thought about the man.

Harry was shocked to learn just how intelligent and well-mannered Louis can be. He only placed Louis in that setting to see how good his speech is, but he ended up observing a refined gentleman systematically winning over an entire room, utilizing his vast knowledge to further conversations and displaying an air of grace and dignity one can expect from a person of high status. Harry is going to continue his lessons and carry on normally, but he’s doing so with one thing in mind, a conclusion he came to last night as he tossed and turned in his bed. Louis doesn’t need any mentoring or teaching. He knows exactly what he’s supposed to do.

Louis notices how deep in thought Harry looks and cocks his head to the side. “What’s on your mind?”

Harry’s eyes lazily shift and pin Louis with a cold stare. Louis’ eyes widen behind his sunglasses as he takes in dead eyes free from their usual sparkle, tight lips, and a tense jaw. Harry, of course, has been frustrated with Louis before, therefore it would always show on his expression, but this… this is different. This is anger in its purest form.

“What’s on your mind?”

Harry smirks. “See? Now that’s intimidating. Are you ready to start our lesson or do you need more time to cope with the product of your mistakes?”
“I’m ready to go home.” Louis mumbles as he sits back in his seat.

Harry ignores that statement and instructs Louis to turn to page 35 in his textbook. Louis snatches his textbook off the table and does what he’s told. Harry didn’t mean to look so cold but he just couldn’t help it. Louis can easily flip a switch inside of himself and shift from a problem child to a world class gentleman, and he can’t even put on a suitable act for the sake of his family’s reputation and dignity? How disgraceful, how inconsiderate, how low.

“What the fuck did I do?” Louis snaps, his eyes wide in frustration.

Harry is silent as he mulls over the thought of calling Louis out, of letting Louis know that he isn’t fooling anyone. Ultimately, Harry decides against it.

“Nothing,” He replies. “Now, our second lesson is-”

“Tell me what your problem is,” Louis pleads. “I can’t…” he trails off and shifts his eyes away from Harry’s. “Just tell me why you’re so mad.”

Harry’s eyes widen. Louis’ voice was so vulnerable and free from its usual confidence, and it creates a sharp and sudden ache in Harry’s chest. The anger he felt before seems to dissipate, instantly getting replaced by a strong urge to relieve Louis of whatever negative emotion he’s feeling.

“I’m…” Harry trails off, trying to think of what to say. “I just- I don’t appreciate you coming here drunk or hungover to the point where you can’t function. I really wish that you’d refrain from doing your… usual activities on Saturday nights and Sunday mornings until this process is finished.”

Louis bites his lip as he mulls over the new information. He looks slightly irritated but thoughtful. A few beats pass before he nods. “I get where you’re coming from. It is kind of inconsiderate of me. I’ll stay in during that time.”

Harry can’t help but feel baffled. He was fully prepared for a snarky remark or, God forbid, a tantrum of some sort, but neither of those things happened. Louis acknowledged the error of his ways and agreed to do better in the future. Harry feels faint.

“Um, well, thank you.” Harry stutters, giving Louis a genuine smile.

Louis discreetly places his hands over his cheeks to hide how pink they’re getting. “Don’t mention it.”

Harry doesn’t mean to look at Louis with so much fondness, it just happens. “Please read the introductory paragraph.”

Louis nods as he holds up his textbook and shifts in his seat to get more comfortable. Harry can’t help the warmth that spreads in the center of his chest. He definitely doesn’t mind the clothes Louis normally wears, though he’ll never admit it, but he feels so endeared by how relaxed and soft Louis currently looks.

“Lesson 2, table etiquette,” Louis reads. “Table etiquette is the gateway to all other forms of etiquette. If a man does not display the proper behavior when enjoying a meal, then he is hopeless anywhere else.” He furrows his eyebrows and looks up at Harry. “Really?”

Harry nods. “You can tell a lot about a person from their table manners.”

Louis purses his lips and continues reading. “In this chapter, you will learn the proper way to
behave during a formal breakfast, lunch, or dinner. The skills required are memory, patience, and attentiveness.”

“Good,” Harry praises. He reaches down, pulls a rectangular wooden case off the floor, and places it on the coffee table. “The first part covers cutlery.” He opens the case to reveal all types of forks, spoons, and knives. Each utensil is in their own little compartment on a soft bed of velvet.

Harry clears his throat before he starts rattling off the correct name of each utensil and what they’re used for. Louis’ eyes are wide and unblinking as he tries to absorb all the information being thrown at him. Briefly, he wishes to go back in time and strangle whoever thought that all this shit was necessary to enjoy one meal.

“Well, that covers it,” Harry finishes. “Any questions?”

“Just one,” Louis says. “Can you, like, stick one of those knives in my neck and kill me?”

Harry rolls his eyes and bites his lip to prevent himself from laughing. “I’m afraid I can’t do that. I’ll get sent to prison if I do.”

Louis pouts. “What a pity.”

Harry turns the case around and pushes it closer to Louis. “Let’s see if you have a good memory. Give me the name and purpose of-”

“Do you want to come over to my house for lunch?” Louis asks.

Harry pauses at the sudden invitation, slowly blinking at Louis as he processes his words. Louis stares back at him and it’s obvious that he’s trying to keep his expression neutral, but he ends up looking just as nervous as he feels on the inside.

“I-It’s not my idea,” Louis clarifies. “My parents… they want to have you over.”

Harry clears his throat with a small cough. “Um, I would love to have lunch with you and your family. When do your parents want me to come over?”

“Is Wednesday fine with you?” Louis asks, wringing his hands.

“What time?”

“Four.”

“Fine with me.”

Louis nods and doesn’t say another word. The session carries on without another interruption.

~

“Harry.”

The voice above Harry is so soft and desperate and he can’t see the owner of it. His eyelids are closed and they feel like they weigh a ton. The only thing he can feel is a weight on top of him and the soft mattress of his bed.

“Open your eyes,” The voice giggles. “Come on. Let me see your eyes.”

And suddenly, Harry feels a thousand times lighter. His eyes slowly blink open, temporarily
blinded by the haze of bright, afternoon light streaming in through the window. His curtains are open and that's how he knows this is a dream. His curtains are never open. When his eyes are well adjusted to the light, they widen at the sight in front of him.

Louis is straddling Harry’s waist and has his hands rubbing up and down Harry’s torso. But the thing that gets Harry to almost start choking on his own spit, is the fact that Louis is completely naked and Harry is still fully clothed in his pajamas. Harry doesn’t even notice the state Louis is in until Louis starts talking again.

“You have such gorgeous eyes.” Louis practically whimpers, grinding his hips against Harry’s groin. His skin is flushed, his pupils are dilated with a thin rim of blue surrounding them, his hair is messy, and his breaths are coming out in desperate pants.

“L-Louis,” Harry manages to stutter out, his voice sounding rough to his own ears. “What are you doing?”

Louis bites his lip as he leans down, bracketing Harry’s head with his forearms. “Pleasing you.”

Harry swallows. “What if I don’t want to be pleased?”

“Don’t,” Louis whimpers, nuzzling his head against Harry’s chest. “Oh, God, don’t torture me. Say you want me. Please.”

Harry wants to resist. He’s aware that this is merely a dream and no consequences would come out of him giving into temptation, but he views this as a test of how strong he is. If he can resist Louis in a dream, then he can surely resist him in real life.

“I-I don’t-”

Harry cuts himself off when Louis pulls away from his chest and looks down at him. His eyes are pleading, his lips are raw from biting them so much, and there’s a layer of sweat on his forehead. Wordlessly, his steady grinding turns rough and Harry squeezes his eyes shut and grits his teeth, trying his best to not make it known just how good it feels. Louis smirks as if he knows how much Harry is holding back. He doesn’t even have to try anymore. He knows he’s the winner of this round. He grabs one of Harry’s hands and lifts it up to his face. Harry finally lets out a small moan when Louis wraps his lips around his middle finger.

Louis locks eyes with Harry and giggles as he slowly takes the finger out of his mouth. “Hmm, did you like that?”

“I-I-”

“You want more,” Louis says lowly. “Just say it. Say it and you can have anything.”

“Anything?”

“Anything I can give you, baby. Just say it.”

In this moment, the urge to resist seems to drain out of Harry. “I want-”

“Harry!”

Harry’s eyes fling open as he feels himself getting jostled around. Pam and Sam are on his bed on either side of him, roughly shaking him awake and shouting his name. When they see that he’s finally awake, they kneel their way off the bed and give him matching looks of disapproval.
“You slept through your alarm!” They yell in unison.

“You only have ten minutes to get ready for breakfast.” Pam informs.

“Get your butt in gear, mister!” Sam orders.

When the twins rush out of the room, Harry scrambles out of bed and pauses as soon as he stands up. Slowly, he looks down and nearly chokes at the tent that has formed at the front of his pajama pants. He covers his crotch with his hands as if that’ll fix the issue and looks around, having a slight fear that someone saw his shame.

“Goddammit,” He mumbles, feeling too frazzled to reprimand himself for the coarse language. “Goddammit, goddammit, goddammit!”

And that just might be his new favorite word.

Miraculously, Harry manages to take a cold shower, brush his teeth, and throw together an outfit in the span of ten minutes. He rushes downstairs and doesn’t notice until he’s halfway to the dining room that his shoes don’t match. He sighs in defeat and decides that he can fix that later.

He instantly feels seven pairs of eyes on him when he enters the dining room. Wordlessly, he takes his usual seat adjacent to his father and next to Madeline. His food is already on the table, a vegetable omelet served with a bowl of oatmeal and a glass of orange juice. Eventually, he looks up and faces every questioning stare being directed at him.

He turns to his parents and sighs. “I apologize for my tardiness. I… I slept through my alarm.”

Carter and Gwendoline almost look comical when their eyes widen in unison. They glance at each other, seeming to have a silent conversation with their eyes.

Carter puts down his fork before he faces Harry with a wary expression. “Are you alright, son? Did you have a rough night?”

“I’m just fine,” Harry answers. “I just slept through my alarm. No big deal.”

“Um, well,” Gwendoline stutters. “It’s just not like you. You’re always the first person at the table and you weren’t even here when the food was served. That’s… odd.”

“Not really,” Harry says, slowly losing his patience. “I just slept through my alarm. Don’t worry, it won’t happen again.”

“Well-”

“Get off my back!” Harry snaps.

The table grows silent as Harry’s harsh words echo through the air. Carter and Gwendoline look shocked, Madeline and Evelyn look worried, and Margaret, Preston, and Eli look way too pleased.

“H-Harry,” Gwendoline breathes. “What on earth has gotten into you?”

Harry closes his eyes, counts to ten, and breathes a deep sigh. “I apologize mother. I’m just… really tired.”

Harry doesn’t say anything else as he picks up the proper utensils to eat his food. He can still feel the entire table staring at him, but the feeling eventually passes as everyone wordlessly resumes their breakfast. Madeline places her hand on Harry’s knee and gives it a gentle squeeze.
“Are you ok?” She asks so quietly that only Harry can hear her.

He nods. “I’m ok.”

Madeline doesn’t believe him one bit, but she doesn’t pry. She gives his knee one last squeeze, a gesture that says I’m here for you, and turns her attention to Preston when he taps her on the shoulder. Harry wants to eat in silence and not make his presence known, but he does have things to talk to his parents about.

“Mother, father,” He calls. His parents regard him with raised eyebrows and wary expressions. “Um, Victoria and I are going out to the farmers market today.”

“Can Madeline and I come?” Evelyn asks, practically bouncing in her seat. “If Victoria won’t come to us, then we’ll come to her.”

“I can also pick up a few things.” Madeline muses, going through a mental checklist of things she might need.

“Oh, I’m sure Harry prefers to be alone with his fiancé,” Gwendaînîe laughîs as if Madeline and Evelyn accompanying the couple is the most ridiculous suggestion in the world. “When your father and I first began our courtship, we dreaded every moment that we had to be around other people.”

“We always wanted to be by ourselves.” Carter says softly, reaching over to hold Gwendaînîe’s hand in his. Despite his cold nature, the man absolutely adores his wife.

Harry smiles at the obvious love and admiration flowing between his parents. “It’s ok if they come along, mother. We’re just going to walk around and eat whatever looks good.”

“Splendid!” Evelyn cheers. “Eli, do you want to come?”

“No,” He instantly answers. “I’ve got things to do.”

“Like what?” Carter mumbles. “Sitting around, enjoying my air conditioning, eating my food, and using up my electricity?”

Eli clenches his fists and sighs. “I work hard for your company, father.”

“Mhm,” Carter hums, his face devoid of any emotion as he eats his food. “I guess you do.”

There’s so much Eli wants to say, but none of it will even remotely work out in his favor. Evelyn places her hand on his back and starts rubbing it in small circles, instantly calming him down and relieving him of the tension built up in his body.

Harry looks at Preston and Madeline to see that the two of them are whispering to each other. Preston pays such careful attention to his wife, looking at her as if she contained the answer to how world peace can be achieved. Harry is surrounded by such shining examples of what he wants his marriage to be like. He wants himself and Victoria to be just as in love and devoted to each other as the three couples he’s currently observing. Margaret, who hasn’t talked to anyone all morning, rolls her eyes at all the sappiness she’s seeing. What she needs is a whole bottle of vodka, which she can later get from the kitchen when everyone else busies themselves with their usual activities.

“One more thing,” Harry says after he swallows a chunk of his omelet. “The Tomlinsons have invited me to their house for lunch on Wednesday.”

“Really?” Gwendaînîe drawls. “I’ve never heard of them inviting people over to their home.”
“I don’t blame them,” Carter chuckles. “You should’ve seen their son during my gathering. He was a shining example of a model gentleman. They must feel grateful for the incredible work our boy did.”

Gwendoline turns to Harry, her eyes crinkling with how wide she’s smiling. “Well, I can’t say that I’m shocked.”

Harry looks down at his food with a faint blush on his cheeks. “Mother, please.”

Preston and Eli bite their tongues to avoid saying something they’ll regret later. Margaret just shakes her head, taking a sip of her orange juice to keep herself from laughing.

When breakfast is over and the table is cleared by the maids stationed in the kitchen, everyone gets up and wanders off to their own activities. After Harry changes into a matching pair of loafers, he heads back downstairs and joins Madeline and Evelyn in the foyer.

“Are you ready?” Evelyn asks, smoothing out the skirt of her sundress.

“Ready.” Harry answers.

The drive to Victoria’s house is lively and filled with joy and laughter. The sun is shining and there’s only a few wispy clouds dotting the sky, the radio station that’s currently on is on a roll and playing hit after hit, and Evelyn and Madeline, both sitting comfortably in the back seat, have Harry in a constant state of high amusement. To say that he’s in high spirits by the time he gets to Victoria’s house would be an understatement.

Victoria is sitting on the steps outside her house, but instantly gets up when Harry’s car stops in front of her. She’s once again dressed in yellow and Harry curses himself when he notices that the color really does wash her out.

“Oh, she is gorgeous.” Madeline gushes.

“She reminds me of Elsa from Frozen.” Evelyn giggles.

Madeline snorts. “Child.”

Evelyn sticks her tongue out at her. “Buzzkill.”


Before either of them can say anything, Harry slips out of the car to greet Victoria by the passenger side. When he’s close enough, she takes his hand and gets on the tips of her toes to kiss his cheek.

“I see we have company.” She says.

Harry scratches the back of his head as his nerves overtake him. He didn’t once consider if Victoria would mind other people intruding on their time together.

“Um, yeah,” He sighs. “They’re my brothers’ wives.”

Her entire face lights up. “Really?”

Harry nods. “Yeah. They couldn’t wait to meet you, so they decided to tag along.” He wrings his hands. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all.” She answers cheerfully.
As soon as Harry opens the door for Victoria, she’s instantly bombarded with loud greetings and excited chatter. Victoria grins at the sudden burst of energy, and responds to Madeline and Evelyn with an equal amount of cheer. Harry smiles fondly as he gets back in the car and begins their journey to the farmers market. As he tunes out the flowing conversation around him, he thinks about how thankful he is that Madeline and Evelyn decided to tag along. He can’t even look at Victoria without feeling guilt coiling around his heart like a snake. He realizes that what happened with Louis was only a dream, but he still feels like he betrayed her. If the twins hadn’t woken him up, he would’ve… he blushes when he starts to think about what he would’ve done.

“Harry?”

He turns his attention to a confused looking Victoria. “Yes?”

“Are you ok?”

“I’m just fine. Why do you ask?”

“You’re gripping the steering wheel tighter than a vice!” Evelyn interjects.

Harry notices that he is in fact gripping the steering wheel way too tight. He weakens his hold on it and takes a deep breath to relieve himself of any built up tension. Victoria looks hopelessly confused yet worried while Evelyn and Madeline look skeptical. If Victoria wasn’t in the car, they would definitely interrogate Harry and try to figure out why he’s acting so weird.

As soon as they all enter the market, Evelyn and Madeline eagerly drag Victoria away, leaving Harry alone with his thoughts. He’s leaning against a small, abandoned fruit stand, munching on a plum he bought as soon as he came in. As he finishes off the last of his snack, he comes to a rather sound conclusion. The dream he had means absolutely nothing. He’s attracted to Louis, he’ll reluctantly admit that, but the attraction is purely physical. He sighs a breath of relief, strangely taking comfort in his realization. Physical attraction is meaningless, and slowly but surely, it passes.

“Well, isn’t this a pleasant surprise.”

For a moment, Harry feels like he’s hearing things because there’s just no way this is happening.

“You ignoring me, baby?”

Harry takes a deep breath before he turns his head to face Louis. He’s grinning at Harry in such an innocent manner that one would have to be a fool to fall for. His lips are stained mauve, most likely due to the popsicle he’s holding in his right hand. He’s dressed in a white crop top with short, ruffled sleeves, black skinny jeans, and a pair of boots. Two women with bright colored hair are standing on either side of him, fiercely analyzing Harry as they enjoy their own popsicles. The one on the right is dressed just as promiscuously as Louis while the one on the left is dressed more casually.

“Are you stalking me?” Harry asks, only half joking.

“I was just about to ask you the same thing.” Louis counters. He takes a firm lick of his popsicle and Harry can’t help but follow the movement of his tongue.

“You’re Harry?” The casually dressed woman asks, her voice low and gravelly.

“Yup.” Louis says before Harry can answer. “Babe, the nosy one is Cara,” Cara sticks her tongue out at him. “And this angel is Perrie.”
“It’s nice to finally meet you!” Perrie says, her voice reminiscent of silver bells. The tone of her voice, the expression on her face, and her entire aura are the epitomes of joy and warmth. Harry instantly likes her.

“It’s lovely to meet you, too,” Harry replies. His eyes shift over to Cara. “It’s lovely to meet both of you.”

Cara smirks as she takes a bite of her popsicle. “Thanks for tacking that on, pal.”

“How come Perrie gets all the warmth from you?” Louis asks. It’s obvious that he’s trying to sound like he’s joking, but there’s a slight edge to his tone that shows that he’s serious.

“Probably because she’s not a brat like some people.” Harry scoffs.

“You just met her!” Louis shouts in disbelief. “You don’t know that!”

“Your boy is an amazing judge of character.” Cara laughs. She laughs even harder when Louis flips her off without looking at her.

“I like him,” Perrie giggles. “I wanna put him in my purse and keep him as my pet!”

“Alright,” Cara drawls. “We’re driving right past cute and heading towards the border of creepy. Chill.”

“I can’t help it!” Perrie pouts. “Look at him! Those dimples are killing me right now.”

Surprisingly, Harry laughs. “Thanks. Got them from my mother.”

“Glad you two are best friends.” Louis mutters with his arms crossed. He honestly looks two seconds away from stomping his foot and leaving the area.

“Don’t be so salty.” Cara scoffs.

Before Louis can respond to that, Harry speaks up. “I’m actually glad that you’re here.”

Louis pauses and narrows his eyes suspiciously at Harry. “You are? Why?”

“I have to talk to you.” Harry rushes out before he can psych himself out.

As if they had rehearsed it, Louis, Cara, and Perrie cock their heads to the side at the exact same time, their eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

“Um, ok.” Louis drawls.

Harry guides him away from Cara and Perrie with the promise of bringing him right back. The two of them head over to a small, red barn, purely there for decoration, and slip inside of it. There’s no one in there and the only sound that can be heard is gravel crunching underneath their shoes. Louis casually leans against a wooden post, staring expectantly at Harry. In this moment, Harry feels completely vulnerable.

“I don’t really know how to lead into this,” Harry admits, avoiding Louis’ intense stare. “So I’ll just cut to the chase.” He takes a deep breath and forces his eyes to meet Louis’. “We’re attracted to each other.”

Louis’ eyes widen, clearly expecting anything but that, and his lips form into an amused smile. He doesn’t say anything. He just stands there and waits for what Harry’s going to say next, intrigued.
as to where he’s going with this.

“However,” Harry continues confidently. “There’s nothing we can do about our feelings, absolutely nothing. I am betrothed and we are both men. You might be under the impression that I’ll break and bend to your will, but that will never happen. I’m telling you this because I don’t want things to escalate into a huge mess that’ll end up destroying both of us. Besides, physical attraction isn’t indicative of anything important. It’s a product of lust and it passes just as quickly as it comes. What we’re feeling now will not last, I will remain faithful to Victoria, and that’s that.”

Louis purses his lips and nods, pretending to give Harry’s words some thought. He finishes off his popsicle, drops the mauve painted stick on the ground, and taps a small beat with his foot before he speaks.

“So, you admit that you want to fuck me.”

Harry gawks at him, his face going red at how blunt that statement was. “I-Is that all you got from that?”

Louis shrugs with a small laugh. “I zoned in and out. You were boring me.”

“Louis,” Harry sighs in frustration. “This is serious. We-”

“You know,” Louis interrupts. “For a gentleman, you’re pretty presumptuous. Here you are droning on about how physical attraction works, and you don’t even know for sure if I want you.”

“You do, though.” Harry replies without another thought. He almost slaps himself for how arrogant he sounds, but there’s a huge part of him that feels bothered by Louis’ statement.

“I do?” Louis asks mockingly. “Hmm, I don’t think so. I’ve certainly given no indication that I’m into you.”

Harry runs his tongue across his top set of teeth, trying to control the annoyance that’s starting to flare up. “I know what you’re trying to do, Louis.”

Louis gives a wide smile that proudly displays his teeth. “What am I trying to do?”

“You’re trying to wind me up.”

“Is it working, baby?”

“No,” Harry shakes his head and takes a step back from Louis. “No, no, no.”

“You’re thinking too much,” Louis says, his expression just as soft as his voice. “Way too much.” He takes a couple of steps forward and places his hand on Harry’s chest. “If I wanted you, I would suggest a few ways that I could ease your tension, clear your mind.”

Harry remains silent.

“I could massage your neck,” Louis continues, trailing his hand from Harry’s chest to the nape of his neck. “Maybe press my lips against all of your sweet spots, leave a couple of hickeys.”

Harry clenches his teeth, his resolve slowly crumbling.

“Or maybe that’s not what you would like,” Louis giggles, his cheeks darkening. “Maybe you’d like me to use my mouth for something else.”
Harry lets his eyes slip shut, wondering how much longer he can last.

“Hmm, is that it?” Louis sighs, wrapping his arms around Harry’s neck and pressing their bodies together. For a moment, Harry fears that his teeth will break from how hard he’s clenching them.

“I’d get down on my knees,” Louis breaths. “And you could just grab my hair and do whatever you want. I wouldn’t care how rough you’d get. I’d just care about making you feel better. I’d let you fucking *drown* in me if it would make you feel better.” He pulls away from Harry and slides his hands on his shoulders. “But unfortunately, I don’t want you.”

And just like that, a switch flips in Harry’s head and he momentarily loses his conscience. He grabs Louis by the arm, stopping him from stepping away, and presses him up against a nearby post.

“Don’t play dumb.” Harry spits.

“I’m not,” Louis says, sounding as if he’s sedated. His cheeks are pink and his eyes are vacant and glossy. “I’m not into you at all. There isn’t a single thing about you that I find- *fuck!*”

Louis is at a loss for words when Harry hikes up his crop top, revealing his flushed chest. He leans forward and rests his head on Louis’ shoulder as his hands rub up and down a smooth plane of a defined, hairless torso.

“You wanna push me away then?” Harry asks with a certain edge to his tone.

“I-I don’t-”

Louis cuts himself off with a whine as Harry starts to rub the pads of his thumbs against his nipples. They’re puffy and sensitive due to the sudden assault of his senses, and he can’t think straight due to how good it feels for them to be touched. For a moment, he considers guiding Harry’s mouth to his chest, having a strong desire to see if it’s just as good as his hands.

“Look at how your body is arching into my touch,” Harry chuckles, his voice low and raspy. “I thought you didn’t want me.”

“Doesn’t prove anything,” Louis whines. “You’re just touching me in a way that I like to be touched.”

Harry hums thoughtfully as he takes Louis’ nipples between his fingers and give them a slight pinch. Louis flinches at the sudden action and instantly grinds his hips into Harry’s. Harry pulls away from Louis’ shoulders, revealing a smug half-smile that should piss Louis off instead of making him feel flustered. Harry’s expression grows blank as he stares at Louis, getting lost in how ruined he looks from just having his nipples touched. Harry has always prided himself in never giving into greed, but he can’t help but want more. He wants *everything.*

With only slight hesitation, Harry leans forward and presses his lips against Louis’, sighing at how soft and slick they are. There’s a certain innocence to this kiss considering its their first. It’s brimming with curiosity and the potential of something more. The feeling that Harry doesn’t want to acknowledge flares up, and he can no longer ignore it. He knows what it is. He knows exactly what it is and he wants to drown in it. *Desire.*

Harry breaks the kiss only to lean back in for another. This time, there’s no trace of innocence that can be detected. Louis parts his lips and Harry slips his tongue between them. He knows what to do. He’s no stranger to any of this. A low groan vibrates through Harry’s throat as the taste of blackberries invades his taste buds. He feels lighter, as if he’s about to lift off the ground at any
minute and float off into space, as the kiss becomes maddeningly heady. He nips at Louis’ bottom lip as he pulls away, pressing their foreheads together as he once again lets his hands explore Louis’ torso.

Louis’ laugh comes out as breathless and choked off. “Oh, how bold you are when you’re provoked.”

In this moment, realization seems to dawn on Harry. He feels as if his entire body has been extinguished by a wave of ice cold water. He lets go of Louis and takes a step back, putting at least a foot of space between them. His eyes remain glued to the ground and his body is trembling. He knew Louis was playing him like a fiddle, yet he still gave in.

“I—I’m sorry,” Harry says sheepishly. “I’m very sorry, but—”

“What are you sorry for?” Louis asks.

And Harry is absolutely stumped. He has no idea what he’s apologizing for, but he still feels the urge to apologize a thousand times more. Louis pulls his top back down and smooths it out, cursing under his breath when he notices a mauve colored stain on it. He crosses his arms over his chest and locks his eyes with Harry, preventing the other man from looking anywhere else.

“You can’t help yourself,” Louis chuckles. “Did you seriously think you could just drag me in here, confess that you want to me, which I already knew by the way, and then walk back out with some bullshit assumption that we’d act casual from now on?”

Harry hates being at a loss for words, but that’s something that always tends to happen whenever he’s around Louis. The man always has a way of shutting him up.

“I won’t be mean,” Louis sighs as he takes his phone out of his back pocket. “I’ll leave you alone… for now.”

With that, Louis spins on his heels and heads toward the exit of the barn. He’s halfway there before he snaps his fingers and looks back at Harry. “Don’t forget our lunch on Wednesday. Four o’clock sharp.”

He once again looks forward and leaves the barn without another word. Harry feels like he has weights attached to his ankles keeping him firmly in place. He squeezes his eyes shut and clenches his fists, wishing that he had kept his mouth shut because he knows this entire situation can only get worse from here. He counts to ten in his head before he walks out of the barn.

“Harry!”

Harry turns his head at the sound of his name to see Madeline, Evelyn, and Victoria. They’re all waving at him and carrying their individual baskets of fresh produce.

“Get your cute behind over here!” Evelyn shouts, her words slightly slurred.

Harry walks up to them, feeling slight confusion by the added sway in Evelyn’s step and the sloppiness of her speech.

“She had a few drinks.” Madeline says as if she read Harry’s mind.

“All natural drinks!” Evelyn corrects, throwing her arm around Victoria’s neck. “I like shopping with Vic. She doesn’t tell me what to do.” She looks pointedly at Madeline.
“Sorry, Maddie,” Victoria giggles. “I didn’t expect for this one to get so out of hand.”

Harry’s eyes widen. One afternoon and they’re already using nicknames. Victoria comes up to him and locks their arms together as they, along with Madeline and Evelyn, head out of the farmers market.

“So, what kept you busy while the girls and I were getting up to no good?” Victoria asks, her expression feigning mischief.

“Stuffing my face,” Harry rushes out, his voice wavering. “Nothing interesting.”

Victoria nods and gives his bicep a light squeeze. Harry feels so guilty that his chest is starting to ache. Not too long ago, he was feeling up another person, another man, in a barn and now he’s lying to Victoria’s face, and despite how suspiciously he answered her question, she still believed him with her entire heart. She trusts him.

Harry must control himself. He must kick Louis out of his system and keep their relationship strictly professional. If he can’t do it for his own sake, then he can do it for Victoria’s.

~

Harry comes to the Tomlinson manor at four o’clock exactly. While the Styles manor has a gaudy flare to it with its bright flowers and gold decorations, the Tomlinson manor is more traditional with its beige color, ivy covered walls, and stone decorations. It’s simple compared to the other homes in Alton, and Harry absolutely adores it.

Harry parks his car right by the front entrance, switches the engine off, and hops out of it with poorly concealed uncertainty. He has a big bag filled with smaller gift bags and he’s nervous about how Mr. and Mrs. Tomlinson will react to them. Some people in this town hate it when guests bring gifts. They feel like it’s an action that stems from feelings of pity and obligation. Harry is completely aware of this, but he wants to take a chance. There’s such a massive part of him that wants to impress these people, more so than anyone else he’s met. He approaches the double doors of the manor and rings the door bell. A pleasant chime rings out and fills the calm silence.

“Coming!” Someone yells from the other side of the door. Their voice is light and reminiscent of songbirds.

A beat passes before the doors swing open, revealing a petite, modestly dressed girl with ridiculously long, pitch black hair that reaches past her tailbone. Her face has the same even mix of sharp and soft features as Louis. It’s clear to Harry that she’s one of Louis’ sisters. Her eyes are wide and her smile is kind as she looks up at him.

“Welcome!” She cheers, clasping her hands together. “I’ve only seen you from afar around town, and you are definitely much more handsome up close! My name is Angelica, Louis’ younger sister. Welcome to our home!”

Harry blinks at her, feeling overwhelmed from the burst of energy he has only seen in the twins.

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“Um, thank you very much for the warm welcome. It is great to be here.” He reaches inside the bag and pulls out a gift out with her name on it. “This is for you.”

Angelica gasps as she takes the gift from Harry’s hand. “You didn’t have to do that! Oh, thank you so much. I always knew you were a kind man.”

She eagerly digs her hand into the bag and gasps at what she pulls out of it. In her hand, there’s a pack of five choker necklaces that vary in design. She keeps switching her gaze from the gift to
Harry before she wraps Harry up in a tight hug.

“A man after my own heart!” She shouts.

“I’m getting jealous over here.”

Harry looks over Angelica’s shoulder just as she looks back. Louis is standing in the middle of the foyer with his arms crossed over his chest and a fond smile on his face. He’s dressed casually in a blue t-shirt, jean shorts, and a pair of navy blue Sperrys.

“Your mentor is so generous!” Angelica giggles.

“He’s very generous.” Louis drawls as he approaches the pair. Harry glowers at him. “You came bearing gifts? How lovely! What’d you get me?”

“You take three hours away from my Sundays,” Harry deadpans. “That’s your gift.”

Louis places a hand on his chest and acts as if he’s offended. “No gift for me?” he leans closer to Harry. “Not making an effort to impress the one you like? And I thought you were a gentleman.”

Angelica is watching the two of them in slight confusion. She thinks for a moment, comes to a conclusion, scoffs at how ridiculous her conclusion sounds, looks back at them, and widens her eyes when realization dawns on her.


“Have you gone mad?” Louis asks, nearly laughing just because she’s laughing.

She shakes her head. “No… well, maybe a little, but anyway,” She looks between him and Harry and laughs again. “I’ll keep my mouth shut.” She turns away from the two men and exits the foyer.

“Great,” Harry sighs. “She thinks there is something going on between us.”

Louis raises an eyebrow, amusement coloring his features. “Isn’t there?”

“If you want to act this way, then that is completely fine,” Harry says. “But I am determined to keep things normal between us.”

Louis shakes his head. “Oh, baby, it’s much too late for that.” He turns away from him and goes in the same direction Angelica went in. “Follow me.”

Harry takes a deep, shaky breath, relieving some of the tension in his body, before he follows. He tries his best to ignore the extra sway Louis puts into his walk, but he fails miserably. He can hear Louis’ family before he can see them. Their chatter is loud and their laughs are louder. The smell of food wafts at his nostrils when he and Louis pass the kitchen. It’s strong yet it’s so unbelievably good. As soon as the two of them are outside, they see the entire family sitting under a gazebo in the middle of the backyard. The back of the manor is just as simple as the front, filled with nothing but ivy and stone statues and walkways.

“There they are!” Angelica announces, raising her glass of lemonade.

Everyone else under the gazebo turns their attention toward the back door. Harry recognizes Marie and Ezekiel, but not the two girls on either side of Angelica. One of the girls is considerably young but holds herself with the grace and dignity of a lady. Harry assumes that she’s Rose. The other girl looks as if she’s in her teens, but she certainly doesn’t have the same disposition as one. She is
Harry clearly thought it was a woman, and Harry assumed that she’s Carmen.

Harry is right on Louis’ heels as he makes his way to the gazebo. When they get there, Louis takes a seat beside Rose and Harry takes the seat beside Louis, which is the only seat available.

“It’s lovely to see you again, Harry.” Marie grins.

“Same to you, Mrs. Tomlinson.” Harry replies, turning on his signature charm.

“The food will be out in a moment,” She informs. “I don’t know when you last ate, but I hope you’re able to hold on before your stomach starts eating itself.”

Harry laughs. “I had a pretty full breakfast this morning, so I think I will be fine.”

“He has presents!” Rose shouts. Her eyes are alight and she radiates a certain joy you can only expect from children. There isn’t a trace of her former air of maturity in sight.

“Rose, calm down.” Ezekiel reprimands. His voice is firm yet holds a certain softness.

Rose isn’t able to calm down, not with the knowledge that she might receive a gift.

Harry sheepishly reaches down and opens the bag. “I, uh, hope you do not mind that I brought gifts.”

“Free stuff!” Carmen cheers, practically bouncing in her seat. “Give me!”

“Carmen.” Ezekiel snap, causing her to immediately calm down.

Marie rolls her eyes before she faces Harry with a genuine smile. “Love, you didn’t have to do that.”

“I wanted to,” Harry says, pulling out Rose’s gift. “I have to start with the little one. I do not think she can wait any longer.”

Rose reaches across the table and takes the bag from Harry. She closes her eyes and digs around the bag.

“She wants to be surprised.” Louis whispers to Harry. Harry’s heart softens at how fond Louis sounds. It’s clear as day that he loves his sisters more than anything.

Rose takes the item out of the bag and holds it up to her face before she opens her eyes. She grins so hard that her cheeks hurt when she sees a black, rectangular box of premium chocolate in her hands.

“Thank you, Mr. Styles!” She cheers, cuddling the chocolate to her chest.

Harry winces. “Um, sweetie, you can call me Harry, ok? Wow, I have never been referred to as Mr. Styles, so I kind of feel old now.”

Marie laughs. “Oh, hush, junior.”

“I’m next!” Carmen shouts.

Harry digs around his bag and pulls Carmen’s gift out of it. He hands the gift to her and she eagerly takes it. Next, Harry pulls out Marie and Ezekiel’s gifts and hands them over to their proper owners.
“What’s that?” Louis asks, his voice low. Harry is confused until Louis points toward the bag. Right at the very bottom, one last gift bag is visible.

Harry shrugs. “It is nothing.”

Louis pouts. “Why are you torturing me?”

“Because it is fun.” Harry teases.

Louis stares at Harry for a moment before he thrusts his hand in Harry’s bag. Harry lets out a shocked laugh as he tries to push Louis away from the bag and close it. For a moment, they forget that they’re around other people.

“Relax, children!” Angelica giggles, eliciting laughter from the entire table.

Harry pauses his movements and blushes at his childlike behavior. Louis is silently laughing over his empty plate, sending a wave of heat through Harry’s chest.

Moments later, three servants come out of the house with the food. They lay the platters and a pitcher full of lemonade down at the center of the table. When they excuse themselves and leave the gazebo, everyone starts filling their plates and glasses. Their lunch consists of salami sandwiches with melted gouda cheese and a side of cobb salad.

Lunch carries on without a hitch. Louis’ family radiates the warmth and love that Harry often wishes was present in his own family. He’s so used to tense conversations and uncomfortable silence that it almost overwhelms him to be a part of a family dinner where everyone is so close and inviting. He’s also pleasantly surprised to observe a softer side of Louis. He keeps grinning, playing around with his siblings, and hiding his face in Harry’s shoulder whenever he laughs too hard.

In the middle of lunch, Louis’ phone goes off. He apologizes before he excuses himself from the table for a moment. Marie keeps her eyes on Louis and waits until he’s completely out of earshot before she grabs Harry’s attention.

“Ma’am?” he replies.

Marie sighs as she reaches across the table to take Harry’s hand in hers. “Thank you so much. You are a Godsend.”

Harry doesn’t have any idea what she’s talking about until realization dawns on him. “Oh, there is no need to-”

“Yes,” Marie interrupts. “There is. You didn’t have to offer your time to help our son, but you did, and now he’s… a whole new person. Did you see how he politely excused himself from the table? Before you came along, he’d normally just get up and leave without saying a word to anyone. I mean, his clothing choices are still inappropriate at times, but I don’t expect everything to get fixed when you guys are just two months in. I realize I’m probably rambling at this point but, I just want you to know that Ezekiel and I appreciate you for fixing him.”

“There was nothing wrong with him to begin with.” Angelica mutters so lowly that only Rose and Carmen can hear her.

“Angelica,” Carmen warns. “don’t.”

“He’s turning into such an exceptional young man,” Ezekiel says, his smile genuine. “And it’s all
thanks to you. If you ever need our assistance for anything, we’re here for you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Tomlinson.” Harry replies, feeling strong sincerity from his words.

Louis comes back out just moments later and takes his seat. “So, what did I miss?”

“Nothing important.” Angelica answers, obviously annoyed.

Louis turns his attention to Harry and gives him a small smile. It’s genuine, sincere, and free from all its usual mischief. Harry smiles back at him and unconsciously places his hand on Louis’ knee.

“Enjoying yourself?” Louis asks.

“Definitely.” Harry answers.

Angelica eyes them from across the table with a knowing look on her face. When Louis looks back across the table and meets her gaze, he looks down and blushes, causing her to laugh.

“What’s so funny, love?” Marie asks.

“Nothing,” Angelica answers, taking a sip of her lemonade. “I’m just thinking about something.”

When lunch is over and conversation dies down, the three servants from before come back out to collect the dirty dishes. Harry leaves Louis’ family with warm hugs and soft goodbyes. Louis follows him as he enters the backdoor, offering to walk him to his car. As they make their way to the foyer, Louis keeps glancing at the bag in Harry’s hand. When they walk out of the front door and over to Harry’s car, Louis finally breaks.

“Are you seriously not gonna give me my gift?” He snaps.

Harry raises an eyebrow. “How do you know it’s for you?”

“I will kill you and make it look like an accident.”

Harry laughs as he pulls Louis’ gift out and hands it to him. Louis snatches it out of Harry’s hand and greedily thrusts his hand inside of it. He pulls out his gift and pauses when he sees what it is, a midnight blue crop top with short, ruffled sleeves.

“I-I hope you like it,” Harry stutters. “I just- I noticed back at the barn how you got a stain on your white one and, well, blackberry stains are hell to get out, so I got you a replacement.”

Louis remains silent, his eyebrows furrowed as he stares at the top.

“I, uh, I know that the one you have is white,” Harry continues. “But I really like the color. I think it’d look good on you. I tried to find your size, you can let me know if it’s, like, too big or too small and I’ll take it back. And-”

Louis cuts Harry off by wrapping his arms around his neck and pressing their lips together. Harry knows that he should push him away and reprimand him for doing such a thing, but there’s no part of him that wants to. Usually, there’s at least a small part of him that constantly nags at him about doing the right thing, but in this moment, it’s completely silent. There isn’t a single thing on his mind but the beautiful and wonderfully complex man in front of him. Slowly but surely, Harry melts into the kiss. He places his hands on Louis’ waist and allows his eyes to close.

He lets himself drown.
Harry wakes up before the sun begins to rise, dreading what awaits him on this Sunday morning. The sky is still covered by a cool blanket of night and the only source of light is the crescent moon high above. He hasn’t spoken to Louis since Wednesday’s lunch and he feels as if he might sweat out of his skin. Whenever he has a moment to himself, all of senses are assaulted by thoughts of Louis. He envisions sparkling, blue eyes and evenly tan skin, his nostrils are filled with Louis’ signature scent of peaches and cigarettes, he can taste blackberries and the slick warmth of Louis’ lips, he can feel his body pressed firmly against a smaller one, and he can hear the slow uncurl of a high and raspy voice filled with mischief.

Harry groans as he rolls over on his stomach and stuffs his face in his pillow. He’s frustrated to the point of irrational anger and he’s completely disappointed in himself. What Louis said at the barn was true. He can’t control himself. And the cherry on top of this whole situation is that he can’t even use Victoria as a distraction. It’s pageant season, so she’s going to be away quite a bit for the next couple of months. Basically, he’s fucked.

Harry stays in bed for God knows how long until a portion of the sun peeks over the horizon, shining its light between the small opening of Harry’s curtains. He looks over at his alarm clock to see that it’s just a little past 5:30. Breakfast is in an hour and a half. He sighs as he runs a hand through his mess of curls, cursing when his class ring momentarily gets stuck. There’s a million thoughts running through his mind and none of them have a shred of coherency. Louis is once again making him a nervous wreck without even lifting a perfectly manicured finger.

“Why?” Harry whines, covering his face with his hands. “Why do I have to tear my hair out while he’s sauntering around as if nothing’s going on? Why does my mind want to give into him when it knows it’s all just a game? Do I have an inner masochist?” he uncovers his face and sighs. “And why the f- on earth am I talking to myself?”

“It’s a good way to get your thoughts together.”

Harry doesn’t even flinch at the sudden guest, he just lazily props himself on his elbows and looks forward. One of the twins, who Harry instantly recognizes as Sam, is leaning against the door frame with her arms hanging loosely by her sides. She’s still wearing her nightgown, her hair is unempt, and her face appears younger since it’s free of makeup.

“Forgive me for eavesdropping,” She apologizes insincerely. “But you sound very troubled.”

She walks towards Harry’s bed with light, graceful steps and sits down at the end of it, tucking her feet underneath her bottom and placing her hands on her lap. Her countenance is tranquil and her tone is soft, which shocks Harry into speechlessness. Energetic has always been a constant personality trait for the twins. Neither of them have ever given the impression that they know how to be calm and at ease.

“Are you tired, Sam?” Harry asks, concluding that her behavior can only come from exhaustion.
“Nope,” She answers. “I’m pretty awake at the moment. It’s actually very rare for me or Pam to feel tired in the morning since we make sure to get a proper night’s rest.”

“Then why-”

“Pam and I tend to feed off each other,” She giggles, her expression fond as she thinks of her beloved sister. “Apart, we’re pretty chill, but together, we’re a powerhouse.”

“Maybe that’s just a thing among twins, eh?” Harry teases.

She grins. “Maybe… but enough about that, what’s troubling you, dear?”

Harry’s smile morphs into an unpleasant grimace. “Well, nothing.”

“Allow me to rephrase the question,” She sighs. “Who is troubling you?”

“I have a feeling you know the answer to that,” Harry scoffs.

She gives him a sympathetic smile and slightly nods her head. “Pam and I have been talking about your… obvious infatuation.”

Harry’s eyes widen. “I-It’s not obvious!”

“It’s pretty obvious,” She insists. “But that’s not what I want to talk about. Are you in a relationship with Louis?”

Harry feels a spike of anger coursing through his bloodstream. “Don’t ask questions that can land you in the unemployment line.”

She rolls her eyes. “Get off your high horse, Junior. You don’t sign my paychecks. Is he leaving scratches on your back or not?”

“Don’t be so crass,” Harry snaps, his voice rising a few octaves. “We haven’t… done it.”

“Have you done something?” She asks.

Harry’s silent for a moment before he looks down at his lap with a defeated sigh. He can feel a blush creeping its way on his cheeks and wishes that he can will it away.

“Say no more,” She laughs. “What a cute expression you made!” Her face grows solemn as her amusement starts to wear off. “A little shameful, isn’t it? You are technically spoken for.”

“Do you think I don’t know that?” Harry grits out. “Do you think I don’t feel shame about having these thoughts?” he squeezes his eyes shut as if he can will the world to disappear. “I thought I was better.”

“What happened with Howard wasn’t a product of sickness, dear,” She says, a deep sigh trailing behind her words. “I knew this courtship was a bad idea. Pam was positive that everything would work out, but I tend to be a little more pessimistic than her. You have no interest in marrying Victoria.”

“Yes, I do!” Harry rushes out. “I-I think Victoria is a gorgeous woman with vast intelligence and a kind heart. What more could I possibly ask for? She would make the perfect wife.”

“Yes, but she’s not a man,” She says pointedly, growing tired of dancing around the main issue.
“What are you trying to imply?!?” He shouts, feeling rage bubbling up to the surface of his mind.

“Twelve years,” She sighs wistfully. “My sister and I have worked in this house for twelve years. I remember our first day so vividly. Our parents used the little money they had to clean our uniforms and get them tailored. They were beyond delighted that we were able to get jobs that provided housing. When they drove us to this mansion… they started to cry. Not because they were parting ways with their daughters, but because they couldn’t believe that we would live in such a gorgeous place. After a rather extensive sob fest, they drove away and we never saw them again. We were officially two fifteen-year-old girls on our own in this world.”

Harry stares at her in awe as she takes a brief pause. He’s never heard the life stories of anyone who has worked in this manor, mostly because he never cared about such information, but he’s hanging onto Sam’s every word as if she’s revealing the true meaning of life.

“We were pretty much just thrown into work,” She continues. “There were no introductions or anything. Hell, we didn’t even meet every single member of the family until we were two weeks in, but the one person we were always aware of, was you. You were the golden child, and every worker in this house knew to prioritize you over the other children. Your parents made sure that we knew that. If you needed anything, we needed to give it to you within the minute you asked for it. It was either that or unemployment.” She sighs. “And it’s still the same. I use to think such treatment was warranted for you because you’re different. You aren’t like all the other golden children I’ve seen during galas and balls and all those other gaudy events that your parents throw.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asks, his tone begging for an elaboration.

“Your charm has always been so… effortless and genuine,” She clarifies. “Everyone else plasters on their fake smiles and speak when they’re spoken to, but you? You’ve always been different. Your ability to command an entire room while managing to come off as a moral, humble dignitary is your greatest talent. It’s something that every other golden child has tried and failed to replicate. For that, I commend you. However, and this is where you became an enigma to me, I began to notice a long time ago that you hate all the attention and praise.”

Harry snorts. “No I-”

“All the other golden children light up and wag their invisible tails whenever they’re praised,” She interrupts. “You, on the other hand, just nod your head and blush from obvious embarrassment. Whenever you have a moment where you don’t have to put on a show for anyone, you shut down and appear lost until you have to do it again. Hell, during the entirety of this conversation, you flinched every time I said golden child.” Harry involuntarily flinches at that. “You hate that title, you hate the pressure you’re constantly under, and you don’t want this marriage. I would say that you need to figure out who you are and what you want from life, but honestly, I firmly believe that you already know all of that. I believe that you’ve always known.”

She untucks herself from her comfortable position and gets up from the bed, keeping her eyes on Harry as he tries to absorb everything he’s been told.

“I… I don’t know what to say,” He chuckles. “I haven’t been able to figure out what to say for a while now.”

She gives a full-blown grin that’s wholly reminiscent of her usual self. “That’s what happens when life gets unexpected. Refreshing, isn’t it?”

Harry ponders that for a moment, giving the question some serious thought. Before Louis came along, he’s always been the type of person one could never reduce to speechlessness. There’s a
huge part of him, the part that loves to have full control of a situation, that loathes the abrupt change, but there’s another part of him, the part that’s been denied for such a large portion of his life, that wants to welcome the change with open arms.

“Yes,” He admits. “It’s very refreshing.”

She nods. “Good.”

She turns around and walks towards the door, stopping halfway there when Harry asks a question.

“Why do you no longer feel like I deserve special treatment?”

“It’s not right for your well-being to be placed above everyone else’s,” She answers. “And I’m one hundred percent positive that you agree with me.”

With that, she proceeds her walk and exits the room. Harry snorts when he hears distant squealing just a little while later. Pam is awake.

~

Harry is standing in front of the mirror, adjusting his collar for, what has to be, the fiftieth time. He has no qualms about what he’s wearing, nor does he see the need to keep adjusting this and undoing that, but he has to do something with his hands or else he’ll start thinking, which isn’t something he wants to do right now.

“Harry!” He can hear the twins shout from all the way downstairs. “Louis’ here!”

Harry gives a deep sigh and looks up at the ceiling. “I’m gonna be completely honest, I’m not sure if a God exists or not, but if there is one, can you kill me? I don’t want anything dramatic. Just use your Godly powers to, I don’t know, give me a heart attack or something? Make me slip and bang my head against the counter?”

“Harry!” The twins shout again.

“You know what?” Harry continues. “Go all out. If that’s the only way you can do it, then that’s ok. I’m perfectly fine with spontaneous combustion.”

He waits a while as if he honestly expects that he’s about to catch on fire at any moment, before he curses under his breath and leaves the bathroom. He exits his bedroom and heads down the familiar maze of hallways, his heartbeat steadily climbing as Louis’ voice gets louder with every step he takes. He can’t deny that Louis’ voice does something to him. It’s reminiscent of sunshine and everything joyful when it gets boisterous and humorous, but it has such a sensual edge to it when it gets soft and quiet.

“Harold!” The twins practically shriek.

“I’m coming!” Harry shouts back impatiently.

“You sure are taking your sweet time!” Louis cackles.

Harry almost stomps his foot petulantly when his heart flutters at the sound of Louis’ obnoxious laughter. It doesn’t matter what comes out of his mouth, his body always ends up betraying him. He reluctantly descends the stairs and stops halfway, clenching his teeth when he sees Louis wrapped up in conversation with the twins. He’s wearing a fluffy, black coat that comes all the way down to his feet. It’s just as gaudy as the white coat he wore on the first visit. He looks up at
the stairs and gives a wide smile that shows off his teeth.

“Morning, love.” Louis greets.

“Morning,” Harry sighs exasperatedly. “Do you plan on coming up, or do you need to be escorted?”

“Someone’s snappy.” Louis scoffs. “What crawled up-”

“No cursing.”

“I was gonna say bottom!”

“Sure you were.”

“Break it up, lovebirds.” Sam sings.

Pam giggles at her sister’s words, while Harry and Louis look down and curse internally at the growing warmth in their cheeks. Harry doesn’t think there’s a single day that’s gone by with Louis where he hasn’t blushed like a child with a schoolyard crush, and to him, that’s completely ridiculous. Wordlessly, Louis leaves the twins and ascends the steps. The closer he gets, the more Harry can smell lavender, it caresses his nostrils with its sweet scent and he can’t help but take a deep, subtle breath to get more of it. Louis can’t help but smirk at Harry’s failure to be subtle. He knew switching his body washes was a good idea, especially for today.

“Down, boy,” Louis orders playfully as he walks past Harry.

“I’m not a dog,” Harry mutters as he follows behind Louis.

“Don’t act like a damn bloodhound then,” Louis says. “God, it’s so cold out there. It’s Summer for God’s sake, it shouldn’t be this cold. This damn weather better get its shit together.”

Harry snorts. “Or what? You’ll climb into a rocket and punch mother nature?”

“Of course not,” Louis laughs. “We’ll discuss ways that she can improve over goblets of heavenly coffee.”

“Heavenly coffee?”

“Yup, Coffee made from the tears of Freddie Mercury.”

“If you’re talking about heavenly coffee, shouldn’t it be made from the tears of God?”

“Freddie Mercury, God, what’s the difference?”

“That’s a little blasphemous.”

“Truthful is what it is.”

Harry shakes his head as a small smile creeps on his face. He and Louis enter his room and take their usual seats in the armchairs after Harry closes and locks the door. Harry picks up his own copy of the textbook from the coffee table when a sudden thought occurs to him.

“Why don’t you have your textbook?” Harry asks.

Louis doesn’t say a word. He just leans back in his seat and stares emotionlessly at Harry, letting
the silence hang in the air and winding up the tension.

“Louis,” Harry snaps.

Louis stays silent as he casually crosses his legs. The motion causes Harry to finally notice that Louis’ only wearing a pair of black socks on his feet.

“Why aren’t you wearing shoes?” Harry asks, his confusion causing him to draw out every syllable.

Louis’ emotionless expression slowly morphs into one of amusement. Upon further inspection, Harry can see that Louis’ lips are a shade redder than usual. The soft yet striking color makes his teeth appear whiter, making his smirk appear all the more wicked.

“We’re gonna do something a little bit different,” Louis says, his voice dropping a couple of octaves.

Harry swallows to relieve the growing dryness in his throat, trying to form a cohesive sentence in his head. “Wh- I don’t- Why- What are you-”

“Today,” Louis interrupts as he undoes the sash of his coat. “I am the teacher…” He pulls at the coat to reveal his bare collarbones. “And you are the student.” He finally pulls off the coat, letting it rest under his body.

Harry almost grabs at his chest when there’s a sudden spike in his heart rate. Louis is smiling at Harry, looking mischievous and just plain evil, as he sits there in only a tight pair of briefs and thigh highs, not socks like Harry originally thought. Louis sits back and uncrosses his legs to slightly spread his thighs.

“You…” Harry trails off as his eyes greedily devour every delicate curve of Louis’ body. “You need to put some clothes on.” He gets up from his chair and strides over to his dresser, feeling as if this is just another dream because there is no way this is happening.

“Harry,” Louis says firmly, effectively halting the man in question. “Come here.”

Harry *almost* says no, the word hangs off the very tip of his tongue, just waiting to be released, but he chooses to hold it in. Instead, he closes his drawer, turns around, and slowly makes his way toward Louis. With every step Harry takes, he can feel a chorus of voices shouting at him to make the right decision, but he tunes them out. He stops directly in front of Louis, not too far from being in between his thighs.

“Sit,” Louis orders.

Wordlessly, Harry sits on the edge of the table, his knees pressing against Louis’ as he does. Louis looks all too pleased and Harry feels all too guilty.

“You have the power to stop this, you know,” Louis says, knowing damn well that Harry isn’t going to stop this.

Harry *almost* says no, the word hangs off the very tip of his tongue, just waiting to be released, but he chooses to hold it in. Instead, he closes his drawer, turns around, and slowly makes his way toward Louis. With every step Harry takes, he can feel a chorus of voices shouting at him to make the right decision, but he tunes them out. He stops directly in front of Louis, not too far from being in between his thighs.

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“You have the power to stop this, you know,” Louis says, knowing damn well that Harry isn’t going to stop this.

Harry licks his drying lips as he lifts a trembling hand and places it on Louis’ knee, sending unwarranted shivers up the temptress’ spine.

“He’s how this is going to work,” Louis breathes, sliding Harry’s hand off of him. “Here’s how this is going to work.” He slides down slightly in the chair and props his feet up on the table, bracketing Harry’s waist with them. “I’m gonna touch a part of my body,” he places his hand on his chest to demonstrate. “And
then I’m gonna say hands, lips… or tongue.”

Harry feels himself hardening as those words leave Louis’ mouth, and he doesn’t feel an ounce of shame about it.

“Do I need to explain further,” Louis chuckles, feeling pleasant tingles all over his body as he takes in how overwhelmed Harry looks. “Or do you get what you’re supposed to do?”

Harry swallows. “I-I get it.”

Louis bites his lip and runs his fingers down his chest, stopping when they reach his navel. “Lips.”

With just a hint of hesitation, Harry leans down and places soft kisses against the expanse of Louis’ stomach. Louis runs his fingers through Harry’s ridiculously soft hair, his breathing picking up as he feels velvety lips repeatedly touching his skin.

“Enough,” Louis pants.

Harry stops instantly and sits back up, his eyes glazed and his cheeks red as he waits for another command.

“So obedient,” Louis praises. He lifts his hand and thinks for a moment before he grins and places a finger on his lips. “Tongue.”

Harry leans forward as if there’s a magnet drawing them together, and gently swipes his tongue against Louis’ bottom lip, letting a soft moan escape him as the taste of cherry explodes on his tongue. As he pulls back, Louis tugs harshly at Harry’s hair, eliciting a low groan from him.

“Don’t stop until I tell you to stop.” Louis demands. He leans in and lightly digs his teeth into Harry’s plush, bottom lip before he lets go and leans back into the chair.

Harry’s breathing is ragged and rough as he stares at Louis with wild eyes, practically trembling from his eagerness to hear another command. Louis lifts his left foot and places it on Harry’s thigh, digging his toes in a spot that’s dangerously close to Harry’s crotch.

“Take these off,” Louis orders.

Harry uses both of his hands to pull off the right thigh high, revealing inch after inch of smooth, evenly tan skin. When he’s done with that, he quickly removes the left thigh high. He wants to savor the strangely sensual sight of the articles of clothing being removed from Louis’ skin, but he’s much too eager to get to the good stuff. Louis slides back up in his seat and sits up straight. He beckons Harry to come closer, causing the man to instantly slide off the table and get on his knees in between Louis’ spread thighs.

Louis slides his hand up and down his right thigh, biting his lip as he observes how the movement seems to hypnotize Harry. “Lips.”

Harry nods before he lifts Louis’ right leg and places it on his shoulder, eliciting a pleased whine from Louis. He begins to place light, open mouthed kisses against the delicate skin of Louis’ thigh, his ego inflating when Louis whimpers in satisfaction. Feeling bold, Harry leans in and runs his tongue up a spot that’s close to Louis’ clothed erection.


Harry delicately slides Louis’ leg off his shoulder and sits back, smirking up at him as he waits for
yet another command. The part of him that loves to be in control is patiently waiting to strike.

Louis lifts a trembling hand and gently pulls at one of his nipples. “Tongue,” He slides his hand over to the other nipple. “Hands.”

Harry sits up, using Louis’ thighs as leverage and instantly follows his orders. He circles the tip of his tongue around the right nipple and rubs the pad of his thumb against the left, coaxing delicate pants to escape Louis’ cherry flavored lips. Harry looks up at him through his lashes as he takes a broad lick of the sensitive bud, causing Louis to flinch and grab at Harry’s hair.

“Sensitive?” Harry asks, emphasizing the word by sharply pinching the left nipple.

“That’s enough,” Louis gasps out, gently pushing Harry away.

Harry bites his lip to hold back a malicious smirk as he stares up at Louis. He’s becoming more and more pliant with each command, slowly falling into a state where he can be easily overpowered. He cocks his head to the side and presses his fingers against his pulse.

“Lips.” He breathes. His voice is softer than before and has a hint of vulnerability that makes Harry’s toes curl.

Harry leans back in and lets his bottom lip trail along the length of Louis’ neck, eliciting a shiver from him.

Now, Harry thinks. Now is the perfect time.

He parts his lips and latches on to an area of Louis’ neck, taking his time as he covers it with splotches of red and purple. Louis doesn’t even have the willpower to chastise him. He just bares more of his neck for Harry to devour, and latches his hands onto his shoulders as if they’re lifelines. Giving into a moment of possessiveness, Harry covers a couple of hickeys that are just starting to fade, wanting to get rid of any evidence showing that another person touch Louis’ body.

“Y-You’re not following the rules,” Louis says, his voice barely above a whisper.

“I’m just altering them a little,” Harry chuckles, trailing his tongue from Louis’ neck to his jaw. “Tongue.” He lifts a hand and buries his fingers in Louis’ feathery hair. “Hands.” He raises his head and makes direct eye contact with Louis, observing the thin rim of blue surrounding his blown-out pupils, his lips that are now puffy from how often he’s biting them, and the shallow breaths leaving his mouth. In short, he’s a mess. Harry’s unoccupied hand comes up and cups Louis’ jaw.

“Lips,” He whispers, his voice coated in pure lust. With the word hanging in the air and echoing through Louis’ mind, Harry leans in and captures Louis’ lips in a searing kiss. There’s nothing organized or cohesive about the action, it’s just a messy union of curious tongues and slick lips.

“Please fuck me,” Louis begs when they both come up for air. “I want you to fuck me.”

“Really?” Harry drawls. “Hmm, I recall you saying something back at the farmers’ market. What was it? Oh, yes. You don’t want me.”

Louis bites his trembling lip and pulls Harry closer to him, throwing his pride out the window for one moment. “I want you. I-I really want you.”

“Are you sure?” Harry asks, holding in a laugh at Louis’ desperate expression. “I am just touching you in a way that you like. It makes no difference it’s me or someone else… right?”
Louis shakes his head. “No, never. It has to be you.”

Feeling satisfied with that response, Harry leans back against the table and slightly stretches out his legs. Understanding what Harry wants, Louis slides off the chair and straddles his lap, wasting no time in rejoining their lips and grinding their crotches together. Harry digs his fingers into Louis’ ass, wanting to leave bruises there.

“Harry!”

“Shit!” Harry curses, pushing Louis off his lap and shooting up from the floor.

“Jackass!” Louis whisper-shouts, feeling soreness from being suddenly pushed to the floor.


“Can you stop?” Louis snaps, expertly catching every article of clothing being thrown at him.

“Harry, are you busy?” The voice calls again, knocking insistently on Harry’s door.

“No, mother!” Harry answers at the same time Louis mutters a bitter, “Well, he was.”

Louis curses under his breath as he reluctantly gets up from the floor, and rushes into the bathroom with Harry’s clothes in hand. Harry fixes his clothes, runs his fingers through his hair, and adjust his fly to better conceal his erection.

“Harry!”

“Be right there, mother!” He shouts. He kicks Louis’ thigh highs under the arm chair before he approaches the door, unlocks it, and opens it, revealing a very excited Gwendoline Styles.

“Three months,” She practically squeals, looking five seconds away from clapping her hands and jumping up and down.

Harry lifts an eyebrow in confusion. “Until… what?”

“The proposal!” She clarifies, taking Harry by the hand and guiding him over to the armchairs. He takes the one Louis usually sits in while his mother takes the other one. “Your father and I just came back from our weekly lunch with the Astaires. We all agreed that we want you to propose to Victoria in exactly three months! She doesn’t know, of course, so you’ll have the element of surprise. The wedding can happen in December. I just love a winter wedding!”

“Three months?” Harry says as if he’s attempting to speak a different language. “Why?”

Her smile widens. “Why not? It’s more than enough time for you and Victoria to strengthen your relationship, and her birthday is around that-” She cuts herself off with a sharp gasp. “Oh my stars! You can propose to her during her birthday party! How romantic!” she gasps again. “We can have the party here! We can invite the elite of the town- Carter!” She gets up and scampers out of the room. “Get the Astaires on the phone! I have ideas!”

Harry blinks after her, trying to grasp whether he’s dreaming or not. He’s never seen his mother so giddy. She resembled a child on the verge of receiving a treat as she rambled about the proposal, which is set to happen in… three months. Harry can feel his blood running cold. He can’t help but think about how soon three months is. He and Victoria have developed a decent friendship and he calls her his fiancé all the time in order to please their respective families, but he wouldn’t say he’s
falling in love with her, at least not yet. As his mind seems to part ways with his body, Louis steps out of the bathroom, now wearing a pair of pants that are too long for him and a v-neck that’s too big for him.

“Alright?” He asks, sensing the distress Harry’s currently under.

“Yes,” Harry sighs. “I’m… I’m good. Let’s, uh, start our lesson for today.”

Louis’ cock is just begging him to seduce Harry into continuing their little moment, but his mind knows damn well that the moment has passed for good, and Harry is way too wrapped up in confusion and self-doubt to do anything.

“Oh,” Louis answers, taking Harry’s usual seat.

~

Unknown: Do you have any plans on Friday?

Harry receives the random text while he’s eating dinner with his family. It’s considered rude to be on your phone at the table, so he tries to be as discreet as he can, keeping the phone from his parent’s view as he types out a reply.

Harry: Who is this?

It’s not even a full minute until Harry receives an answer that causes him to roll his eyes, and save the random number under a different name.

Louis: Lou xx

Harry: How did you get my number?

Louis: Don’t worry about that. Do you have any plans or not?

Harry: Why?

Louis: I wanna get you out of your house. Show you a good time.

Harry: I’m afraid of what your version of a ‘good time’ is.

Louis: Get your mind out of the gutter. My friends and I are going to a concert. Ever heard of the neighbourhood?

Harry: I heard of them. Never listened to any of their music though.

Louis: Wanna go with us? Got an extra ticket

Harry: Where is it?

Louis: Vanderbilt

Harry: That’s three hours away… what time is the concert?

Louis: Eight.

Harry: PM???

Louis: Don’t be a nerd.
Harry flinches at the sudden shout of his name and looks up to see his father, who looks very disappointed.

“Who are you texting?” Carter asks, his face red from the anger he feels at his son’s disobedience.

“Um… Victoria,” Harry answers. Beside the obvious reason why his answer is a huge lie, Victoria is never on her phone during pageant season. She likes to be focused at all times and rarely talks to anyone unless it’s a life or death situation.

Carter takes a deep breath to calm himself down. “Harry, you know the rules. No phone at the table.”

“Now, Carter,” Gwendoline drawls. “You can’t blame the boy, can you?” she grins and reaches across the table to take Harry’s hand in hers. “Especially after the news he received a few days ago. God, I’m so excited I can barely contain myself!”

“I understand, Gwen,” Carter sighs. “but-”

“Oh, don’t be such a grouch, love,” Gwendoline interrupts. “Let the boy talk to his future wife.”

Harry flinches at such a loaded term. Future wife. For a moment, he’s confused about his reactions to everything pertaining to this courtship. He knew his parents would want him and Victoria to wed as soon as possible, he knew that from the moment he learned about courtships. Hell, just a few weeks ago, he and Victoria sat down to a romantic dinner and discussed their imminent future together. Why is he acting as if he’s being blindsided when he knew all of this was bound to happen? Just as he’s on the verge of slipping into a well of deep thought, his phone vibrates.

Louis: Are you coming? We’re not gonna drive straight home afterwards cuz it ends late. We’re staying at a hotel.

Harry: My parents are NOT gonna let me stay out all night.

Louis: Dude… you’re 21

Harry: They let me live here rent free. Least I can do is follow their rules.

Louis: Just lie

Harry: I’m not lying to my parents

Louis: Come on. We’ll have a good time… and we’ll be all alone in our own hotel room ;)

Harry’s eyes widen and his cheeks flush. It’s a simple, suggestive text that holds a certain promise he definitely wants Louis to keep.

Harry: Sure.

Louis: The power of horniness once again works in my favor! Pik you up at four! <3

Harry: *Pick

Louis: Fuck you.

Harry laughs a little too loudly at the text, prompting skeptical looks from everyone at the table.
“I don’t recall the beauty queen having the capability to be that funny.” Margaret mutters, slightly inebriated from the ‘happy juice’ she discreetly poured in her lemonade. Preston holds in his own laughter at her statement.

“What’s so funny?” Gwendoline asks with a knowing expression.

“Nothing,” Harry rushes out, making a mental note to text Louis again before he goes to bed. He doesn’t have a particular reason for doing so, he just wants to talk to him without any outside influences getting in the way.

“Mother, father?” Harry calls tentatively, gaining his parent’s attention. “Uh, is it ok if I attend a business workshop in Vanderbilt?”

Carter’s eyebrows shoot up in shock. “Business workshop?”

“Yes,” Harry says slowly to give himself time to think. “I-I figured, you know, since I am going to take over the business one day, I should start furthering my knowledge. You’ve taught me well, father, but I think I could really benefit from learning from other successful people. It’s an event that takes up an entire day so… I’m gonna have to spend the night at a hotel. Would that be fine with you?”

“Tha-That’s more than fine!” Carter says, not at all use to Harry showing such keen interest in taking over the business. “When is it?”

“Friday,” Harry answers. “I promise I’ll be back first thing Saturday morning.”

“Oh, how lovely,” Gwendoline praises. “Your future is looking brighter and brighter, my love!”

Harry’s cheeks flush from embarrassment. “Mother, please.”

“You know what?” Eli suddenly laughs, gaining the attention of everyone at the table. “I tried to remain quiet through this bullshit-”

“Eli!”

“Hush, Evelyn!” He shouts furiously, slamming his fist on the table. “Harry hasn’t shown an ounce of interest in taking over this company and driving it in the direction it needs to go in.” he turns his attention to Harry and points an accusatory finger at him. “What’s with the sudden interest, huh? Do you know anything about this company? What's our net worth? Who do we plan on partnering with within the next two years? Do you even know when the fuck this company was established?!”

“Eli, that’s enough.” Carter grits out.

“Why aren’t you asking him the shit you need to ask him?” Eli asks hysterically. “Are you seriously so blinded by how great he is, you’re just gonna let him ruin everything this family worked so damn hard to build!”

“Eli-”

“Eugene M. Styles, the man who started this dynasty, was an ambitious man,” Eli informs bitterly, looking directly at Harry. “Despite the ridicule he received, he used the last of his savings to start this company, and look at it now!” he turns his attention back to Carter. “If you give Harry this honor, you might as well spit on the graves of the successors before you!”

“Enough!” Carter bellows.
Eli’s skin pales from the harshness of Carter’s tone. He’s use to his father’s tone towards him being cold or distant, but he’s never heard it reach a level of pure hatred.

“Don’t you dare sit there and act as if you know more than me,” Carter says, his tone and even low. “Even if Harry was downright incompetent, too stupid to even know how to tie his own shoes, I would still hand this company over to him instead of you! And do you want to know why? Because you’re a boy and he’s a man. Harry plans to move out after he gets married, and where will you be? In this house. Harry is engaged in every conversation at every event your mother and I throw, while your ass loiters around the buffet table with an expression that’s much too sour for your lifestyle! Harry has charisma, class, personality, but you?” he scoffs. “You have nothing.”

Evelyn squeezes Eli’s bicep, trying her best to calm her husband down and somehow give her strength to him. It does nothing. He snatches his arm out of her grasp, gets up from his seat, and leaves the dining room without uttering a single word.

“I love family dinners.” Margaret giggles, tossing back the last of her lemonade.

~

“A boy,” Eli spits, taking another hit of his cigarette and exhaling the smoke out of Margaret’s window. “A fucking boy!”

“Calm-”

“Oh, fuck off!” Eli shouts, effectively shutting Preston up. “I can’t believe this shit. I can’t fucking believe it. I’m gonna be the first eldest son to not get the company.” He grimaces. “How fucking embarrassing.”

Margaret is sitting in front of her vanity, casually wiping the makeup off her face as if Eli’s not ranting and raging behind her. After she’s done with that, she picks up her comb and starts to tackle the knots in her hair.

“Are you finished?” She asks after a moment of silence. “Can I speak or do you have anything else to get out of your system?”

“I’m finished,” He sighs defeatedly.

She puts down her comb and turns around in her seat to face her brothers. “Victoria Astaire is a boring prude with a slight God complex. Despite how nice she acts in front of us, she’s an absolute pill. She’s an immature girl who gets her ideas of romance from her dumbass novels, and she has a constant, almost unhealthy, need to strive for perfection in regards to her personal and professional life. That is, if you can call those stupid pageants professional.”

“What does any of that-”

“Shut up, Preston,” Margaret snaps. “I’m saying all of this because there’s no way in hell Victoria was the one Harry was texting during dinner. Nothing she’d say would cause Harry to laugh like a hyena or blush like a fool.”

Preston cocks his head to the side, momentarily resembling a lost puppy. “Then who was he texting.”

Margaret leans back against her vanity with an easy smile. “That’s the million dollar question, my dear brother.”
Louis: if kind of music do you even listen to??

Harry: Classical

Louis: Wow. I am shocked.

Harry: I can just hear your sarcastic tone, you little menace.

Louis: Me? A menace? INCONCEIVABLE!

Harry: Don’t worry, you’re an adorable menace.

Louis: Awww you’re flirting with me.

Harry: You’re insufferable.

Louis: Seriously tho… you have to listen to some of their music before you go to the concert.

Harry: Would I like them?

Louis: Yes

Harry: How much do you like them?

Louis: Jesse (lead singer) can have EVERYTHING I own. I will carry his children if that’s what he wants me to do.

Harry: That’s… biologically impossible.

Louis: It will happen through the power of my love for him.

Harry: You don’t have a uterus.

Louis: THROUGH THE POWER OF MY LOVE, I WILL CARRY JESSE RUTHERFORD’S CHILD.

Harry: Goodnight.

~

When he sees a black range rover recklessly speeding through the shopping center, Harry starts rethinking every decision he’s made that’s gotten him to this point. He’s spent all morning strolling through each and every store, occasionally stopping to buy food, to sell the idea that he’s currently at some made up business workshop in Vanderbilt. He only hopes that his all black get up serves its purpose of disguising him from any family friends. The range rover comes to a rather abrupt stop right in front of him. The passenger side window rolls down, revealing a very confused Louis in the driver seat, his neon green sunglasses keeping his fringe back.

“Babe,” Louis drawls as if he thinks Harry’s unhinged. “Why do you look like you’re about to rob someone? I’ll gladly be your get away car if that's the case. Ride or die and all that.”

Harry rolls his eyes, opening the passenger side door and sliding into the car. The first thing he notices is, of course, Louis’ outfit, a shredded t-shirt with the neighbourhood’s logo on the front, plaid skinny jeans, and his signature pair of vans.
“I didn’t want anyone to recognize me,” Harry explains. “My parents think I’m at some business workshop.”

Louis grins. “Ooh, you lied to your parents?” he looks back at the group cluttered in the two back rows. “We got a big boy over here!”

Harry looks back to see that the gang’s all here, wearing their band merch. Zayn, Niall, and Liam are in the first row while Cara and Perrie are in the very back.

“Hello again, dimples!” Perrie giggles.

“Afternoon, Periwinkle!” Harry sings with a bright smile.

Perrie gasps. “I get a nickname? I’m honored!”

“How come I don’t have a nickname?” Louis mutters, putting the vehicle in drive and guiding it back on the street.

“You have plenty of nicknames,” Harry says. “I just don’t say them out loud because I don’t like using such language.”

“You and I are gonna get along just fine, curly.” Niall laughs, clapping his hand on Harry’s shoulder.

“There shall be no bullying in this car!” Louis chides, trying his best to look serious.

“Stop trying to look serious,” Cara scoffs, not looking up from her phone. “You don’t look threatening, you look huggable.”

“Cara, I swear—”

“You swear what?” Cara interrupts, locking her eyes with Louis’ through the rearview mirror.

“Uh… nothing,” he answers. Out of all the people in this car, Cara is definitely the most intimidating.

“Wimp,” Niall mutters.

“What did you say, Niall?” Cara asks tauntingly, leaning forward to place her hand on his shoulder.

“Wi… ndy. It’s very windy today!” He rushes out, his tone riddled with fear.

“Eh, not really,” Zayn points out, forever a fan of seeing Niall turn into a nervous wreck.

“Zayn, I swear—”

“You swear what, blondie?”

“How come everyone in this car can kick my ass?!” Niall whines.

“Louis, can kick your ass?” Harry asks, feeling genuine shock.

“Well…” Niall trails off.

“Watch what you say, Ni.” Louis threatens.

A boisterous laugh bursts out of Niall. “Yeah, no.”
“Niall, I will come back there and kick your bad knee!” Louis shouts.

“You look so huggable!” Perrie squeals, eliciting laughter from everyone in the car. Everyone except Louis, of course.

“I am such a good fucking friend,” Louis mutters to himself. “Who volunteered to drive for three hours? Me. Who bought the tickets? Me.”

“And we’re very grateful, babe,” Harry assures, placing his hand on Louis’ thigh. He doesn’t even realize that the term of endearment came out of his mouth, probably because it felt natural for him to say.

“You know what would make me happy?” Louis asks, drawing out each syllable as a mischievous grin takes over his face.

“I’m not kissing you.”

“I was thinking—”

“Or sucking you off.”

Everyone in the car grows silent and Harry feels confused as to why until he thinks about what he just said. He takes his hand off Louis’ thigh and looks down at his lap, his face heating up from embarrassment.

“You can read me like a book, babe.” Louis teases, keeping his eyes on the road.

“How much longer.” Perrie groans, her head resting on Cara’s lap.

Louis, along with everyone else in the car, breathes a long suffering sigh. “For the seventh time… two hours.”

“Let’s stop at a pet store,” Liam suggests. “We can buy a muzzle to put on her.”

“Or maybe a leash for you,” Perrie counters. “We can customize it and everything. It’ll say Louis’ bitch right on the collar.”

“Third degree burn!” Niall jeers through everyone’s laughter.

“A w, don’t look so down, love,” Louis coos, seeing Liam pout through the rearview mirror. “You’re a good bitch, a loyal bitch, the best bitch I—”

“Fuck off.” Liam snaps.

“Don’t be salty,” Louis playfully reprimands. “Do you want a kiss to make you feel better?”

“How about not.” Harry cuts in, his patience wearing thin. He doesn’t know how close Louis and Liam are, but they’re too close for his liking. He might be acting a little ridiculous, but he’s just not comfortable with their flirting and their shameless PDA. Louis looks highly amused at the blatant jealousy Harry’s displaying, and he’s just about to point it out until Perrie squeals so loud he almost swerves into a ditch.

“What the fuck?!” Louis shrieks, clutching his chest.
“McDonalds!” Perrie cheers. “Louis, can we please stop at McDonalds?”

“Why can’t you act like an adult?!”

“Louis, please.”

“Fine, just… God, don’t do that again!”

“Perrie,” Cara drawls. “I love you, but if you do that again, I’m gonna have to knock you out.”

“My life flashed before my eyes,” Niall says dramatically. “It was pretty dull and meaningless. I should do more.”

Zayn shrugs. “I’m fine with my life being dull and meaningless. I’m just a sack of organs, I don’t have to amount to anything if I don’t want to.”

“Eh, true,” Louis agrees, pulling into the drive thru. “There are seven billion people on this planet. The idea that we’re all supposed to do something significant is bullshit. If your greatest aspiration in life is just getting a decent apartment with a pet cat, then hell, that should be good enough.”

“I completely agree,” Harry says more to himself than Louis. All his life, he’s been conditioned to think that everyone has a responsibility to do great things, but that’s not true at all. Simply existing is enough.

“What do you want?” Louis asks as he approaches the menu, causing everyone to shout their orders at the same time. “One at a time!” he turns to Harry. “Want anything, sunshine?”

“Well, uh…” Harry trails off, thinking for a moment. “Just ice cream would be fine. Vanilla. And I also want large fries.”

“Vanilla ice cream and large-”

“Welcome to McDonalds!” A cheery voice suddenly comes from the speaker. “What would you like today?”

“A little too cheery for a fast food worker,” Cara mutters. “She must be new.”

“Shut up, Cara,” Louis scoffs. “Um, I want a number one with no onions and a sprite, a vanilla ice cream cone, large fries… what do the rest of you want?”

After everyone places their orders, in an orderly fashion, and Louis repeats each one to the lady over the speaker, Louis drives to the first window and sighs as he takes out his debit card.

“You put that shit away!” Zayn shouts as he hands a few twenties to Louis. “Seriously, though, you’ve done enough, man. You don’t have to pay for everything.”

“But-”

“The lady’s waiting, Lou,” Niall sings, gesturing towards the chipper looking cashier.

As Louis hands the cashier the money Zayn gave him, Cara crawls her way to the front, accidentally hitting Niall with her foot as she does, and wrests her forearms against the armrest as she looks past Louis to see the cashier.

“Hey!” Cara calls out, frightening the cashier. “How long have you been working here?”
“This is my first day!” The cashier answers with a proud smile.

“Told y’all!” Cara shouts victoriously as she makes her way back to her seat.

~

I want a new yellow Ferrari from the nineties in the driveway

But I know that you wouldn’t like that

I want it now, I want it loud, I want it my way

But everybody doesn’t fight like that

The environment of the concert venue keeps changing with every song. Niall, Zayn, and Liam are completely smashed, but doing a great job of maintaining their balance and slurring along to the songs, Cara has her arms around a random girl’s waist, swaying to the music, and Harry and Louis are wrapped up in their own intoxicating bubble.

Harry is right behind Louis, his hands practically glued to Louis’ waist. He’s been paying more attention to Louis’ singing voice than Jesse’s, getting lost in the slow, sensual rasp of it as it softly sings along to song after song. They’re completely surrounded by tipsy bodies clad in band merch, but as far as they’re concerned, they’re all alone.

“Fuck, I love your voice,” Harry whispers in Louis’ ear, slightly inebriated.

“You should listen to yours,” Louis practically moans, grinding backwards into Harry’s crotch. The two of them are probably being way too inappropriate, but they don’t care one bit.

“This is my favorite song by them,” Harry giggles. “I had a dream last night about fucking you to it.”

Louis’ shocked by how blunt Harry gets when there’s alcohol flowing through his system, but he can’t say he isn’t delighted by it.

Don’t tell me about the rules and break them

And don’t tell me about mistakes

And make the same ones I have made before

Don’t say you love me more

Better not say it

I met her at church

But she could be Satan
“How often do you dream about me?” Louis asks, reaching back to pull at Harry’s long locks.

“How often do you dream about me?” Harry answers truthfully. “I wanna do everything to you.”

“Yeah?”

Harry brings up a hand to firmly grip Louis’ jaw. “I wanna bury myself inside of you and make you scream until you lose your fucking voice.”

Louis’ eyes widen at Harry’s growing bravado, feeling almost breathless at the fact that this is the same man who’s supposed to be a beloved golden child. He throws his head back on Harry’s shoulder and laughs at the sheer irony of it all.

Confused, but finding Louis’ laughter amusing, Harry laughs along with him. “What’s so funny, love?”

Louis shakes his head. “Nothing, babe.”

You and I are two oceans apart

We’re on earth to break each other’s hearts, in two

And it’s hard with you

When I’m too far from you

I look at the stars, do you?

“Fuck,” Harry groans. “This is bad.”

“What do you mean?” Louis asks, his curiosity piqued.

Harry laughs once again. “I’m supposed to be, like, the golden child, yet here I am, letting a man grind his ass against me in a concert venue.”

Louis turns around and faces Harry with an amused expression. “Do you hate it?”

Harry instantly shakes his head. “I fucking love it.”

Louis bites his lip and places his hands on Harry’s shoulders, locking their eyes together as he sings along to the chorus.

“Don’t tell me about the rules and break them

And don’t tell me about mistakes

And make the same ones I have made before
Don’t say you love me more
Better not say-”

Before Louis can finish out the chorus, Harry leans forward and claims his lips. They move together in a familiar, fluid dance of needy lips and slick tongues. Everything melts away in puddles of black and white.

You’re LA and I’m Newbury Park
But you’re the flame I use when it gets dark
You’ve got enough pain for both of us
I’ve got all these things I’m focused on
You treat all the rules like you’re the queen
But you and I are few and far between…

~

The moment Harry and Louis are locked in their hotel room, Harry’s hands are instantly on him, tasting perfect skin with greedy fingers and beginning to tear off every article of clothing covering Louis’ skin.

“Hey,” Louis speaks up, feeling a little overwhelmed as Harry guides him to the bed. “Um, c-hey!”

Harry flinches and pulls away from Louis, suddenly worried that he was going too far. Louis’ eyes are glued to the ground, his torso bare and his pants unzipped.

“Can you…” Louis trails off and blushes, feeling slight embarrassment. “Ease up a little?”

Harry’s eyes widen at how nervous Louis looks. He’s normally so confident and seductive, it’s hard to imagine him being any other way. If anything, it’s Harry who should be nervous. Even though this isn’t his first time, he feels a sense of vulnerability around Louis that he’s never felt around anyone else.

“Sure,” Harry answers, his voice having such a high level of sincerity that makes Louis’ heart ache. “I… I want this to be good for you, Lou. I may not have as much experience as you, but I hope that I’m able to-”

“Hush,” Louis shushes, placing his finger on Harry’s lips. He sits down at the end of the bed and starts to unbutton Harry’s jeans. “Just… shut up, ok?”

Before Harry can say anything else, Louis takes his cock out of his underwear and licks the tip of it, eliciting a choked off gasp from Harry.
“Good?” Louis asks, looking up at Harry through his eyelashes. He smiles in satisfaction when Harry nods his head.

Louis leans forward again and wraps his lips around Harry’s cock, bobbing his head once to get it deeper into his eager mouth. Harry tries his best not to thrust his hips out of fear of choking Louis, biting his lip hard enough to draw blood as the boy below him moans around him. Louis flattens his tongue and runs it up and down the underside, sighing at the heady taste on his tongue. He sneaks a hand into his pants and starts rubbing himself through the cotton material of his briefs, needing to take some of the edge off.

“S–Stop,” Harry orders, his voice wavering. He grips Louis’ hair and gently pulls him back. Louis licks away the trails of spit connecting his bottom lip and the tip of Harry’s fully hard cock, his eyes glossy with unshed tears as he looks up at his lover.

“Fuck me,” Louis pleads, scooting further on to the bed. When his back hits the headboard, he peels off his pants, throws them over the bed, and spreads his thighs, silently beckoning Harry to come forward.

Harry keeps his eyes on Louis’ as he takes off his shirt, pulls down his pants and boxers, and crawls in between Louis’ thighs. He kisses the corner of Louis’ mouth before he rejoins their lips, engaging them in yet another kiss that’s anything but innocent. Louis gasps against Harry’s lips when he feels his briefs getting pulled down. Harry momentarily pulls back to take the underwear all the way off and throws them over his shoulder, not at all caring where they end up.

He lifts Louis’ right leg on his shoulder and places a litany of kisses on his thighs, encouraged by Louis’ ragged breathing. Feeling bold, he flicks his tongue against Louis’ entrance, his ego skyrocketing at the high-pitched whine that escapes Louis’ lips. He writhes against the duvet as Harry’s tongue begins to destroy him, chipping away at his sanity as it greedily laps at his tight hole.

“I’m– I’m not–fuck!” Louis sobs, his toes curling as Harry licks from his perineum to the tip of his cock.

Harry pulls away with an obnoxious grin on his face. “You’re not what, love?”


Louis cuts himself off and squeezes his eyes shut as Harry’s index finger, slick from his own spit, breaches his entrance. He feels discomfort from the slight intrusion, but he doesn’t let it show, completely putting his trust in Harry’s hands. He’s incoherent and blissed out as one finger gently pumping in and out of him, turns into three fingers furiously preparing him to take Harry with little trouble.

“You hate me, huh?” Harry rasps, running his tongue up the side of Louis’ neck. “How much?”


And Louis babbles the phrase over and over until Harry silences him with another kiss. Louis’ legs tighten around Harry’s waist when a sudden jolt of pleasure courses through his body.

Harry smirks. “Have I found your spot?”

“You know damn well – oh, fuck me!” Louis shrieks as Harry’s fingers start to jab at his prostate, his chest frantically rising and falling with every breath.
“Do you think you-”

“Just put it in!” Louis demands.

“Jesus,” Harry mutters, slicking his cock with the complimentary lotion he spotted on the nightstand. “I was just asking.”

Louis snorts. “I’ve literally been waiting for this since day one, and here you are, taking your sweet – God!”

Harry begins to slide inside of Louis, taking his time as to not hurt him too badly. Louis grips Harry’s biceps so tight that his knuckles start to turn white, internally cursing at the discomfort.

“Are you ok?” Harry asks breathlessly.

“I’m fine,” Louis whispers, looking up at Harry with wide eyes.

In this moment, Harry notices features about Louis that he didn’t notice before. He notices the light freckles on his cheeks, the slight slouch of his left eyelid, and the flecks of gold in his blue eyes. Louis is staring right back at him, also taking in what he didn’t notice before. Louis wraps his arms around Harry’s neck and brings his head down to join their lips together. There’s no heat in this kiss, it’s sweet and simple, yet it still makes Louis’ head spin.

After Harry’s pelvis connects to Louis’ ass, he waits a while before he starts thrusting inside of tight warmth that makes him unconsciously dig his fingers into Louis’ arms. Louis locks his ankles behind Harry’s back, drawing him in deeper. The simple action is all the confirmation Harry needs to hold onto Louis’ waist and increase his pace. Louis pants against Harry’s mouth as his cock starts to jab at his prostate.

“It’s ok,” Louis whispers, placing a kiss on Harry’s neck.

Harry loses himself. His thrusts turn animalistic and greedy, causing Louis to throw his head back and scratch his nails down Harry’s back. The room is filled with the sound of skin slapping against skin, shallow breaths, and satisfied moans.

“I love how fucking loud you are,” Harry groans, his movements consistent and rough. “I love knowing how good you feel.”

Louis shakes his head. “You’re s-such an – hmm! – egomaniac!”

“Don’t act like you don’t love it.” Harry chuckles, taking Louis’ cock in his hand and jerking him off.

Louis grips the back of Harry’s head, his voice rising in volume as he gets closer and closer to his orgasm. He places one hand on Harry’s shoulder and one hand on his cock, licking his lips as he joins Harry in getting him off.

“God, you’re obscene,” Harry breathes, letting go of Louis’ cock and leaning back on his knees. He lifts Louis’ legs on his shoulders and continues to thrust inside of him, satisfied with his current view.

Louis looks up at him, his hair a mess, dry tears on his cheeks, and his lips parted. It’s the most beautiful sight Harry has ever seen. Louis bites his lip as he continues to touch himself. It doesn’t take long for Louis’ orgasm to wash over him, causing his body to tremble and twitch as a loud moan flows out of him. Harry’s hands firmly grip Louis’ thighs as he comes inside of him, his
teeth clenching from the intensity of it.

Harry groans he slips out of Louis and crashes down right beside him. The two of them lay there for at least five minutes, calming their heart rates and enjoying the sound of their breathing mixed together.

“That was…” Louis grins, his cheeks turning an adorable shade of pink. “I really enjoyed that.”

Harry laughs fondly at the comment, loving the softer, more vulnerable side of Louis. “I enjoyed it, too. You, my love, are the most infuriatingly attractive person I’ve ever met in my life.”

“You, too,” Louis says, his eyes sparkling from the term of endearment.

The two of them just lay in bed, enjoying the comfortable silence that falls between them. After a while, Louis takes Harry’s hand in his and gives it a squeeze, wanting to touch him in some way. Harry squeezes back, also craving physical contact.

“This is really random,” Louis breaks the silence. “but, like, do you know that one song from the 90s by Alanis Morissette?”

“Ironic?”

“No.”

“You oughta know?”

“Yes!” Louis giggles. “That song was my shit in high school.”

Harry laughs. “What made you think about that?”

Louis shrugs. “I dunno. My mind’s going a thousand places at once right now.”

Another wave of comfortable silence passes before Harry breaks it. “You know, that song was rumored to be about Dave Coulier.”

Louis purses his lips as he thinks about the familiar name. “Dave Coulier… Dave… Wait, Joey from Full House?”

Harry nods. “Yup, the most badass song about moving on is possibly about Joey… Ranger Joe…”

Louis shakes his head, still in disbelief. “I mean, no, absolutely not. The line are you thinking of me when you fuck her, is not directed towards TV’s most well-known man child.”

“An actor being nothing like their character is normal, Lou.” Harry chuckles. “Bob Saget is nothing like his character. He actually has a pretty dirty sense of humor.”

Louis’ face falls. “What?”

Harry almost laughs at how genuinely heartbroken Louis looks. “Yeah, you should see the standup he did before the show. He said some pretty raunchy stuff.”

Louis is silent for a couple of minutes before he speaks again. “Danny Tanner did no such thing.”

Harry gapes at him. “What?”

“Danny Tanner… did no such thing.” Louis reiterates.
“But-”

Harry cuts himself off when Louis sits up and straddles his lap. He looks down at Harry with an easy smirk and rubs his hands up and down Harry’s chest.

“You can be right…” Louis trails off. “And receive no sex, or you can be wrong and-”

“I choose to be right.”

“Fucker!”

Harry laughs as Louis gets off of him and turns away, cursing under his breath at how impossible he’s being.

“I’m not that kind of man, Louis,” Harry says. “If I’m right, I’m right, and no amount of sex is gonna make me say that I’m wrong.”

“I hate you!” Louis shouts.

He ignores Harry for a mere two minutes before Harry pouts and moves closer to him.

“So,” Harry drawls. “Are we seriously not gonna-”

“Danny Tanner did no such thing.”

“Louis-”

“Admit that Danny Tanner did no such thing, and I will grant you permission to ride the Lou coaster.”

“The Lou coaster?!!”

“Laugh all you want, curly. Please proceed to ruin your chances of ever getting laid again.”

Harry rolls his eyes. “Babe, you can’t just live in denial.”

Louis turns over and locks eyes with Harry. “Yes… I… can.”

“Lou- fuck!”

Louis makes Harry lose his train of thought when he reaches under the covers and grabs Harry’s cock.

“Let me make this sound more interesting then,” Louis begins. “You have two options, be right and go to sleep with blue balls… or be wrong and experience the pleasure of me riding you until dawn.”

“…Danny Tanner did no such thing.”

“Good boy.”
The powder pink haze of dawn streams in through the translucent sliding doors of the hotel room. The ethereal light gives Harry and Louis, both sound asleep and tangled up in pure white sheets, a peach colored glow that highlights the thin sheen of sweat that covers them. Harry has his arm draped over Louis’ abdomen and his head resting on Louis’ chest, which is covered in splotches of red and purple. He wakes up just as the pink haze shifts into a warm yellow, smiling as he observes how peaceful Louis looks when he’s asleep. He looks over at the digital clock to see that it’s a little bit past seven. They need to check out of the hotel in an hour.

“Lou,” Harry whispers, propping himself on his elbow.

Louis mumbles in his sleep and turns over to face Harry, unconsciously seeking out his warmth. Harry sighs at that before he leans down to kiss Louis’ earlobe.

“Wake up, dear,” Harry mumbles against the crown of Louis’ head.

Louis hums as he stirs awake from his deep sleep, cracking an eye open to look up at Harry. “Hmm, I don’t wanna.”

Harry shakes his head as he lays back down and strokes Louis’ cheeks. “I know, but we have to check out soon.”

Louis breathes a deep sigh, placing his hand over Harry’s. “My ass hurts.”

Harry guffaws at the sudden confession, instantly placing his hand over his mouth to quiet himself down. “Sucks for you. I personally feel great.”

Louis widens his eyes and seems to move in a blur as he sits up and stuffs a pillow in Harry’s face. “Ugh, and I’m the insufferable one?!”

Harry tries to talk through the pillow, but his words come out muffled.

Louis laughs. “Sorry, babe, can’t hear you.”

While Louis is distracted by his amusement, Harry shoots up into a sitting position and yanks the pillow away from his face. Louis yelps in shock when Harry grabs him by the wrists and pins him down on the bed. Louis instantly grinds upward, showing once again just how much he loves getting manhandled.

“Don’t let that action fool you,” Louis says, clenching his thighs together. “I can’t do anymore. I’m worn out.”

Harry nods as if he completely understands. “I know. You see, when a person gets fucked as good as you were-“
“My God!”

“They tend to be a mess the next day,” Harry continues, trying and failing to contain his laughter. “Your condition is-”

“I will kick you in the-”

“Hey!” Cara’s voice comes from behind their door, startling the both of them. “You two better not be fucking, you’ve done enough of that. we have to get our asses out of here! One minute late and we have to pay extra. Move it!”

“Don’t be so rude,” Liam’s voice reprimands.

“Oh, get away from the door!” Perrie’s voice demands. “Sorry, guys. We need you downstairs in thirty minutes, no rush. Love you, dimples!”

“Love you, Periwinkle!” Harry shouts back.

Louis pouts and turns away from Harry, mumbling under his breath. Harry rolls his eyes at the childish action, already knowing the cause of it.

He starts running his fingers through Louis’ hair, feeling smug when the man instantly melts into the touch. “Now, What’s wrong, bluebird?”

Louis suddenly stiffens, remaining quiet for a moment, before he rolls over and faces Harry, his blue eyes practically sparkling under the morning light. “Nothing, nothing’s wrong.”

~

After they put their clothes back on and make themselves look semi presentable, Louis and Harry leave the hotel room with their fingers laced together. When they get to the lobby and join their group, they’re instantly met with silence and amused expressions.

“What?” Louis snaps. He’s not the biggest fan of being kept out of the loop.

“Oh, Harry,” Niall suddenly moans, causing everyone else but Louis to burst out laughing. “Oh, fuck, you feel so good. Yes, yes, ye- holy shit!” Niall cuts himself off when Louis kicks his bad knee.

“You were warned, Horan!” Louis shouts.

Even through the pain he’s feeling, Niall manages to grin and give Louis a wink. “Don’t get pissed at me just because the walls aren’t thick, you little minx.”

Louis flips Niall off, taking his keys out of his pocket and throwing them to Liam without even looking at him. “Li, drive.”

Liam curses under his breath as he leaves the group to bring the car around to the front. Louis wraps his arms around Harry, halting the man from walking forward.

“What?” Harry giggles, wrapping his arms around Louis’ waist.


It’s not a lie, but it’s definitely not the whole truth. Louis knows the bliss he’s feeling is only temporary. The bubble they’re floating in is destined to burst, and he doesn’t know when it will
happen, but he’s willing to stall it for as long as possible.

“Christ,” Zayn groans. “Look, I get that you’re in that stage where everything’s exciting and new and all that other shit, but can you chill?”

Louis’ laugh comes out as forced and the only person who seems to notice it is Harry. “Yeah, exciting, new.”

When they see the range rover through the revolving doors, the group exits the lobby. Perrie and Niall are arguing about who Jesse winked at during the concert, her or him, Zayn’s teasing Cara about the hickeys on her neck, making crude comments that she just laughs at, and Harry and Louis are peacefully floating along. They all pile into the car, fighting over the seats as they do. In the end, Cara takes the front seat, Niall and Zayn reluctantly get in the middle row, and Louis, Harry, and Perrie get in the very back. When everyone is all settled, Liam peels out of the parking lot and onto the road.

Louis leans his back against his window and stretches his legs out over Harry’s lap. “Did you have fun?”

Harry clasps his hands over Louis’ legs and nods. “Yeah, I had a great time. I’ve never done anything like that before. Thank you so much for inviting me.”

Louis rolls his eyes, but the blush covering his cheeks gives away how endeared he is. “Don’t be corny.”

“Don’t pretend like you don’t love it,” Harry teases before he presses a soft kiss on Louis’ nose. “Don’t do that,” Louis giggles, scrunching up his nose. “Makes me feel like I’m eight.”

Harry can’t help but lean back in and give Louis’ nose another kiss. “You’re so damn cute.”

“You’re at a ten on the cheese meter,” Zayn groans. “I’m gonna need you to bring yourselves down to a five.”

“I think they’re adorable,” Perrie counters. “Don’t be so rude towards them just because you’re single and bitter.”

“I’m not bitter about being single,” Zayn scoffs. “I’m doing just fine on my own.”

Perrie raises her hands up in mock defense. “I’m not saying you aren’t. I’m just saying that it might do you some good to have stationary dick, dick that won’t leave you, dick that won’t screw you and then not talk to you for a week before screwing you again because you let-”

“Fuck off, Perrie!” Zayn shouts, a blush covering his cheeks.

“She has a point, though,” Louis laughs before he turns his attention to Harry. “It’s good to have someone. Not to necessarily _complete_ you, but to _add_ something to you. Give you something you’ve never had.”

There’s a strong sincerity to Louis’ words that make Harry’s heart ache. He can’t help but hold Louis’ waist with his hands and drag him closer, making him sit on his lap. Louis gives a soft smile before he leans down and plants a kiss on Harry’s lips, sighing in content when the man kisses back. Everyone else rolls their eyes, but there’s a certain fondness to it that cancels the assumption that the action stems from annoyance. Just as Louis licks against the seam of Harry’s mouth, silently asking for entrance, Harry’s phone buzzes in his pocket.
With a huff, Harry pulls away from the kiss. “Sorry, bluebird.”

Louis looks away and bites his lip, internally glowing from the nickname. “It’s fine.”

Harry fishes his phone out of his back pocket and freezes when he sees who’s calling him. With a tense sigh, he answers the call and puts the phone up to his ear, gently pushing Louis back as he does.

“Morning, love,” Harry greets, cursing internally when his voice rises a few octaves.

“Morning, Harry!” Victoria’s cheery voice answers.

“Um, I’m surprised to hear from you,” Harry says. “I thought you’d be, you know, too consumed with your pageants.”

“I’m never too busy to talk to you,” She sighs. “I really wanted to hear from you. Everything has been so stressful lately, I feel like pulling my hair out. The competitions are fierce and it really messes with you mentally, you know?”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Harry says sincerely. “I wish there was something I could do to make it better.”

“Hearing your voice has relaxed me more than anything else ever could,” She admits, her voice covered in honesty and innocence. “What have you been up to? I hope you’ve found some way to entertain yourself in my absence. Not that I add much excitement to your life or anything.”

“Aww, don’t be so hard on yourself,” Harry chuckles. “I’ve just been hanging out, relaxing around the house, same old same old.”

“I suggest that you go outside and get some sunlight,” She giggles. “All you do is stay cooped up in that house all day. If I was there, I’d drag you out for a picnic.”

“And make me one of those sandwiches I love so much?” Harry asks, his tone humorous.

“On freshly baked slices of bread!” She laughs. “With gouda cheese and smoked turkey and-”

“You better stop before I drag you back here,” Harry interrupts teasingly. “Are you trying to torture me?”

Harry flinches when he feels Louis pressing kisses against his jaw. Bright blue eyes lock with his as Louis straddles his lap and continues pressing kisses along his neck.

“Stop,” Harry orders without much conviction. Louis doesn’t listen, he just keeps on teasing Harry, not at all caring about the conversation he’s trying to have.

“Harry,” Victoria drawls. “Are you ok?”

“Yes,” Harry rushes out. “I’m just fine.”

She’s silent for a moment, mulling over whether he’s telling the truth or not, before she speaks again. “Well, ok. Anyway, I wanted to ask you if you’re free to come visit me next Saturday.”

“Oh, um…” Harry trails off, breathing a deep sigh when Louis flicks his tongue against his pulse point. “Sure,” he choke’s out. “Sounds great.”

“Great!” Victoria cheers. “I’ll see you then. Have a lovely day, sweetheart!”
“You, too,” Harry breathes before he hangs up. He puts his phone back in his pocket and digs his fingers into Louis’ waist, eliciting a pleased sigh from him.

“Didn’t mean to distract you,” Louis says, feigning a certain innocence that Harry knows he doesn’t have.

“Just wait until we’re alone,” Harry chuckles humorlessly. “Just you wait.”

Cara tips her head back and groans. “Spoiler alert! He’s gonna fuck you senseless.”

“Cara!” Louis shouts disapprovingly.

Cara lets out a boisterous laugh. “Oh, don’t get all red in the face. We all heard you two fucking, there’s literally no more lines to cross.”

“I’m not red!” Louis lies.

“Yes, you are, bluebird.” Harry sings, prompting Louis to punch his arm.

The glorious chaos that Harry’s beginning to grow used to, and even fond of, continues for the next hour and a half of the ride. Boisterous laughter, constant bickering, and statements that are blunt and filthy enough to color Harry’s cheeks fill the vehicle as it speeds down the interstate.

“Does anyone want to go to The Rink?” Liam asks, pulling into an exit.

After everyone nearly deafens Liam with their loud approval, he pulls up in front of a royal purple building, decorated with sparkles and stickers pertaining to ice skating, and parks in the parking lot. Everyone in the back curses and elbows whoever’s near them as they attempt to get out at the same time. Liam and Cara watch on in wonderment, biting their lips to keep back their laughter at such a childish display.

“These are all people in their early twenties,” Cara says pointedly, shaking her head.

Liam shrugs. “The body matures no matter what, but the mindset doesn’t have to.”

“We’re gonna share a milkshake, we’re gonna share a milkshake,” Louis sings as he skips along with Harry in tow.

“Do we have to?” Harry groans, only half liking the idea of doing something so cutesy.

Louis shrugs. “Either that or suffer the loss of our budding sex life. You’re gonna love the place, babe. They have the best milkshakes. Imagine God having a threesome with a majestic cow and the goddess of ice cream. That’s how good their stuff tastes.”

Harry gapes at him. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“You want a list?” Zayn mutters, prompting Louis to elbow him in the ribs.

“Well, well, well,” The owner, Riley, laughs as the group enters the establishment, stepping out from behind the counter to greet them. “I haven’t seen you trouble makers in a while!”

Louis walks up to her and wraps his arms around her neck, sighing at her familiar cinnamon scent. “You got a table for us, darling?”

She giggles. “I always have a table for you.”
Riley leads the group to a round table at the corner of the packed building. Harry’s eyebrows shoot up to his hair line when he sees that she really does always have a table for Louis. This particular table has Louis’ name written right on the center of it in bold, cursive letters, marking it as his permanent place. Harry can feel Riley’s stare on him as he, along with everyone else, takes his seat.

Riley hums as she taps her index finger on the dimple on her cheek. “Well, you’re new.” Her skeptical expression turns into one of joy, radiating pure sunlight. “I love new people! What’s your name, sweetie pie?”

“This is Harry!” Louis answers before Harry can get a word out. “Harry, this is Riley, also known as the love of my life!”

“Nice to meet you,” Harry says with a warm smile.

Riley is silent for a while, looking skeptical as she seems to analyze Harry, before her eyes widen in recognition. “Harry Styles! You’re Carter’s kid, right?”

Harry can feel his blood start to run cold. If this lady is familiar with his family, then he’s done for. Sensing his nerves, Louis places a hand on Harry’s thigh and gives it a squeeze.

“It’s ok, love,” he assures. “She’s cool.”

“Oh, mom and dad don’t know you’re out and about,” Riley giggles. “I won’t lie, that’s such a strange fear for an adult, but don’t worry, man. I won’t reveal your secret. I’m not that close with your folks anyway.”

“That’s good,” Harry sighs in relief, sheepishly rubbing the back of his neck. “Thank you.”

Riley waves a dismissive hand. “No problem. So, are you guys ready to order?”

Everyone at the table, with the exception of a very wide eyed Harry, starts rattling off their orders. Their voices mesh together in a mess of incoherency, making Harry feel awful for the poor woman keeping up with everything they’re saying. When everyone quiets down, Riley nods and walks back over to the counter.

Harry is absolutely stupefied. “Wait, did she get all-”

“I need one vanilla sunrise with extra caramel, one sundae, heavy on the chocolate but light on the sprinkles and don’t you dare put nuts on it, Cara’s words not mine, one cookie dough shake, one whipped cherry soft serve, one coconut dream, and one classic chocolate shake, don’t be stingy on the shavings!” Riley rattles off, effectively cutting Harry off and further stupefying him.

“Don’t underestimate her skills, love,” Louis chuckles. “You’re gonna love the cookie dough milkshake. It’s so damn good.”

Harry scoffs. “You were serious about us sharing a shake?”

“Of course I was!” Louis laughs, looping his arm around Harry’s. “I want us to do cheesy couple shit.”

Liam groans. “Look, I just want to enjoy my ice cream in peace, so can you two not be gross?”

Louis purses his lips as if he’s really mulling over Liam’s question. He looks at Harry and almost breaks character when he sees that he has the exact same expression. The two of them look at each
other for a moment before they both turn to Liam and give their answer. “No.”

“Worth a shot,” Liam sighs, rhythmically tapping his fingers against the table.

Harry gives a slight cough, instantly reclaiming Louis’ attention. “So, uh, you’re obviously pretty close to Riley,” he points at Louis’ name on the table. “How far back do you two go?”

Louis releases a breath, shaking his head in slight amazement. “We go way back. I’ve known her since I was little. She used to give skating lessons to Carmen.”

Harry furrows his eyebrows. “Skating lessons?”

“Yep,” Louis confirms with a slight nod. “Carmen had this whole figure skating phase that lasted for a couple of years.”

“Was she any good?” Harry asks.

“Fuck no,” Louis scoffs. “The girl nearly broke every bone in her body trying to do all the shit Riley tried to teach her. That says a lot about how stubborn she is by the way. If Riley Goodwin can’t teach you then no one can.”

Harry gapes at Louis as recognition dawns on him. “Riley Goodwin? I knew she looked familiar!”

Louis nods, looking absolutely elated that Harry recognizes her. “The one and only.”

Riley Goodwin is a retired figure skater who was huge back in her day. Her awards and accolades all add up to a fruitful career that skyrocketed her into a stardom that burned out when she suffered from an accident that ruined her right femur. It healed, but it will never be the same. She’ll never be as great as she used to be.

“Anyway,” Louis sighs, turning his attention back to Harry. “I would often sit in on their lessons and... I was so mesmerized by how graceful Riley was. You could tell that she genuinely loved her craft, that she felt more free on the ice than anywhere else, and I loved watching her. It got to a certain point where I started joining their lessons, and not to put Carmen down, but I was considerably easier to teach than her.”

Harry laughs at that, completely enraptured in Louis’ every word. There’s such a strong fondness in his voice that draws Harry in and keeps him at arm’s length. It’s the most mesmerized that Harry has ever felt.

“After the accident,” Louis continues, taking a deep breath as he feels himself getting choked up. “She, uh, didn’t come over anymore, and when she finally did, I latched on to her. I didn’t want to leave her side because she’s family to me. I never had a warm parent figure in my life and she filled that space for me, so I had to fill a space for her.” He bites his lip and grins. “We were inseparable. She was the one person I could tell anything to. Hell, she was the first person I came out to.”

Harry’s breath hitches at that. He had an idea about how close Louis and Riley are, but he didn’t think they were this close. Riley is obviously like a second mother to Louis, and Harry can’t help but feel gratitude towards her.

“She eventually got tired of sitting around and feeling sorry for herself,” Louis continues. “So, she opened up this shop. Saved a table just for me,” Louis smiles as he gingerly runs his fingers across his name. “It’s been going strong for ten years now.”

“Order up!” A raspy southern accent cuts Harry off. A bubbly waiter with shocking red hair and a blinding smile practically skips over to the table, his right hand expertly balancing a platter filled with everyone’s treats.

“Damien!” Louis cheers.

“Love bug!” The waiter replies, setting the platter down at the middle of the table. “Well, I haven’t seen you before.” He says, giving Harry a firm pat on the back. “The name’s Damien, Damien Jefferies.”

“Nice to meet you, Damien.” Harry replies with a slight nod.

Before Damien can say anything else, Riley’s voice shouts from the kitchen. “Damien, get your hick ass over here! There’s no time to socialize!”

Damien rolls his eyes, walking away from the group as he curses under his breath. He and his boss have a very close relationship that can’t survive without an element of malice. Along with everyone else, Louis greedily grabs his dessert, a light brown colored shake with whipped cream and chunks of cookie dough on top.

“Get ready for this liquid heaven to make sweet love to your taste buds!” Louis shouts, stuffing two straws in the shake.

Harry grimaces at the drink. He isn’t a huge health nut or anything, but this drink has to contain at least a gazillion calories.

“Stop worrying about how unhealthy it is,” Louis snorts, seeming to have read Harry’s mind. “Don’t be a nerd. Drink it.”

Harry sighs before he reluctantly leans forward and wraps his lips around the straw. He remains still for a second, feeling Louis’ eyes burning holes in the side of his face, before he takes a slow, hesitant sip. His eyes widen and his nerves tingle when he tastes what has to be the most delicious beverage that has ever graced his taste buds.

“Holy shit,” He whispers before he takes a long sip of the drink.

“This is why you should always trust me.” Louis giggles, leaning forward to occupy the other straw. The two of them lock eyes as they wordlessly sip at their drink, occasionally grinning at how cheesy they must look. Everyone else at the table looks annoyed, but on the inside, they can’t possibly feel anymore joy for Louis.

The rest of the ride back to Alton is silent due to everyone, with the exception of Liam, falling asleep. Nothing knocks a person out quite like a stomach full of sweets. Cara has her feet up on the dash board and her beanie covering her face as she nods off. Zayn’s head is resting against his window while Niall obnoxiously snores as his head rests on Zayn’s lap. Louis is softly snoring away, his head resting on Harry’s shoulder. Harry’s cheek is smushed against the top of Louis’ head, unconsciously nuzzling against his soft hair as he sleeps. Perrie is snuggled up against Harry’s other side, her face buried in his shoulder. Liam tries his best to stay awake, not wanting to die at the age of twenty-two because none of his ‘friends’ wanted to take over driving duties.

When Liam finally pulls into the shopping center, the exact same place where Harry was picked
up, he looks back to see that everyone is still asleep. With a grin that could rival the Cheshire cat’s, Liam opens his alarm app, syncs his phone with the car radio, turns the volume all the way up, and taps a button that releases a high pitched alarm that sounds a lot like a police siren.

Zayn punches Niall in the jaw as he jolts awake, causing the blond to be overwhelmed by both the sudden noise and the pain blossoming on his face, Perrie shrieks as she covers her ears, Harry and Louis nearly head-butt each other as they look around in panicked confusion, and Cara springs up, her beanie still covering her face as she yells, “I’m not going back!”

Liam’s face gets bright red as he doubles over in laughter, repeatedly slapping his knee and avoiding the harsh glares he’s receiving.

“Keep laughing, Payne,” Cara says monotonously, pulling her beanie off her head. “Keep laughing.”

“What the fuck, you prick!” Perrie shouts, her hands firmly grasping her breasts.

“Um… Periwinkle?” Harry bites his lip to keep back a giggle. “Why are you…”

“I don’t really know,” She answers with a shrug. “It’s what I do when I’m panicked or stressed.”

Harry raises an eyebrow, his hands slowly coming up to his own chest to get a firm hold on his pecs. “You know what? This is strangely comforting.”

Perrie beams. “I know, right?”

“Stop being weird,” Louis says, his soft tone giving away that he isn’t really annoyed. “Now come here and kiss me before you go.”

Harry gladly gives into the demand, planting a soft kiss on Louis’ slightly chapped lips. When he pulls away, he places another kiss on Louis’ nose, causing it to scrunch up.

“You’re like a cute little bunny,” Perrie whispers, slightly ruining the tender moment.

“Alright,” Niall pipes up, moving over and pulling his seat forward so Harry can get out. “Get a move on. Can’t handle more sappy shit.”

Louis scoffs. “Too much salt.”

“I’m not salty!” Niall insists.

Harry hums and purses his lips as he climbs out of the car. “Sounds like something a salty person would say.”

Niall squawks at that while everyone else does everything they can to hide their laughter… everyone except for Louis, who is currently grinning from ear to ear.


“Yes, love?” Louis answers.

Harry smirks. “You have a test tomorrow.”

Louis’ amused expression is wiped off his face and replaced by pure grief. Everyone else in the car immediately starts teasing Louis, no longer able to hold in how amused they feel. Louis shakes his head, taking it all in stride, before he leans forward to kiss Harry goodbye.
“There’s my little businessman!” Gwendoline squeals as soon as Harry walks through the front door. She runs to him, the back of her dress flowing behind her, and wraps him up in a tight hug.

“Mother, please,” Harry whines, his cheeks getting red.

“How was the workshop?” She asks, pulling away from the embrace to look at him. “I swear, there isn't one person your father didn’t brag to about where you were. Oh, honey, he's so delighted.”

“The workshop was very… informative,” Harry answers, feeling slight guilt coiling in the pit of his stomach. “I learned a lot.”

Gwendoline claps her hands together in delight. “Wonderful! I’ll go tell your father that you’ve re-”

“Welcome back, my boy!” Carter laughs as he descends the steps.

“Afternoon, father,” Harry greets formally.

When Carter reaches the bottom step, he heads toward Harry and gives his back a firm pat. “How was the workshop?”

“Amazing!” Gwendoline giggles before Harry can say anything. “Spectacular, wonderful, magnificent, oh, there’s just not a word that appropriately covers how it went. Right, my love?”

“Um, yes, ma’am,” Harry breathes, internally thanking his mother for unintentionally saving his skin.

“Now that’s what I like to hear!” Carter laughs, giving Harry another pat on the back. “You’re shaping up to be an excellent heir, my boy. The company will be in your hands real soon!”

“Oh, what a time that will be,” Margaret mutters as she, along with Eli, descends the steps.

Harry beams at the sight of his siblings. “Afternoon, guys!”

“Afternoon,” They greet back emotionlessly.

“Do you mind if Margaret and I go out for lunch?” Eli asks.

“We honestly don’t care what you do,” Gwendoline mutters so lowly that no one can hear her.

“Sure, you can go.” Carter answers dismissively.

Eli mutters under his breath, walking toward the front door with Margaret on his tail. His eyes lock with Harry’s for a moment before he stops. He gives his brother a brief once over before he cocks his head to the side and smiles, his bitter mood suddenly alleviated.

“How was the workshop, brother?” Eli asks.

Harry’s eyes widen at Eli’s sudden interest in his activities. “It was fine. Did you have a nice evening?”

“Yes,” Eli answers with a clipped tone.

“Oh, what did you do?” Harry asks, wanting to continue this rare interaction he’s having with one of his siblings.
Eli shrugs. “Had dinner, spent time with Evy, the usual. Are we done?”

Harry looks down at the marble floor, completely aware that this conversation is over. “Yes.”

When Eli leads Margaret outside, closing the door behind them, he turns to her with an uncharacteristically joyful smile. Margaret’s eyes widen at the expression, feeling slight fear of what it could possibly mean.

“What’s with the sudden display of emotion?” She asks. She tries to sound sarcastic but ends up sounding as nervous as she feels.

Eli’s smile grows larger. “The hickey on our dear golden child’s neck tells me he wasn’t where he said he was.”

Her face lighting up with realization, Margaret grins just as brightly as her brother.

“God, I fucking hate wearing suits,” Louis complains as he tugs on his collar. “Would rather be in something more comfortable.”

Harry rolls his eyes. “What a nice way to say *something sluttier*.”

“Oh, you know you love it.” Louis giggles, looking around before he kisses Harry’s cheek.

“Didn’t say I didn’t,” Harry says, slightly turning head to press his lips against Louis’.

The two of them are currently in Harry’s room getting ready for lunch. Harry isn’t nearly as nervous as he was during Louis’ first test, he knows that Louis’ going to be well behaved, especially since the two of them have some sort of connection.

“I’m honestly so chill right now,” Louis breathes. “I just want to get this over with. No offense, babe, but your family is very…”

“Dreadful?” Harry supplies.

“That’s the word I’m looking for.” Louis says with a nod.

“Harry!” The twins yell in unison as they burst into the room. “It’s time for lunch!”


“It’s just one lunch, bluebird,” Harry soothes, wrapping an arm around Louis’ shoulder.

The twins squeal at Harry’s display of affection, already knowing that the two of them are together. Pam looks elated, her eyes the equivalent of dazzling sapphires, while Sam manages to look smug yet slightly skeptical.

The four of them leave Harry’s room and head down the maze of corridors before descending the steps leading to the foyer. The smell of roast hits their noses before they even make it into the kitchen. The twins can’t wait to tear into it later when the staff are allowed to eat.

“Why on earth are we having a roast during lunch?” Harry questions to himself.

“They want to show off how classy they are,” Louis answers mockingly. “Only the elite can afford to have a premium roast for lunch. Honestly, it’s like you don’t know your family at all.”
“Honestly, I don’t really think I do,” Harry admits.

Louis raises an eyebrow at that, but doesn’t say anything. The twins separate from him and Harry as soon as they all enter the dining room. Gwendoline is fussing with one of the older maids about place settings while Carter converses with one of the chefs. Margaret, Preston, Eli, Evelyn, and Madeline are already in their seats, their eyes shifting to Harry and Louis as soon as they’re in sight.


Gwendoline pauses her razing to take notice of Harry. Her mood instantly elevates as she heads over to her son, taking his hands in hers when she stops in front of him.

“How are you, love?” She asks, giving his hands a squeeze.

“I’m good,” Harry answers with a nod, leaning forward to kiss his mother’s cheek.

“I do not believe we have met yet,” Louis says.

Gwendoline turns to him, her eyes slightly wide, and regards him with a warm smile. “You are correct.” She places a hand on Louis’ shoulder and gives it a squeeze. “I am delighted by your progress, young man. I have not observed you myself, but I trust what I have been hearing from both my husband and my son.”

Louis waves a dismissive hand. “I swear those two are giving me way too much credit.”

“Not at all, dear,” she insists. “When Carter Styles says that he sees potential in someone, he means it,” She gives his shoulder another squeeze before going to take her seat at the table. “We can speak more while we’re eating. Please take your seats.”

When Carter joins the table, the chefs instantly bustle out of the kitchen with platters expertly balanced in their hands. They set down the food, which are revealed to be just the side dishes, at the middle of the table. Finally, Bernard comes out of the kitchen, proudly carrying the most scrumptious roast that’s ever been created. Smoke billows from the juicy slab of beef, covered liberally in Bernard’s signature gravy.

“I don’t care if this is showing off,” Louis mutters so lowly that only Harry can hear him. “I want that in my mouth right now.”

Harry can only nod in agreement, too mesmerized by the star of the meal being carefully placed on the table. The smell wafting from it is smoky with a punch of spice to it, and he wonders if that’s exactly how it tastes.

“Good lord,” Margaret breathes with a shake of her head. “This might be the first time I won’t crave death during a family dinner.”

Louis breathes out a laugh before he turns to her. “Well, you must be Harry’s sister.”

Margaret cocks her head to the side, analyzing Louis’ face, before she sits up straighter and nods. “I suppose.”

Louis takes notice of the way Harry tenses. He looks at the younger man to see his eyes downcast and his lips turned downward. Margaret’s small statement has made some sort of negative impact on him. His eyes narrow and determined, Louis turns his attention back to Margaret.

“You suppose,” Louis scoffs as he fills his plate with food. “Either you are or you are not, my dear.
Do you come from the same parents? Yes. Do you live in the same house? Yes. Does he love you as much as any man could love his family? Yes. You are his sister. Do you also want me to tell you where babies come from?"

He digs into his roast with the proper utensils, expertly ignoring the harsh stare Margaret is sending him. Gwendoline covers her mouth as she giggles like a school girl. Carter just outright laughs, not at all caring about propriety when he finds something funny. Preston and Eli are glaring at Louis, and they’re not being subtle about it either. Evelyn and Madeline look confused, their eyes constantly shifting between Margaret, each other, and Louis. Harry stares at Louis with wide eyes, feeling the same shock he felt when Louis was rude to his brothers.

Gwendoline pulls herself together before she speaks. “So, Louis, how is your family?”

Louis regards Gwendoline with a warm smile. “They are well, Mrs. Styles. Thank you for asking.”

The rest of the dinner goes smoothly, which doesn’t surprise Harry in the slightest. Louis is the perfect gentleman once again, using the correct utensils, utilizing his vocabulary, and being engaged in conversations. Evelyn and Madeline grow fond of the man by the time dessert comes out, easily falling for his ridiculous charm, which their husbands don’t appreciate at all. When it’s finally time for Louis to head home, Gwendoline insists that he comes back for dinner again in the near future. Louis, of course, makes a sincere promise that he’ll do just that.

“I’ll walk you out,” Harry whispers to Louis when they leave the dining room. He takes note of how closely his siblings are watching him, and keeps his hands behind his back to keep himself from touching Louis.

Louis nods, his hands also clasped firmly behind his back. “Ok.”

The two of them head out through the front door and walk to Louis’ car. They don’t say a word because they’re unable to, because they might end up saying something too sentimental or flirty, and they can’t run the risk of acting such a way when a member of Harry’s family might see them. With formal goodbyes and sad eyes, they part ways from each other. All Harry can do is watch Louis’ car drive through the gate and disappear over the horizon.

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“God,” Madeline sighs, shoveling more ice cream in her mouth. “I used to have such a huge crush on Lucy Liu.”

“She’s literally a goddess,” Evelyn adds.

“She’s amazing in every single way and I love her,” Harry praises.

Evelyn, Madeline, and Harry are currently lounging in the theatre room watching Charlie’s Angels. The trio realized a few days ago that it’s been forever since their last Charlie’s Angels night, and they decided to remedy that situation by spending an entire day watching the movies and marathoning the original show. Sure the movies are bad, but they’re comically bad.

“So, Harry,” Evelyn drawls, automatically shifting the jovial mood of the entire room. “The other day at dinner…”

Harry sighs. “Can we please not talk about that?”

“Eli never tells me how he feels,” Evelyn admits, her mouth twisting in frustration. “We’ve been married for twelve years, and not once has he opened up to me. I love that man with every inch of
my soul, and it kills me that he doesn’t find me worthy enough to open up to, even after all this
time.”

The silence that falls between the small group is tense. Not even the sound of the movie’s over the
top action sequence is able to elevate the mood. Harry doesn’t look shocked at all about this
information, already used to years of barely getting to know his older brother, but Madeline’s face
is the dictionary definition of shock. Evelyn keeps her eyes on her lap, suddenly fascinated with her
wedding ring.

Evelyn looks up at Harry with tired eyes. “He puts so much effort into that company, and I’ve
always wondered why because he hates Carter.” Harry flinches at that. “He should want that
company to go down the drain. He should be jumping for joy that Carter wants to give it to
someone as unqualified as you.”

Harry glares at her. “Unqualified?”

“Baby,” Evelyn soothes in a way that definitely doesn’t come off as condescending, taking Harry’s
hand in hers. “I mean zero disrespect, but let’s be honest here. Do you truly think that you can be
an effective leader of that company?”

Harry opens his mouth, ready to defend himself as a suitable leader, and then abruptly closes it. He
mulls over Evelyn’s question with furrowed eyebrows and pursed lips, thinking about how bored
out of his mind he was when his father used to make him sit in on business meetings, how limited
his knowledge is of, well, everything that has to do with the company, how many times he’s
nodded in faux understanding whenever his father gave him rundowns of anything happening
within the company. Ultimately, Harry just shakes his head and faces Evelyn with a determined
expression.

“I’m not qualified now,” He says. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t become qualified. I will be the
person my father needs me to be, an effective leader.”

“Do you want to do it?” Evelyn asks exasperatedly, her patience slowly dwindling. “Is-”

“It doesn’t matter what I want!” Harry snaps. “You know damn well how all of this works, how
my life works. Your husband’s childish behavior and aloof attitude makes him unqualified to run
the company, and that doesn’t concern me. I need to do what I need to do. You know that. How
dare you act like I have any control over any of this!”

Evelyn suddenly looks guilty. “Harry, I wasn’t trying to-”

“Your husband is a social hermit and a soul sucking presence,” Harry continues bitterly. “If you
wanted me to be a bit more specific, that’s why he doesn’t get the company. He’s intelligent, I’ll
give him that, but intelligence isn’t enough for father. Preston certainly can’t run it because he’s
a…”

Harry bites his lip and looks over at an unimpressed Madeline. Her eyes are narrowed, her
shoulders are tense, and her lips are set in a tight line.

“He’s a what, Harry?” She interrogates.

Harry’s no longer in the mood for a Charlie’s Angels night. He gets up from the sofa and strides
out of the theatre room, successfully avoiding eye contact with Evelyn and Madeline.
“How much longer?” Louis groans, his head thrown back as he follows Harry up the steep hill.

It’s a warm and partly cloudy Sunday morning and Harry and Louis are walking through a meadow. Instead of staying inside the house to go over some boring lesson that Louis, more than likely, already knows, Harry decided to take him to a place that he holds very close to his heart. He has his camera in one hand and Louis’ hand in the other as they journey through the bright flowers and tall grass. This has the potential to be a very romantic outing ripped from the pages of a Nicholas Sparks novel, but it isn’t due to Louis’ constant complaining.

“For the thousandth time,” Harry sighs. “We’re almost there.”

“You should’ve told me we were gonna do this before I left the house,” Louis whines. “I am not dressed appropriately for this.”

“You’re wearing short shorts,” Harry points out.

“And boots,” Louis adds. “Heeled boots.”

“Just take them off.”

Louis pouts. “They make me look good, though.”

Harry rolls his eyes and bites his lip to keep back a laugh. “You look good with or without the boots, bluebird.”

“Don’t bluebird me,” Louis mutters, stopping to pull off his boots. He doesn’t admit that the lush grass feels good under his feet, knowing damn well that Harry will just act smug about it.

The two of them walk a little further, now getting immersed in trees with pure white flowers covering their branches. Most of the petals are falling off and getting carried by the wind, creating a majestic feel to what was once an ordinary walk. Harry occasionally glances over at Louis, his heart aching with adoration as the man stares around in awe, his hair, unbeknownst to him, getting covered in white petals.

“Wow,” Louis breathes, taking in the large body of water that comes into view. “Harry, this is beautiful.”

The lake glimmers as the sun, now uncovered by the clouds, shines down on it. It’s surrounded by insanely green grass covered in poppies and tall trees, and Louis isn’t sure if he’s dreaming or not. It takes a while for him to notice the wicker basket sitting right on top of a picnic blanket.

“Is-Is that for us?” Louis asks, looking around to see if there’s anyone else out there.

“Oh course,” Harry chuckles.

“How did-”

“Pam and Sam set it up.”

Louis keeps shifting his eyes from Harry to the picnic, his eyes getting a tad bit glossy as he takes in the suddenly sentimental moment. Harry lifts a hand to cradle Louis’ cheek, leaning in just a little closer to press their lips together. Louis immediately wraps his arms around Harry’s neck and firmly presses their bodies together. When Harry pulls away, he has a sparkle in his eyes and a grin on his face.
“Shall we?” Harry drawls, his tone posh, as he gestures to the picnic.

“We shall,” Louis answers, his tone just as posh as Harry’s.

The two of them sit down on top of the blanket. Louis stretches his legs out and leans back on his palms, sighing as he tips his head back and lets the sun warm his face. Harry’s sitting Indian style as he opens the basket and rummages through it, internally thanking Pam and Sam as he sees everything he told them to pack.

“You feel like some ham and cheese?” Harry asks.

Louis perks up at that. “You better not be teasing me. There better be some ham and cheese in that basket.”

Harry pulls out a neatly wrapped ham and cheese sandwich, which Louis quickly snatches out of his hand. He tears the wrapping and takes a big bite of the sandwich, humming at the taste of it.

“I fucking love ham and cheese,” Louis practically moans.


Louis stares at him for a moment, his expression blank as he chews his food, before he swallows and speaks. “Is this your way of getting me to suck you off right here, right now? Because it’s working.”

“N-No,” Harry stutters, his cheeks reddening. “Why are you so dirty?”

“Don’t act like you don’t love it,” Louis laughs, waving a dismissive hand and gleefully taking a Capri sun.

A calm, comfortable silence falls between them as they eat their food. They occasionally glance at each other and, eventually, lace their fingers together, taking pleasure in just being around each other. At some point, Harry once again notices the white petals stuck in Louis’ hair, and he feels a sudden need to use his camera. He lets go of Louis’ hand, causing the man to look over at him in confusion, and turns on his camera. Understanding what Harry wants to do, Louis looks directly at the lens and smiles, giggling when he hears a sharp click.

“You and your damn camera,” Louis sighs, but he doesn’t sound the least bit annoyed. In fact, his tone is soft and serene.

“You’re just…” Harry trails off as he takes another picture. “So perfect.”

Louis’ eyes slightly widen at that. Harry has complimented him before, but the difference between now and all those other times is the tone of his voice. It’s filled with so much… pure love. Louis can feel his heart speeding up as hopeful thoughts that look a lot like forever overtake his mind. Before he can think too much about what those thoughts mean, he gets up from the blanket and runs toward the lake, diving straight in when he hears Harry yelling after him.

“What are you doing?!?” Harry shouts through his laughter.

Louis treads the water with a bright grin. “Giving you pictures you can jack off to.”

Harry rolls his eyes at the vulgarity, but he still indulges Louis by doing a full-fledged photoshoot of him in the lake. He captures picture after picture of Louis splashing the water, looking directly in the camera with his fringe artfully sticking to his forehead, and doing underwater handstands. After
a while, Louis beckons Harry to come into the water.

Harry sighs. “I’m not-”

“Don’t be a nerd!” Louis shouts, walking closer to the shallow end. His shirt, now see through, clings to his torso and Harry can’t seem to look away from it.

Louis notices Harry’s perverted stare and bites his lip to hide an obnoxious smirk. He slightly cocks his head to the side as he toys with the hem of his shirt, gaining some gratification from how wide Harry’s eyes get. When he grows tired of his own teasing, he strips himself of the shirt, walking backwards into the water as he throws it near the picnic blanket.

“Coming in?” Louis asks as he unzips his shorts.

Wordlessly, Harry strips himself of his shirt and trousers, and walks right into the water.

As promised, Harry visits Victoria a few days later. He makes the five-hour car ride to Agatha Chastain’s 85th annual miss marvelous pageant, located right on the coast of Holbrooke. When he’s within ten minutes of his destination, he stops at some random flower shop and picks up a bouquet of tulips. He isn’t quite sure if they’re Victoria’s favorite, but he does remember her saying that she found them beautiful.

When he gets to the pageant, he goes through a brick wall of security guards in order to enter the dressing room area. There are so many buff men in suits, security cameras, and alarms, one might assume they’re in a government facility rather than a beauty pageant, which is to be expected since all the contestants are exclusively refined.

Harry walks down the brightly lit corridor leading to Victoria's room, a bright smile on his face and the bouquet gripped in his hand. Half-naked women, who seem to have no qualms about a man traipsing outside their dressing rooms, rush about the hallways, shouting demands at their managers and frantically making last minute adjustments to their hair, makeup, or outfits.

Harry occasionally smooths out his blazer out of nerves as he gets closer and closer to where his betrothed is, wondering if this is the appropriate time to visit her. She may have invited him here, but he still feels like he’s catching her at a very bad time. His eyes light up when he sees a pastel pink door with her room number engraved on it, and he’s just about to knock when a terrified looking man bursts out of the room. Harry swiftly steps to the side, two seconds away from asking the man if he’s alright, when a loud, shrill, almost inhuman voice rings out.

“You fucking moron!”

The man ducks as a shoe flies out of the room, nearly whacking him on the head. “M-Ms. Astaire, I am so sorry. Please just-”

“Get out,” The voice practically growls. “You’ve ruined it. Get the fuck out! You call yourself a fashion designer?! You’re a fucking joke! I take a chance on an amateur and this is what I get?!”

The man winces as frustrated tears start to form in his eyes. “I-I’m so-”

He’s interrupted when another shoe flings out of the room, this time hitting him on the shoulder.

“Go away!” The voice screeches. The man’s face turns sickeningly pale as he nods frantically and runs right past Harry.
Harry just stands where he is, seemingly frozen as he tries to grasp what’s going on. He stands there for a while before Victoria storms out of the room, her makeup, hair, and wardrobe flawless and her expression sour. She looks to her right and freezes when she sees Harry.

“U-Um,” She choking out, her cheeks reddening from embarrassment. “I-I… Hello, Harry. You’re early.”

Harry feels too shocked to say anything. He subtly leans forward to see if there’s anyone else in the dressing room, feeling dread when he finds that Victoria seems to be alone. The raging psychopath he heard just a moment ago had to be her, and he doesn’t know how to feel about that.

Victoria’s face twists up as if she’s about to cry before she shakes her head and wills the expression away. “Um, are those flowers for me?”

Harry can do nothing but give a tentative nod, slightly afraid of setting her off. Victoria frowns at the action but doesn’t address it as she gingerly takes the bouquet from his hands.

“They’re beautiful,” She says. “They really are. I love tulips.”

Harry remains silent, his eyes searching Victoria’s as if he’s deducing whether or not she’s even capable of producing such a disturbing shriek.

“Please say something,” She mutters, looking desperately at Harry. “Anything.”

“Why…” He trails off, carefully choosing his words. “Why were you so brutish toward that man.”

Victoria is silent for a while before she answers. “H-He messed up my dress, Harry,” she chuckles as if it’s a valid reason for behaving like a maniac.

Harry looks at her dress, a peach colored number covered in meticulously placed sequins and feathers, before he looks back up at her face with a shrug. “It looks gorgeous. What’s the issue?”

Victoria insistently shakes her head. “It’s not. There’s not enough sequins along the bust, you see?” she waves a hand over her chest. “A-And the feathers are too small and-” she breathes out a frustrated sigh when she sees that Harry has the same skeptical look on his face. “It’s a pageant, dear, and I can’t… everything has to be perfect.”

“It looks like he worked hard on it,” Harry says, growing irritated. “Constructive criticism is fine, but you have no right to scream at people and put them down. It’s not very becoming, nor is it a way that anyone of your status should behave.”

Victoria’s breathing becomes ragged as she starts wringing her hands. “U-Um, I…” she sighs.

“Come in, please.”

Harry doesn’t come in the dressing room willingly. Victoria has to grab him by the wrist and drag him in, her expression pleading him to cooperate. She closes the door behind them before she leads Harry over to a mauve, heart shaped couch and sits down with him. They’re silent but they can vaguely hear the hustle and bustle from outside the door. Harry takes the time to look around the room, having zero interest in it but finding it more interesting than looking at Victoria. The room is painted light pink, the vanity, covered with makeup and hair care products, is grand with rose petals intricately carved into it, and there’s a clothing rack filled with various pageant wear.

“I’m not always like that,” Victoria rushes out, sighing in relief when Harry’s attention snaps back to her. “I just want everything to be perfect.” She pauses as she looks down and plays with the rings on her fingers. “You don’t understand, you just don’t understand.”
Harry surprises himself when he scoffs. “What don’t I understand? That you’re apparently a self-absorbed-”

“Please don’t say that,” she pleads, her voice wavering. She locks eyes with Harry, her normally fierce hazel irises now dull and seemingly lifeless. “I’ve… I want to be perfect, I want everything to be perfect.”

Harry’s face softens as he takes her hand in his. “Love, it’s impossible for everything to be absolutely per-”

“No, it isn’t,” She snaps, insistently shaking her head. “I hate that phrase more than anything else in the world. It’s only said by people who don’t even try! Perfection is attainable, Harry. You just have to want it, and goddammit I need it.”

Harry doesn’t know what else to say, and that doesn’t come from shock, it comes from pity. He’s met women like Victoria far too often in his life, and he knows that this way of thinking is something they’re bound to. Once they’re in a mindset where flaws are the biggest forms of failure, it’s hard for them to get out of it. It’s a shame that someone he’s grown to care about, someone he’s actively planning a future with, is in that mindset.

Harry’s silence drags on, causing Victoria’s nerves to steadily grow, before he asks her the only question he can think of. “Why do you need it?”

Victoria’s eyes widen as she stutters out random words, seemingly trying to find a good answer to Harry’s question that won’t result in the loss of her dignity. Harry places a hand on her shoulder and gives it a gentle squeeze, and she relaxes instantly.

“Ever since I was little,” She begins. “I wanted to be a princess?” She phrases the statement like a question as if she herself is confused by it. “I watched this pageant on TV, the 2005 Precious Princess Pageant, and I was in complete awe of everything I saw. The women were in the most elegant dresses I’ve ever seen, and they had these crowns on top of their heads with real diamonds in them. Oh, Harry, it was an experience. It was like stars just exploded into sparkling dust and rained down on each and every contestant. I knew right then that I wanted to enter a pageant.” Her grin radiates the room. “And, God, I was loved, and I’m still loved, by everyone. That’s all I ever wanted.”

“You wanted to be loved?” Harry asks.

“More than anything else in the world.” She answers as if it’s ludicrous to believe that she would desire anything else.

“Screaming and acting like a brat doesn’t get people to love you,” Harry says rather bluntly.

Victoria’s face falls as she looks back down at her lap. “I promise that it doesn’t happen a lot. I’m just so stressed about everything, because I have all these people wanting me to succeed. Surely you know what that’s like. You are a golden child.”

Harry winces at that, giving himself a moment of reflection before he nods. “I guess.”

Victoria shifts closer and wraps her arms around Harry’s torso, giving him a kiss on the cheek. Harry doesn’t return the hug, but he does lean closer into Victoria’s side.

“You promise it doesn’t happen a lot?” Harry asks.

“I promise,” She answers, and Harry knows she’s lying.
“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Harry groans.

“Draw four, bitch!” Louis cackles, doing a mini victory dance.

It’s yet another Sunday morning and Harry and Louis are in Harry’s bedroom, once again doing nothing productive. Louis brought a deck of Uno cards with him, the text conversation he and Harry had last night still fresh in his mind.

Harry: I’ve never played uno…

Louis: How the FUCK have you never played UNO?????

Harry welcomed the distraction with open arms since his mind is clogged with so many negative thoughts. The pageant incident is definitely one of them, but it’s not the only thing. July is growing near, and Harry isn’t looking forward to the inevitable depression the month will bring.

“This game isn’t fair at all,” Harry mutters as he reaches a hand toward the deck. He’s just about to draw four cards before he pauses, suddenly remembering one of the rules Louis shared with him before they started the game. “Show me your hand.”

Louis scoffs. “What?”

“Show me your hand.” Harry reiterates, slowly pulling his hand away from the deck.

“Harry, I am appalled,” Louis says, feigning offense.

“Show your hand.”

“I am bewildered, aghast, scandalized.”

“Your hand.”

“I have never felt so-”

“Louis!”

The two of them are silent for a moment, staring each other down as they wait for either one of them to break. When Harry shows no sign of backing down, Louis slaps his cards on the table and petulantly crosses his arms.

“I knew it!” Harry laughs, seeing a red card Louis could’ve played instead of his wild draw four card. “You played your card illegally! Draw four!”

“God fucking dammit,” Louis mutters, drawing four cards from the deck.

“Crime never pays, Mr. Tomlinson,” Harry says with his head held high.

Louis snorts. “Yeah, yeah, fuck off.”

The game continues in comfortable silence. More sunlight trickles into the room as the morning
passes in a blur of moving cards and obnoxious shouts of, “Uno!”. Eventually, the silence makes Harry grow tense. His negative thoughts are slowly returning to his brain, distracting him from what he’s doing. Louis’ smile drops from his face when he notices the sudden shift in Harry’s mood. He puts his cards face down on the coffee table, and reaches across to take Harry’s hand in his.

“Anything wrong, love?” He asks, giving Harry’s hand a squeeze.

Harry wants to tell Louis that nothing’s wrong, but he can’t find it within himself to do so. There’s a huge part of him that suddenly feels guilty for even thinking about lying to Louis, and he understands why, yet he doesn’t want to. Ultimately, he decides to open up, to let himself reopen past wounds and pray that Louis doesn’t rub dirt in them.

“This time of year,” he breathes, avoiding Louis’ concerned gaze. “It’s very hard for me.”

Louis doesn’t let go of Harry’s hand as he gets up from his armchair to sit directly in front of him on the edge of the coffee table.

“Why is it hard?” He asks, keeping his voice low.

Harry closes his eyes, giving himself a little time to collect his thoughts, and opens them to bravely lock eyes with Louis. “I’m not a virgin.”

Louis’ eyebrows furrow. “Uh… I know… I was there when you lost it.”

“N-No,” Harry stutters, internally cursing himself for being so vague. “I wasn’t a virgin when we met.”

Louis’ eyes get so wide that Harry momentarily worries that they’ll fall out of his head. He doesn’t know what to say, the only thing he can do is sit there and stare at this man who isn’t as innocent as he once thought.

“You don’t have to say anything,” Harry says, covering Louis’ hand with his free one. “In fact, it’s probably better if you don’t. Just let me speak without any interruptions, ok?”

Still unable to form a coherent thought, Louis gives a slight nod. Harry sighs, squeezing Louis’ hand in his and leaning closer to give him a kiss on the cheek. When he pulls back, he one again meets Louis’ eyes.

“When I was fourteen, I had a friend named Howard Casey,” Harry begins. “He was the first and only friend I’ve ever made and I cared for him more than anyone else in the world. I thought he was so cool because he seemed to know everything and didn’t care about what others thought of him.” He smiles fondly at the memories that start to flow into his mind. “Plus, he was a golden child like me, and he hated the label as much as I did. On my fifteenth birthday, I confessed that I was having… thoughts about him. I told him that I was afraid of why I was having them and what they could mean, and then he kissed me.” His voice softens to a delicate whisper. “We ended up having sex that night, it was wrong on so many levels because we were so young, but we couldn’t control ourselves. Years of being treated as programmable robots by our families, erupted into a five-month sexual entanglement that I didn’t want to escape from.”

Harry is silent for a moment, suddenly feeling overwhelmed by everything he’s starting to remember. Louis remains silent, squeezing Harry’s hand as if it’s a lifeline to let him know that he’s still there. Harry licks his drying lips and gives a shaky sigh, obviously trying to keep his emotions under control.
“One night,” he continues. “W-We were being intimate, and I,” Harry swallows the growing lump in his throat. “I didn’t lock the door that time. I always did, but not that night. I just forgot. My door swung open,” a tear slides down his cheek. “And my father came in, and he was so furious. I understood, I completely understood, because I was fifteen, I had no business being sexually active at that age, but my age wasn’t the issue. He made that perfectly clear after he practically chased Howard out of the house.” His breathing grows increasingly ragged as more tears fall down his face. “He screamed at me, he called me every name in the fucking book. Faggot, flamer, cocksucker, disgusting heathen! And my mother just stood by and let him, because she was just as disgusted as he was! And you know what he did? He ruined Howard’s family, he fucking ruined their reputation, their business, their way of life, just because of that one night!”

“Harry,” Louis breathes, his eyes filled with unshed tears. He doesn’t know what to say or do. His chest is aching due to how useless he feels. More than anything else in the world, he wants to take Harry’s pain and shackle it to his own heart, to transfer all the horrible memories from Harry’s mind to his own, to bear any negative emotion Harry’s feeling until his dying day, and these are desires that come from a pure place of adoration and love.

“My parents didn’t talk to me for a month,” Harry scoffs. “They didn’t even have the guts to look at my face. They were acting as if everything was normal until reality set in. Finally, I grew tired of being an outcast. I told them that I was corrupted by Howard, that I was a blind soul that was slowly regaining their vision. They took me back instantly because I’m the golden child.” his entire body starts to tremble. “And the loss of a golden child is fucking lethal to a family’s reputation.”

Louis can tell that Harry has nothing else to say. His tense muscles relax, the grip he has on Louis’ hand softens, and his breathing evens out. Louis doesn’t say anything, knowing that Harry probably needs space to cool down after spilling his heart out like that. After a while of tense silence, Harry buries his face in Louis’ chest and subtly breathes in his scent, taking comfort in it. Louis rubs his hands up and down Harry’s back in hopes of providing even more comfort.

“You’re not alone,” Louis says distantly.

“What do you mean?” Harry asks, but Louis doesn’t elaborate. He rests his chin on top of Harry’s head, taking shelter in his warmth, his scent, and his immeasurable strength.

Harry and Louis spend so much time with each other, the passing months seem to blend together. July passes in a blur of lovemaking, late night phone calls and texts, and random outings to obscure locations. August is a tad bit slower, but not by much, and the heat cools down just a little. They develop a special type of intimacy that isn’t sexual or friendly, it's the kind that makes them enjoy full afternoons of hushed conversations and evening cuddles that lead to nothing more. September is warm, but it develops a huge spike in heat when Harry’s parents postpone the engagement due to his grandparents not being a to come to Victoria’s birthday party, which goes on without a hitch. Her and Harry dance the night away like the perfect couple they’re supposed to be, until Harry slips out later that night to make love to Louis in his bedroom while the festivities continue downstairs. Everything is so perfect that Harry almost believes he’s dreaming, that Louis is just a product of his hopeful imagination, and he wakes up every morning to be gladly proven wrong.

October… is a very rude awakening.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

As you can see, this isn't the last chapter, but don't get your pitchforks and torches, friends, you won't have to wait long for it. It's all ready to go, just need to edit it. I just want to leave you with this for a bit before I reveal the conclusion. Enjoy! :)

The first day of October brings slight wind, a dark gray sky, and heavy rain. It ruins Harry and Victoria’s original plan to spend the afternoon at the park, so Harry suggested that they’d eat at a cozy little coffee shop right at the edge of town. Victoria hates coffee with a passion and doesn’t appreciate the smell of it, but she agrees to go with a pageant smile plastered on her face. Harry, of course, could see right through the act, but he didn’t say a word about it.

They’re sitting on a sofa at the corner of the shop, soaking up the casual and laid back ambiance. Victoria is absorbed in her latest novel, which is a bit more depressing than her usual fluff, and Harry is discreetly texting Louis as he sips his coffee.

*Harry: Are things getting any better with your mother?*

*Louis: No.*

*Harry: Sorry love :( Want me to come over?*

*Louis: Don’t piss off the beauty queen by cutting your date short*

*Harry: Fuck that. If you need me i’ll be there.*

*Louis: Hoorah. Chivalry isn’t dead…*

Harry frowns at the bitter sarcasm that’s evident in Louis’ texts, feeling useless for not having the ability to make things better for his lover. For the past two weeks, Louis has been in hot water with his mother. He won’t tell Harry the entire story of what happened, but from what Harry can gather, Louis said something to her that he probably shouldn’t have said. Harry knows for sure, though, that the problem doesn’t involve him. Marie wouldn’t keep allowing Louis to come over to the manor if that was the case.


Harry nods. “Everything’s fine. I just have a lot on my mind.”

“You can tell me anything, you know,” She says, placing a hand on his shoulder. “We’re going to spend the rest of our lives together, you can trust me with anything that’s troubling you.”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Harry insists, leaning away from her touch.
Victoria tries not to let her face show just how much Harry’s rejection hurt her, but she doesn’t do a great job of it. Harry suddenly feels guilty, remembering what Evelyn said about Eli, how his notorious lack of emotion and ability to open up saddens her. Harry doesn’t want to be like his brother or any other man that makes his wife feel lesser in any way. He wants Victoria to be happy, not unappreciated, useless, or miserable like other wives that stroll around Alton. He takes her hand and gives it a squeeze, lifting it up to his lips to give it a gentle kiss, the first kiss he’s ever laid on her skin.

Victoria’s cheeks flush as she looks away from Harry. “Th-That was lovely. Thank you.”

Harry smiles. “I promise that nothing is wrong, love. My mind is just going in a thousand different places at once.”

She bites the inside of her cheek, obviously thinking about something she doesn't want to think about. “Are you… unsure?”

“About…”

“Us,” She clarifies. “Are you unsure about us?”

“Of course not,” Harry scoffs, trying to sound as convincing as possible. “I want nothing more than to be your husband. That is something you can put your faith in.”

Victoria faces Harry, her expression wary. “Are you sure? Even after the, you know, incident at the pageant?”

Harry scoots closer to her and wraps his arms around her torso. “We all have our bad days. Nothing to worry about.”

Victoria grows still in his arms before she returns the hug and buries her face in his shoulder. The rigid state of her body tells Harry that she’s trying to hold back an emotional breakdown, but he doesn’t comment on it, mostly because she wouldn’t want him to.

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On the fifth day of October, Harry is a nervous wreck. Louis hasn’t texted him for the past four days, he never showed up for their lesson on Sunday, and he keeps ignoring all of Harry’s calls and text messages.

Against his better judgment, Harry is driving through brutal rainfall to get to the Tomlinson manor. He’s showing up completely unannounced, but he can’t get himself to care about how rude that is, especially when he doesn’t know how Louis’ feeling right now. He comes to a rather abrupt stop outside the manor, instantly wrenching his car door open and running up the stairs to the front entrance, paying no mind to how soaked he’s getting. He takes a few minutes to calm himself down, to get himself in the right mindset, before he rings the doorbell, releasing a musical chime that sounds more ominous than whimsical. He waits a few moments before the door finally opens, revealing a visibly exhausted Marie Tomlinson. Her tired eyes manage to sparkle when she sees Harry, looking at him as if he’s the answer to all of her prayers.

“Harry,” She breathes, smoothing out her gown. “Um, are you here to see Louis?”

“Yes, ma’am,” He answers. “Uh, he didn’t show up to his-”

“Yes,” She interrupts with a grimace. “I know. Please come in. Rid him of his thoughts.”
She said the last part under her breath, but Harry still heard her loud and clear. He now has a good idea of what’s going on, but he wants so desperately to be wrong or even slightly mistaken.

He walks right past Marie and heads up the spiral staircase to Louis’ room. On the way there, he hears music coming from the slightly open door of Rose’s room. He concludes that she’s once again practicing her violin, as he does recall Louis mentioning that she has a recital coming up. Angelica’s door is shut, but Harry can tell that it’s hers because of the hot pink A at the center of it. Carmen’s door is wide open, revealing a room that’s been deserted since her marriage, and Harry briefly wonders why it isn’t closed. Louis’ door is at the very end of the hallway. Harry can hear loud music, which sounds a lot like some Tove Lo song Louis introduced him to a couple of weeks ago, coming from the other side of the door. He raises a hesitant fist and knocks twice.

“Lou!” He shouts.

Suddenly, the music stops, leaving a silence that’s far more deafening. Harry stands where he is for much longer than he’d like, and he’s just about to knock on the door again when it suddenly swings open. Louis stands there, his face flushed, his eyes dull, and his hair a mess, dressed in sweats. He locks eyes with Harry, making it impossible for the man to look away, before he grabs him by the collar and yanks him in the room. Before Harry can say anything, Louis’ mouth is covering his and locking them in a bruising kiss.

Louis pulls away from the kiss with wide eyes and blown pupils. “Let’s fuck.”

Harry’s face flushes at the blunt proposition, shaking his head as he gently pushes Louis away. “No, we can’t. Not here.”

Louis scoffs, once again invading Harry’s space. “Sure we can.” he jumps up and wraps his legs around Harry’s waist, smirking when Harry grips his thighs to keep him up. “Come on, sweetheart.” he lands a kiss on Harry’s cheek. “Fuck me.”

“L-Louis,” Harry stutters, melting under the feeling of Louis’ lips insistently pressing against every inch of his face. “We can’t! Stop it!”

“What do you mean?” Louis huffs, keeping his hands on Harry’s shoulders as he gets back down on the floor and takes a step back. His eyes are fiery, but it seems to come from a place of anger and resentment rather than lust or determination. “You don’t think i’m attractive or something?”

Harry gapes at Louis, feeling hurt that the man would ever think that. “You’re the most beautiful person in the universe to me. You know that.”

“Then fuck me,” Louis demands, stepping closer to him. “Do it. Make a mess out of me. I want you to make me scream so loud that she hears it!”

“What?!” Harry shouts, taking a large step back. “Louis, what the fuck are you-”

“Show me!” Louis interrupts, frightening Harry with how psychotic he’s starting to sound. “Show me how beautiful you think I am, and I'll reward you by making all the noise I want.” his eyes shift past Harry to the slightly open door. “It can also serve as a punishment for her! I want her to hear how good it feels when you take me, how good it feels for her precious son to be taken by another man!”

“A-Are you talking about your mother?” Harry splutters. “Louis, what happened?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Louis growls, backing Harry up against the door, closing it all the way in the process. “In fact, I don’t want to talk at all. Why talk when we can fuck like animals?”
he leans in and starts nibbling Harry’s earlobe. “Come on. Pick me up, throw me on the bed, and take me.”

“No!” Harry bellows, causing Louis to step back out of fear. “Your sisters are home. Do you want them to hear? And is this all i’m good for? Being a tool to piss off of your mother?”

That seems to flip a switch inside of Louis. His fierce eyes grow horrified and his flushed skin turns as pale as a sheet. The reality of what he was trying to do is setting in.

“I-I,” he shakes his head and turns away from Harry. “I’m so… I’m so…” his breaths come out in gasps as he tries to get out the words he wants to say. Those breaths eventually dissolve into a sob that racks his body and causes him to crumble to the floor. “I’m sorry! I’m so, so sorry!”

Harry is frozen where he stands, not having a clue about what he should do. Does he comfort Louis? Does he give him space? Does he leave? Ultimately, he joins Louis on the floor and wraps him up in a tight hug, letting him sob into his chest. Louis holds onto Harry as if he’s the only thing keeping him from sinking, and in a way, he is.

“I’m so sorry,” Louis chokes out. “I-I care for you so much, Harry. Goddammit, I do. I really, really do. I have more respect for you than this, I have more respect for my sisters than this, and I have more respect for myself than this! Fuck, i’m so disgusting!”

“Don’t say that,” Harry mumbles, his cheek pressed against the top of Louis’ head. He breathes in the faint scent of peach scented shampoo and nuzzles against Louis’ hair. “You just had a moment, that’s all. Just let everything out, ok? I’m here. I’m always here.”

“I don’t want to go outside,” Louis admits, and Harry has no clue what he means by that. “I just want to stay here with you.” he suddenly shakes his head. “No, not here. I want to go… I want to go-”

“Bluebird,” Harry whispers, kissing Louis’ temple. “Don’t get more worked up than you already are. Relax.”

They hold on tightly to each other, their individual universes centered on this tender moment. They pay no mind to the harsh rain, the concerned voices of Angelica and Rose right outside Louis’ door, or the mutual feeling of unease they share for the future.

~

It’s the sixth day of October, and dinner at the Styles manor is different from how it usually is. The mood isn’t hostile or strained. In fact, it’s unnervingly comfortable and light hearted, which is most likely due to the fact that Eli and Preston aren’t there. The two brothers haven’t been seen all day, and when Harry asked Margaret where they ran off to, he only received a disinterested glance and small shrug.

Madeline and Evelyn are animatedly telling Harry about their recent trip to Prague, which was a very spur of the moment kind of trip. Margaret is slumped in her seat, barely even picking at her food, and taking long sips of her spiked lemonade. Carter and Gwendoline are whispering to each other, and judging by the expressions on their faces, their topic is a wonderful thing of great importance.

“Harry!” Gwendoline calls with a bright smile.

Harry turns away from Evelyn to face his mother, his eyebrows raised in question. Gwendoline looks as if she’s about to burst from her excitement. Her skin is practically glowing under the dull
light of the chandelier, and her eyes are sparkling.

“What is it, mother?” Harry asks.

“Your grandparents are free to come here in the next couple of weeks!” She squeals. “And Jillian and I are planning the perfect event for you to propose to Victoria!”

Harry can feel his skin pale. “Wow, really?”

Gwendoline nods her head, her smile still plastered on her face. She’s either oblivious to Harry’s lack of excitement, or she pays no mind to it.

“Really!” she cheers. “Oh, it’s going to be fantastic! Everyone will be there to see my little man take the next huge leap in his life! I know this is sudden, but to be fair, we have been putting this off for a few weeks. You should be engaged by now.”

The table is silent for a moment, save for the occasional sound of forks scraping against plates, before everyone is startled by Margaret’s sudden, manic laughter. Her face gets red as she slaps her hand against the table, eliciting loud clattering from the dishes and glassware, and hides her face in the crook of her arm.

“Oh, I would love to know what’s so funny.” Gwendoline sneers, her face red from anger.

“Oh, mother,” Margaret sighs, calming herself down. “Can’t a woman feel happy for her younger brother?” she turns to Harry with a mischievous sparkle in her eyes. “I cannot wait until the spectacle.” she takes a sip of her drink, paying no mind to the looks she’s receiving. “What a blessed day it will be.”

The rest of the dinner goes on normally with just a hint of tension beneath it, but Harry can’t help but feel disturbed. He can’t explain why, but the way Margaret keeps glancing at him with a huge smile on her face makes his skin crawl. There’s a portion of his mind that keeps yelling at him, that keeps flashing a warning signal that says danger in big, bold letters. The feeling is suffocating and leaves him unable to eat the rest of his food, and it doesn’t go away for the rest of the evening. He ends up falling into a dreamless sleep, his head filled with warning signs and fake smiles that serve no other purpose but to hide something awful.

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On the following Sunday, the tenth day of October, Louis comes to the manor with slumped shoulders and an uncaring attitude. He’s wearing sweats, but Harry thinks his decision to do so comes from a place of defeat instead of laziness.

Louis’ sitting across from Harry in his usual armchair, avoiding eye contact. He unconsciously picks the skin off his chapped lips as his eyes remain downcast and devoid of any emotion. His phone keeps buzzing in his pocket, and it seems to grate on his nerves every time it does.

Finally, it also starts to grate on Harry’s nerves. “Turn it off.”

Louis pauses, his thumb and index finger latched on to stubborn skin, and looks up at Harry with his eyes narrowed. “What?”

“Turn it off,” Harry reiterates a bit more firmly. “It’s irritating you, so just turn it off.”

“I can’t.”
“Why-”

“Please,” Louis breathes, his voice wavering.

Harry grows silent at Louis’ obvious distress, not wanting to upset him any further. In this moment, it hits Harry like a sudden strike of lightning that Louis doesn't open up to him. In fact, the only time he's come close to doing so, is when he told Harry about Riley, which was months ago. There’s an obvious chemistry that flows between them, and Harry feels more comfortable with him than with anyone else, but Louis doesn't get personal. Over the past few months, Harry has reopened old wounds and shared things with Louis that he’s never shared before, but Louis just doesn't do the same. The only personal thing Harry knows is who Louis came out to first. He doesn’t know anything else but what he sees on the surface and… it fucking hurts.

Harry doesn’t say any of this, though. He can’t when Louis is sitting in front him looking as if he wants to world to swallow him whole. Hesitantly, he takes a deep breath and bites his lip to keep back all the words he wants to say. He rises from his armchair and heads over to his vanity. Louis stares at him with analytical eyes as he takes a speaker out from his drawer and syncs it up with his phone. Harry turns back to Louis and just stares at him for a moment, letting the silence drag on as he tries to get his thoughts in order.

“We are officially starting our next lesson,” Harry says monotonously. “Dance.”

“Harry, what-”

“A gentleman who isn’t swift on his feet and fluent in the language of dance, is better off staying at home than attending a ball or any other event that involves dancing,” Harry continues, reciting the introductory paragraph from the lesson. “In this chapter, you will learn the origins and techniques of different styles of ballroom dance.”

“Harry-”

“Get up.”

Reluctantly, Louis gets up from his armchair and sluggishly heads over to Harry, eventually stopping in front of him with his arms crossed over his chest. Harry holds his hand out, waiting patiently for Louis to take it as he sings along to the lyrics. Louis’ dead eyes seem to sparkle as the opening notes of the song flow out of the speaker, and transitions to the jovial voice of Stevie Wonder.

For once in my life, I have someone who needs me

Someone I’ve needed so long

For once, unafraid, I can go where life leads me

And somehow I know I’ll be strong

Louis is as still as a statue, still slightly disoriented by his confusion, as Harry holds his hand out, waiting patiently for Louis to take it as he sings along to the lyrics. Louis shakes his head as a huge smile suddenly takes over his face, making him look livelier than he’s looked in weeks. He takes Harry’s hand in his and allows the man to lead them in a dance that’s far from formal. Harry’s hands are placed on Louis’ hips and Louis’ arms are wrapped around Harry’s neck. The two of
them rhythmically move around the room, their bodies moving as one, laughing whenever Louis misses a step and singing along to the music.

For once, I can say, this is mine, you can’t take it

As long as I know I have love, I can make it

For once in my life, I have someone who needs me

“You idiot!” Louis laughs as Harry suddenly picks him up and spins around the room. “You’re gonna fall, you fucking klutz!”

“Have faith in me, bluebird!” Harry giggles, setting Louis back down on his feet.

Louis looks up at Harry with an expression of mock disapproval, but it doesn’t stay on his face for too long. He feels all of his stress melting away under Harry’s loving attention. He takes a step forward and rests his forehead against Harry’s shoulder, allowing every one of his senses to get invaded by him. They continue to move as one when the music fades into nothing. When the next song in Harry’s playlist starts, Louis squeals like a child and claps his hands together. He lets go of Harry and starts dancing around the room all by himself, moving his hips and bopping his head to the beat.

He sings at the top of his lungs when the lyrics begin. “You can dance, you can jive, having the time of your life! See that girl, watch that scene, diggin’ the dancing queen!”

Harry doesn’t say or do anything as he watches Louis, completely awestruck at how carefree and joyful he looks. Louis jumps around to the beat, his hair, which has gotten longer within the past few months, swinging around and getting colored a golden brown by the sunlight streaming in through the curtains. Halfway through the second round of the chorus, Louis notices that Harry’s just staring at him. He grins mischievously before he runs to Harry’s bed and starts jumping on it. Harry laughs harder than he has in weeks, watching Louis as he spins in the air and belts out the lyrics through his non stop giggling.

It’s a moment that will surely stay in Harry’s mind until his last breath, and he wishes that he captured it with his camera.

~

The twelfth day of October brings news that manages to be earth shattering and expected. The Saturday after the next, Harry is to propose to Victoria at a pastel themed ball planned by Gwendoline and Jillian, Victoria’s mother. According to Gwendoline, it’s going to be more of a spectacle than Victoria’s birthday party.

“It’s going to be the event of the season!” Gwendoline said. “A full orchestra, a three course meal, and the attendance of all of our family and friends! How splendid!”

Right now, as Harry lays with Victoria on a picnic blanket and watches the clouds stroll by, he’s having a hard time keeping his mouth shut about the proposal, constantly forgetting that she has no knowledge of it. If he ruins the surprise and robs his mother of a genuine reaction from Victoria, his head will definitely be served on a platter.
“That cloud looks like a duck.” Victoria says, suddenly ruining the silence.

“What?” Harry chuckles.

“I’m serious!” She points to a cloud that does indeed look like the shape of a duck. “See?”

“I guess you're right.” Harry says.

“Told you.”

A beat passes before Victoria suddenly sits up and takes Harry’s hand in hers. “Can I tell you something?”

Harry gives her hand a squeeze, now warily looking up at her. “Sure.”

She nibbles on her bottom lip, obviously nervous about what she’s about to say, and Harry is just about to make an effort to comfort her when she says it. Those sacred words only reserved for a married couple rather than one that isn’t even engaged yet.

“I love you.”

Harry has no clue what he’s supposed to say. He can’t even find the proper words in the deepest crevices of his mind, but he doesn’t dwell too long on that before Victoria speaks again.

“You don’t have to say it back,” She rushes out. “Or anything for that matter. I-I know it’s wrong to say those words outside of marriage, but I just couldn’t wait any longer. I love you.”

Harry’s mouth opens and closes repeatedly before he finally says something. “U-Um, well I… I don’t know how to respond to that.”

“And that’s fine,” She assures, squeezing Harry’s hand as if it’s a lifeline. “I just…” she trails off as her eyes start to water. “I just wanted to tell you how I feel. Harry, we haven’t known each other for a long time, but I already know that you’re the one for me. I thought men like you only existed in my novels. Even after you saw my ugly side, you stuck by me. You didn’t demand for our courtship to end.” she shakes her head. “I was so afraid of that.”

Harry sits up and wraps his arms around Victoria, allowing her to bury her face into his chest. Despite the warmth he’s emitting, the blood flowing through him has never felt more chilling.

“Nothing would bring me more joy,” she sniffles. “Than to be your wife.”

Guilt. That’s what Harry’s feeling. Pure, unbridled guilt that causes his breathing to grow ragged. He feels as if God himself is squeezing his heart in his almighty hand as punishment for every wrong he’s committed. He wants to let go of Victoria out of fear that he’s somehow contaminating her with his touch.

Suddenly, Harry thinks about Louis. It’s definitely not rare for him to do so, but it’s rare for him to do so while having thoughts that are the complete opposite of fond and loving. He can feel his phone buzzing in his pocket, and he knows it’s him, but he doesn’t want to answer. He can practically feel his heart shatter, something that hasn’t happened since the Howard Casey incident, and he knows in the back of his mind that it has to end. It can’t continue. He has responsibilities and no amount of sex, late night conversations, and tender kisses can erase that. No matter how much his heart aches at the thought of living life without Louis, without the only thing that makes everything bearable nowadays, he knows that he has to cut the cord. He squeezes his eyes shut to keep himself from crying, wanting to be a man for Victoria.
“Victoria,” Harry breathes.

She pulls away and looks up at him with wide eyes filled with an innocent that nearly causes him to shed a tear. “Yes?”

“I…” He trails off as he takes time to carefully choose his words. “It would be an honor to be your husband.”

That’s more than enough for her.

~

Louis: Morning, love! :D

Louis: You are NOT still asleep. If I’m up then you’re definitely up.

Louis: ?????

Louis: Uhhh I don’t mean to blow up your phone but… i’m not used to you not texting back so…

Louis: Is everything ok?

Louis: Harry????

~

The thirteenth day of October brings the harshest rainfall of the season.

Louis: ‘The lessons are over. There’s nothing more I can do.’ Did you seriously say that to my mother?

Louis: What did I do?

Louis: Why aren’t you answering me?

Louis: Oh so I’m not allowed to come to your house anymore?? I dunno what your issue is, but just know that I’m not gonna sit around and feel sorry for myself.

Louis: I’m gonna go out and fuck someone else so FUCK YOU.

~

The sixteenth say of October brings light rain and a decent afternoon that serves a good amount of sunlight.
Louis: I didn’t fuck anyone. I couldn’t.

Louis: I bet you think I’m pathetic, huh?

Louis: I’m hurt. I’m honestly so fucking hurt and I know I sound desperate and pathetic but I don’t even care. I need you to say something. I need you to tell me what I did, because I just can’t move on from this without knowing what I did.

Louis: Was it even me? Was it you? Did you lose interest in me?

Louis: Please answer me.

~

The nineteenth day of October is silent. There’s no rain, harsh wind, or sunshine. There are only dark gray clouds that loom ominously over the entire town, covering every blue inch of the sky.

Louis: We just got the invite to the ball…

Louis: You’re proposing to her? Is that why you’ve been distancing yourself from me?

Louis: Abandoning your bluebird, huh?

Harry: Please stop.

Louis: Great. You’re alive.

Harry: Don’t text me and don’t call me. We’re done.

Harry: Don’t blow up my phone like some lunatic. Move on.

Louis: You said that to hurt me.

Louis: It worked.

Harry throws his phone on the bed, no longer able to read and reread Louis’ texts. He paces around the room, trying his best to keep his emotions in check. He desires nothing more than to ease Louis’ pain, but he knows that doing such a thing would be counterproductive to what he’s trying to accomplish. Instead, he closes his eyes and allows his tears to fall freely, somehow knowing that Louis’ doing the exact same thing.

~

The 23rd day of October is the day of the pastel themed ball. A grand orchestra occupies a corner of the ballroom, filling the space with beautiful music. Tables covered in pure white cloths and pastel tableware are on one side of the room, while jovial conversation and dancing takes place on the other side of the room. Harry and Victoria are dressed in pastel purple outfits, smiles plastered on their faces as they speak to everyone who approaches them. The box containing the engagement ring is burning a hole in Harry’s pocket. Both of their parents watch as they make their way around the ballroom, their expressions prideful and relieved.
Victoria’s hand is practically glued to Harry’s. She follows him everywhere and doesn’t even consider letting go of him, no matter where he leads her. Even when he stops a few times to have dull conversations with his father’s business associates, she remains present and attentive, displaying the perfect behavior of the perfect wife.

Halfway through the evening, Harry notices Louis. The man is sitting with his family at one of the tables, scarfing down his plate of rosemary chicken and rice pilaf. He’s dressed in a fitted powder blue suit with a pastel pink tie. His hair is slicked back but there’s a few loose strands that flawlessly frame his face. To Harry, he looks absolutely stunning. He suddenly looks up and locks eyes with Harry, staring him down as he and Victoria walk, arm in arm, through the masses. They continue to stare at each other until Louis is out of Harry’s line of vision. Harry suddenly feels a lot more melancholic than he did a few moments ago. He knows that getting over Louis is going to be tough, much more tough than getting over Howard, but he knows that it has to be done. He has to look toward the future that was carefully mapped out for him, and go forward.

“Harry!”

Harry and Victoria pause and turn their heads to see Margaret, Preston, and Eli heading towards them with matching smiles on their faces. Harry is confused by the sudden wariness he feels, so he forces it down and regards them with a kind smile.

“Good evening, guys!” He greets. “Enjoying yourselves?”

“Oh, we are having a great time!” Margaret answers. “But we’ll have an even better time later on, right?”

“Stop it,” Harry mutters, assuming that Margaret is talking about the proposal.

“You look gorgeous, Victoria,” Eli praises, looking so uncharacteristically happy.

“Oh, thank you, Eli,” Victoria says, looking a bit surprised by the compliment. “All of you look so nice. Mint green is definitely your color, Margaret.”

“Thanks, sweetie,” Margaret giggles. “Anyway, I think we’re starting to take up too much of your time. We know you have people to see and all that.”

“You’re my siblings,” Harry points out. “You can take all of my time if that’s what you want to do.”


Margaret chuckles. “Ready, brother. See you later, Harry… Victoria.”

“Later,” Harry says, waving at them as they head over to the dining area.

“Strange,” Victoria mumbles as Harry resumes leading her around the room. “That was so… strange.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asks, his eyebrows furrowed.

“I don’t know,” She answers. “I just… have a bad feeling. My stomach is twisting in knots.”

Before Harry can ask Victoria to further elaborate, his mother’s voice echoes through the room. Harry looks to the front of the ballroom to see his mother standing on a makeshift stage, signalling everyone to quiet down so she can speak.
“At this time,” she says, her voice thick from emotion. Victoria’s parents and Carter are right beside her, looking just as emotional as she does. It’s time. “Please make room for Harry and Victoria to have their dance.”

Victoria look up at Harry with an expression that resembles a lost puppy. “What’s going on?”

Harry gives her an assuring smile as he takes her hand in his. He leads them to the center of the ballroom, paying little mind to the fact that they’re being stared at as if they’re exotic zoo animals. When they finally get to the middle of the dance floor, the orchestra begins to play a song that Harry instantly recognizes from years of wedding anniversaries. It’s the song that was playing when his father proposed to his mother. The lights dim as Harry leads Victoria in a slow dance, his left hand on her waist and his right hand grasping her left. They practically float across the floor, effortlessly pulling off a scene ripped straight from a fairytale.

At one point, Harry glances at Louis, who watches everything with lifeless eyes. His parents are on either side of him, paying more attention to him than the couple of the evening, and Harry can tell that he’s uncomfortable, that he’s trapped. He has a strong urge to let go of Victoria, push through the crowd, and run off into the night with Louis by his side, but this is a harsh reality where things like that just don’t happen. Harry belongs to Victoria, Louis belongs to his parents, and unfortunately… that’s just the way it is.

The music is nearly over, and Harry is just about to pull away from Victoria, get down on one knee, and pop the question, when he gets distracted by pieces of paper raining down on the ballroom. Upon further inspection, he sees that the slips of paper are actually photos, black and white photos. He doesn’t pay any mind to it, figuring that it’s just an added touch made by his mother to make the moment more special, until he hears scandalized gasps and loud chattering.

“What on earth is this?” Victoria asks, grabbing a photo that falls on top of her head. She looks at it and seems to freeze where she stands. Her eyes widen, her lips part, and her breathing gets choppy as her eyes frantically analyze the image in front of her.

“Victoria, are you-”

Before Harry can finish, Victoria pushes him away. “You heathen!”

Harry’s eyes widen as she turns around, pushes her way through the crowd, and runs out of the ballroom. She only looks back at Harry once, betrayal and disgust written all over her face. Harry looks around to see that everyone is staring at him in disgust rather than awe, and the room all of a sudden feels a lot smaller than it actually is. He looks to his parents to see that they’re merely hollow shells of their former selves. Victoria's parents are nowhere to be seen, and Harry instantly concludes that they ran after their daughter. Gwendoline looks like a statue, her eyes glued to Harry in a way that makes his skin crawl, and Carter has a picture held tightly in his hands, his nostrils flaring as he stares down at it. Harry doesn’t even want to know what he’s doing in that particular photo. He feels trapped, absolutely trapped, and he doesn’t see Louis anywhere, which stresses him out even more. Finally, he turns on his heels and runs out of the room.
It’s raining. Harry looks out the windows of every hallway he bolts through to see that it’s raining so hard that it sounds like bullets are hitting the manor. He doesn’t know what kind of sick joke God is playing, but he’s definitely not laughing. When he finally reaches the hallway leading to his bedroom, he pauses. He remembers closing his door before he left the room, but now, it’s cracked open. He already knows who’s in there before he even enters, but he still flinches in shock. Louis is sitting on the edge of the bed, looking up at Harry. The two of them are dead silent, not quite knowing what they’re supposed to say. The last ten minutes feel like a fucked up nightmare, but they’re completely aware that they’re awake. Harry wants to embrace Louis, but he can’t bring himself to do so, not when a disturbing conclusion comes to his head.

“You…” Harry trails off as he locks eyes with Louis. “You did this, didn’t you?”

Louis looks as if Harry just punched him in the stomach. “What? No,” He looks down and shakes his head as if he can’t quite believe that this is happening. “No! No, no no! I’d never do this!” He looks back up at Harry. “I… do you seriously think that I would-”

“Who’d you hire to take those photos?” Harry chuckles without a hint of amusement. “They got some damn good shots. Professional?”

Louis gets up from the bed and stomps toward Harry, looking furious and hurt. “I didn’t fucking do this!”

“Was this your plan from the beginning?” Harry asks, drowning out everything Louis’ saying. “Or did you want them just in case you needed them?” he scoffs. “I bet it was the latter.”

“Oh my God,” Louis whispers, his voice wavering. “You seriously think I did this. I-I don’t-”

“You know,” Harry interrupts, taking a step back. “I’ve always read stories about jilted ex lovers, but I never thought that you’d be one of them. I sure did misjudge you.”

"Harry, you-"

"It makes sense," Harry continues. "It makes sense that you'd stoop this low. I bet you're not even embarrassed. You're so used to being laid out, that it doesn't even bother you to-"

"You were my first!"

Harry shakes his head. "You liar."

Louis doesn’t even try to hold back the tears that well up in his eyes, far too shocked and exhausted to do so. “… he roughly rubs the palm of his hand against his right eye and insistently shakes his head. “No.” he squeezes his eyes shut as a sob wracks through his body. “I would never.” He opens his eyes and looks at Harry, silently pleading him to believe what he’s saying. “I would never do this to you. Never. The last thing I want is for you to suffer. Please believe me. I-I love you.”

Harry scoffs. “God, you’re sick.”

“I do!” Louis shouts, stepping forward to wrap his arms around Harry’s torso. Harry tenses, but he doesn’t move, allowing Louis to nuzzle into his chest. “I love you… and I know that you love me too.” he looks up at Harry and brings his hands up to cup his face. “I don’t know who did this, and I don’t know how anyone could be this hateful and cruel, but please know that I played no part in it. You’re…” he sniffles. “You’re one of the only things in my life that keeps me going, that makes every single shitty thing worth suffering through. You’re my light, Harry. Don’t think for a second that I’d do anything to hurt you.”
“Your light?” Harry snorts. “How long did it take for you to come up with that one?” he sighs. “I would respect you more if you told the truth.”

“Why are you being so fucking-”

“Get away from him!” A shrill voice shouts behind Harry. He and Louis turn to see Gwendoline standing right at the door, her face red, her hair a mess, and her body trembling. “Go away! Get out! Go back downstairs and leave!”

She stomps toward Louis and roughly pulls on his arm, causing him to yelp. Instinctively, Harry grabs his mother by the shoulder and gives her a shove, sending the woman backward into the bookcase. She looks up in horror and covers her mouth with her hands, shaking her head as she tries to get a firm grasp on reality. Harry, realizing what he did, reaches a hand out to his mother. She slaps it away and points an accusatory finger at him.

“Don’t touch me!” She shrieks. “You value this filth more than your own mother?!” she turns to Louis and narrows her eyes. “Your family is downstairs. I suggest you join them and get the hell out of my home!”

Louis engages in a very tense stare down with her, but he eventually breaks it when Harry gently squeezes his side. With one final look at Harry, Louis reluctantly leaves the room. Harry and his mother are now alone. They stand in silence for a moment before she sighs and rubs her temples.

“I won’t talk to you right now,” She says, exhaustion overtaking her. “This is a discussion we need to have when I’m… in the right state of mind.” she turns and heads to the door, pausing only to speak again. “You realize that there’s no coming back from this, right?”

Harry bites his lip and squeezes his eyes shut, attempting to calm himself down. “I know. Mother, I-”

“Don’t,” She breathes. “I am not your mother,” she looks back at Harry, her expression cold and impassive. “You are not my son.”

With that, she looks forward, fixes her hair, and leaves the room, slamming the door behind her. Harry sits down on the edge of his bed, feeling numb to the world around him. He still feels like he’s in some twisted nightmare, that he’ll wake up to a world that still adores him, but he know that this is reality. He glances to his right and sighs when he sees a pastel pink tie. He didn't even notice that Louis had it off. He picks it up, feels the satin material of it between his fingers, and lifts it up to his nose. He grips it harshly when he catches the faint smell of peaches and cigarette smoke. It’s a combination of smells that used to comfort him, but not anymore. He inhales the scent yet again, chuckling humorlessly to himself as he feels a sharp pain in his chest.

“I believe you,” he mumbles to himself. “I know you didn’t do it. I was just hurt. This is such a mess, bluebird, it’s a fucking disaster, but I hope you make it out with your sanity intact. If anyone deserves that, it’s you.” he closes his eyes as he lays back on the bed. “I will never be happy, and that’s just the way it is. Golden children are never happy. We go through life being pulled along by our leashes, charming whoever we need to charm, and making our families look far greater than they actually are. I was never meant to be happy, but you?” he smiles. “You’re meant to be free, to live life the way you want to, and I hope that you'll get everything you deserve one day. I sincerely do, love.”
Chapter 8

Now that we're at the end, I just want to thank every single person who has read this story. Thank you for the encouragement, the love, and the support! I truly believe that I'm getting better and better as a writer with every story I post, and I can't thank you enough for reading. Please enjoy! xx

The 24th day of October is the most gorgeous day of the month. The sun is beating down on the water-logged artificial grass of the Styles estate, the bright red and light brown leaves of the trees surrounding the area fall gracefully down to the ground, and the distant chirping of birds fills the sweet silence of the slightly windy air. However, the beauty outside the manor is no match for the ugliness and tension within it.

Right now, in Carter’s study, Harry is sitting on a plush chair, which is not so comfortable at the moment, avoiding the eyes of his parents. Carter is sitting behind his desk, his eyes devoid of any emotion as he stares at his youngest son, and Gwendoline is standing right beside his chair, her hand resting on the back of it. Margaret, Preston, and Eli are all outside the office, eagerly pressing their ears against the door to enjoy the fruits of their labor.

Carter’s right eye occasionally twitches as if he’s on the verge of a mental breakdown. Last night was the most embarrassing night of his life. While Gwendoline was upstairs, he was still in the ballroom, facing the humiliation of being stared at by a sea of judgmental eyes, attempting to calmly inform everyone that it was time for them to go home, and that picture, the only picture he managed to look at, is still making his stomach turn. He has it crumpled up in his desk drawer, waiting for the perfect moment to use it. Harry’s foot is incessantly tapping on the ground as his anxiety builds up. He hates the silence.

“I don’t know what to say to you,” Carter says, his voice rough from exhaustion. “I just don’t know what to say. Was this an act of rebellion or-”

“Wait a second,” Harry interrupts, facing his parents for the first time today. “You can’t possibly believe that I did this. Do you honestly think that I would put myself in this position?”

Carter is silent for a moment before he sighs and shakes his head. “I don’t know, Harry. I would think not, but I obviously don’t know who you really are.”

“Father,” Harry forces out, his voice cracking on the last syllable. “I-I’m your son. That’s who I am, and that’s who I’ve always been.”

Carter shakes his head. “Harry... we’ve been here before. I thought we were pass this phase, but obviously we’re not. I don’t understand the thought behind your actions. You are a man. A man is supposed to desire the tender touch of a woman, not...” he trails off as he opens the desk drawer and pulls out the crumpled photo. Without looking at it, he flattens it out in his palm and slams it in front of Harry, causing him to flinch. “This!”

Hesitantly, Harry looks down at the picture and takes a sharp intake of breath at what he sees. There he is, in full, vibrant color, amorously holding Louis and dipping him in the lake. Louis, with
crinkly eyes and a bright smile, has his head tossed back, immersing his hair in the water. Harry is staring down at him as if he's the key to every problem that plagues the earth. Harry remembers this specific moment so clearly, and the only thing he currently desires is to live in it for the rest of his life. Getting over Louis will not be an easy feat.

“So this is what you want,” Carter sneers, disgusted by the longing expression on Harry’s face. “What on earth has this man told you? What promises did he make? What lies did he spew?” his voice increases in volume as he rises from his seat. “I don’t know what fairytalies he filled your head with, but none of them can ever be reality. You know that, right? You can’t seriously be under the impression that this man, who probably has his legs open more times than not, is in love with you!”

“Don’t!” Harry bellows, shooting up from his seat. “Don’t you dare speak poorly of him in my presence!”

“Look at you,” Carter chuckles condescendingly. “Acting tough, talking back to your father like a spoiled brat.”

Harry and Carter stand with their shoulders squared as they stare each other down, their eyes saying things that are far more hostile than anything that could come out of their mouths. Gwendoline, already getting sick of the fruitless arguing, slams her fist against the desk, causing the two men to flinch.

“I have had it!” she spits before she focuses on Harry with narrowed eyes. “Harry, let me tell you three things that your father and I are one hundred percent sure of. One, our reputation in this town is fucked up beyond repair and we might have to move. Two, Victoria is heartbroken and inconsolable, or at least that’s what I could gather through the slew of insults I received during my phone call with Jillian. Three, that no good little bastard has to be the one behind this! There is no doubt in my mind that this was planned from the very beginning!” her eyes widen as she comes to a rash conclusion. “Carter, I bet my life that his whore mother is behind all of this. That damn Marie O’Connor has been jealous of me ever since high school. Of course she’d want to ruin me!” she slams her fist on the desk again. “Damn you, Harry, for taking her bait!”

“You’re wrong,” Harry insists. “Louis would never try to hurt me. He cares about me.”

Gwendoline scoffs. “That’s exactly what you said about Howard right before he left you!”

Harry clenches his fists. “Father drove his family out of town!”

“And he never tried to contact you!” Gwendoline continues, seemingly tuning Harry out. “Harry, sweetie, you have to see how wrong this whole thing is.”

“It’s not wrong for the reasons you think it’s wrong,” Harry says. “It’s wrong because I betrayed Victoria, not because Louis is a man. You don’t care about Victoria, you never did. It’s obvious that you only saw her as an accessory.”

“Of course we only saw her as an accessory!” Carter shouts as if it's the most obvious thing in the world. Harry’s eyes widen at that. “What? Did you think we would deny that? Victoria Astaire is a highly sought after woman who would’ve made a lovely edition to this family. She’s attractive, intelligent, and has an irrational desire to be perfect. Those were the reasons why we chose her. We didn’t care if you’d grow to love her, because that’s not what marriage is about!”

Harry’s face pales. “That’s not what marriage is about? But… don’t you love mother?”
“That doesn’t matter,” Gwendoline rushes out before Carter can answer. Her body is tense and slightly trembling, giving away how terrified she is of her husband's answer. The last remaining fantasy in Harry’s mind is automatically stripped away. His parents are far more fake than he thought they were.

“Harry,” Carter sighs. “We’re getting way off track. The point is, whatever relationship you had with that man—”

“Louis,” Harry interrupts, crossing his arms over his chest. “Don't call him that man as if it’s a sin to say his name.”

“Louis,” Carter forces out through clenched teeth. “Whatever relationship you had with Louis was wrong. We are a God fearing family and we will not tolerate sinful behavior!”

“I don’t understand,” Harry chuckles humorlessly, looking anywhere else but directly at his parents. “Your relationship with mother is pure in the eyes of God, even though you obviously don’t love her,” Gwendoline flinches at that. “But my genuine adoration for Louis is sinful? My willingness to not only love him, but to lay down my life for him, is less valid than whatever the hell your union is? Bullshit. The God I believe in only wants happiness for his children, and if they can only find that happiness while being in the arms of someone who’s the same gender as them—”

“Enough!” Carter bellows, slamming his fist on the desk. “I will not let you sit there and spew your blasphemy!”

“It’s blasphemy to assume that God loves all?” Harry snorts. “How rich.”

“Get out,” Carter growls. “Get out this instant before I do something I might regret!”

One tense stare down later, Harry turns around and storms out of the room in a huff. Margaret, Preston, and Eli all take a step back as Harry swings the door open and slams it shut. He instantly freezes when he sees his siblings standing in front of him, becoming increasingly confused when he observes their poor attempts at holding back their amused expressions.

“Is everything alright, brother?” Eli asks.

“What the fuck do you think?” Harry grimaces, no longer having any patience. His siblings look taken aback as he ignores them and storms back up to his room.

Loneliness is something that Harry isn’t the slightest bit familiar with. Even though he never had a good friend or acquaintance that he could share his deepest thoughts with, there’s never been a time where he felt like he had no one. And honestly, he’s starting to think that it’s always been that way. He's always been alone.

Laying in bed and unconsciously counting every light on the chandelier above him, he thinks about everything that’s happened today. He thinks about every moment from the dramatic confrontation in Carter’s office this morning to the tense dinner he just came back from. His parents acted like overgrown children, ignoring Harry and remaining silent throughout their meal. Margaret, Preston, and Eli filled the tense silence by making their own conversations, which is definitely not a normal occurrence. Harry wants to chalk it up to them wanting to ease the tension and taking some of the focus off him, but somehow, he knows that’s a foolish conclusion to come to.

“Harry,” a familiar voice calls softly.
Harry props himself up on his elbows and looks forward to see the twins peeking into his room, their expressions wary. He suddenly feels nervous. He knows his parents have instructed the house workers to not interact with him in any way, and he doesn’t want the twins to get in trouble.

“We can’t stay long,” Sam whispers as she and Pam fully enter the room and close the door.

“We don’t want your parents to throw a fit.” Pam adds.

The twins stride over to Harry’s bed and sit down on the edge of it, smoothing out the fronts of their nightgowns as they do so. Harry’s mood is far too sour for him to find it the least bit endearing.

“So,” Sam sighs. “It seems that you’ve got yourself in one hell of a mess.” she leans closer to him as if she’s about to reveal a scandalous secret. “Do you think Louis is responsible for this?”

“No,” Harry answers instantly. “I thought he was at first, but-”

“Are you sure?” Pam asks.

“I have more reason to believe that you two are behind this!” Harry snaps. “And don’t start defending yourselves, because I know you guys would never put me in this situation, but Louis is going through way too much shit with his parents to even consider doing a thing like this!”

The twins heave long suffering sighs, suddenly feeling guilty that they assumed that Louis would do such a thing. It wasn’t in his character and it’s no doubt just worsening his own situation.

“We’re sorry,” Sam mutters.

“We just feel so useless,” Pam groans. “There’s someone out there who wants to ruin you, and it sucks that we can’t find out who it is!”

“Keep it down, moron,” Sam orders, her tone clipped. “Do you want us to die at the hands of the she-devil?”

Harry’s eyebrow furrow in confusion. “She-devil?”

“Your mother,” The twins clarify in unison.

A week ago, he would’ve snapped at the twins for calling his own mother such a degrading name, but now, he can’t help but laugh, and it’s the first genuine laugh he’s had in a while. He only enjoys it for a second before he’s once again thinking about the reality of his situation. He goes from happy to exhausted to melancholic in the span of five seconds. The twins feel the sudden shift in his mood, and dive right into a spontaneous rant about high class society. They comically point out its flaws, hypocrisies, and unrealistic expectations, causing Harry to nearly pass out from his continuous fits of laughter. In this moment, he doesn’t feel so alone.

~

The remainder of October, now only referred to as ‘one hellish month’ by Harry, passes by in a flash. Harry hasn’t seen or heard from Louis since the ball. He misses him terribly, but knows that it wouldn’t be the right decision to attempt to contact him. There isn’t a doubt in his mind that Louis’ parents have him under complete lockdown, and it’s most likely more severe than the lockdown Harry is currently under. For the past week, he’s been prohibited from leaving the house, checking his phone, and speaking to anyone but people who are in the family. Gwendoline has even gone as far as putting a security camera in his room, and the only reason why he knows that is
because of the twins’ letters.

As a mode of inconspicuous communication, the twins have been slipping letters and small notes in the pockets of Harry’s freshly cleaned clothes. At the end of the day, when Harry puts away his dirty clothes, he leaves small replies in the pockets of his trousers. It’s ridiculous for them to have to put so much effort into talking to each other, but Harry’s parents have eyes everywhere, and the twins need their jobs.

Harry’s in the kitchen reading a humorous letter from Pam, when he hears someone entering. He hastily stuffs the letter into his pocket and hides behind the fridge. He doesn’t want to face his parents, not right now. His tense muscles relax when he sees Margaret, Preston, and Eli entering the kitchen, their faces red from laughter. He’s just about to get out of his hiding spot, but suddenly freezes when they start talking.

“I still can’t believe they put a camera in his room!” Preston wheezes out through his obnoxious laughter. “I almost feel like i’m in a dream. Everything is working out way too good. I should’ve never doubted you, Margaret.”

“Lately, I just can’t stop smiling,” Eli says with a bright smile. “I talked to father yesterday. He didn’t say it outright, but that company is as good as mine!”

Margaret looks smug as she opens the pantry and takes out a jar of preserves, unintentionally reminding Harry of a moment that has never left his mind.

An eight-year-old Harry is hiding in the cupboard, rubbing his small fists against his eyes as he sobs. His father had just yelled at him over his grades, and he feels like the most useless person on the planet. It’s not like he did a terrible job, his homeschool teacher, Mrs. Shaw, always tells him that he’s a marvelous student, but his father only accepts perfection, nothing less.

Harry’s starting to calm down a little when the cupboard door swings open, revealing an annoyed looking Margaret. She’s crouched down in front of Harry with a jar of raspberry preserves in her right hand and a silver spoon in her left. Gwendoline hates it when the children use silverware for anything other than Breakfast, dinner, and special occasions, but Margaret doesn’t care about that.

“What are you crying about?” Margaret asks with a sneer.

Harry rubs the tears off his chubby cheeks with the sleeve of his shirt, avoiding her harsh gaze.

“Come on, Haz,” Margaret groans, rolling her eyes. “Stop being a baby and tell me what’s wrong.”

He sniffs. “I-I can’t do anything right.”

She’s silent for a moment, casually eating her preserves as if she didn’t hear Harry’s answer, before she whacks him on the head with her spoon.

“Ow!” Harry whines. “What was that for?”

She shrugs. “You’re being stupid.”

“Stupid?”

She sighs as if she’s losing her patience. “You’re being way too hard on yourself.”

“Yeah, but-”
"But nothing," she interrupts, once again hitting him with the spoon. "Listen up, because I’m only gonna say this once. It’s impossible to be good at everything, but it’s also impossible to not be good at anything at all. You’re curled up in a damn cupboard, crying your eyes out, because you’re failing at excelling in everything. That’s stupid."

"But father."

"Doesn’t matter," she says. "What he says doesn’t matter. If you gave it your all, then you’re just fine. Don’t let his unrealistic expectations drive you towards a mental breakdown. Now stop your blubbering and get out of there!"

Harry sniffs repeatedly as he stretches out his legs and ducks out of the cupboard. He rises up to his full height along with his sister, and looks up at her with wide, sparkling eyes filled with admiration. She purses her lips, seeming to be in deep thought, before she opens a drawer, takes out another silver spoon, and holds it out for Harry to take.

"Want some?" She asks, holding up the preserves.

Harry wants to wrinkle his nose in disgust and decline her offer, still confused as to how she can eat preserves with no bread or cookies or anything. However, he did no such thing, knowing that this might be the only quality time he gets with any of his siblings. He and Margaret spend the entire afternoon together in the garden, eating their jar of preserves in comfortable silence.

Harry doesn’t remember much about his childhood, mostly because he suppresses most of his memories from that time, but that moment with Margaret is one of the few memories he can recall so vividly. It’s a moment that he will never forget. It was the first time in his entire life that he felt loved, and now, it’s getting stained with every word that comes out of Margaret’s mouth.

"This is why you should always trust me," she says airily. "Everything is finally how it should be. We’re getting the attention we deserve, and that useless bastard is history."

"Mother and father can’t even look at him," Eli chuckles. "This is the Howard Casey incident on steroids."

"How the hell did you even get those pictures?" Preston asks.

Margaret smirks. "That’s a secret, my dear brother."

In this moment, Harry makes himself visible. "A secret?"

The older siblings freeze at the sound of Harry’s voice. Slowly and reluctantly, their eyes shift to their younger brother, shock evident on their faces.

"I’d love to know the secret," Harry says, his voice wavering. "After all, it does involve me."

Eli is the first person to gain back his composure. "Well, well, well, look who’s lurking around."

Margaret grins, her eyes alight with mischief. "I’m sure mother and father won’t appreciate your eavesdropping. How pathetic."

Harry has had enough.

"Pathetic?" he scoffs. "I am not pathetic, but you three sure are. You’re gonna tell on me? Get mommy and daddy to fix your problem?"
Eli gapes at him. “I- you-”

“You’re still children,” Harry says, shaking his head. “You’re all still little kids who need the approval of their parents. That’s why you stay at home even though you’re all married,” he looks at Margaret. “Oh, I’m sorry, only two of your are married, because somebody was left at the altar!” Margaret flinches at that. “You all act as if you hate mother and father, but you don’t, you love them more than you love yourselves, and trust me, that’s a whole lot of love. All you’ve ever wanted was for them to love you back, but I was always in the way, right? That's why you hate me?”

“Yes!” Margaret yells. “There, are you happy? That was the reason why we did what we did. You were always in the way!”

“You were never the woman they needed you to be, Margaret!” Harry shouts back. “You were desired by every eligible bachelor in this town. Mothers were practically begging for you to marry their sons, but they quickly changed their minds when they found out who you really were, a stubborn, mean spirited woman with no manners!” before Margaret can say anything, he turns to Preston. “You are an idiot! You’re reckless, rude, and unapologetic with your actions, and it’s fucking annoying! Your natural talent of being a dumbass is the reason why you were sent to military school! Father had to pay Madeline’s father to get him to allow her marriage to you. Thank God she fell for… whatever you have to offer, because I’d feel bad for her if she was in a loveless marriage with an insufferable prick!”

“You need to shut your damn mouth,” Eli growls.

Harry laughs bitterly as he zeros in on his oldest sibling. “Last but certainly not least. You think you’re above everyone else in this town, but you’re not. You’re just another high class douche with a God complex. There’s plenty of people like you. Do you want to know what I think about you? I think you’re a sad little boy who loves to throw tantrums whenever you’re denied of what you want. I think you’re a failure as a husband, as a man, as a human fucking being! I think you’re exactly like your father. You’re everything I will never want to be.”

A tense silence blankets the rooms. Harry has said everything he wanted to say, and his siblings don’t know where to begin. They know that there’s nothing but truth behind his words, but they’re still trying to figure out how to defend themselves.

“W-Well you have your flaws!” Margaret sputters. “Don’t think for one second that you’re perfect!”

Harry’s smile doesn’t have a trace of humor behind it. “I never said that I was perfect. The whole reason why we’re here, yelling at each other, is because none of us are perfect.” he sighs and looks down at the tiled floor. “I’m no better than any of you, because i’m also still a little kid.” he looks back up at his siblings with tears welling up in his eyes. “I need their love too… and I’ll do anything to get it back.”

This time, no one has anything to say. With his words hanging in the air, Harry walks past his siblings and heads back upstairs to his room.

~

When the twins came up to Harry’s room to tell him that he needed to go to Carter's study, he was slightly surprised. He expected another discussion at some point, but he didn’t expect it to happen so soon. He expected at least six more months of receiving the cold shoulder. He rushes down the hallway and enters his father’s study, feeling instant confusion when he sees the smiling faces of
his parents.

“Harry,” Carter greets jovially. “Sit down, son.”

Harry tries his best to hide his bewilderment, but his expression still ends up mirroring how he feels on the inside. He ambles over to the chair right in front of Carter’s desk and sits down, feeling slightly wary of how this conversation is going to go.

“My dear, sweet boy,” Gwendoline giggles. “We have the answer to all of our problems.”

Harry raises an eyebrow. “You do?”

She nods excitedly. “Yes! First of all, we’re moving. We can’t stay in this town. Our reputation is too damaged to fix, so we have to restart somewhere else.”

Harry simply nods, already expecting that moving away would be the next move.

“Second,” Carter cuts in. “We’re sending you to… a very special place.”

“A very special place?” Harry parrots. “What kind of place?”

Gwendoline worries her bottom lip between her teeth, shifting her eyes to her husband. It’s clear that she doesn’t want to say what this ‘special place’ is, and Harry is instantly sent into an internal panic. Gwendoline Styles is a woman who finds any excuse to hear herself talk, so whatever’s going to be said next is not going to sit well with Harry.

“Well…” Carter trails off as he carefully chooses his words. Ultimately, he says nothing. He just opens his desk drawer, pulls out a pamphlet, and hands it to Harry.

Harry narrows his eyes at his parents before he looks down at the pamphlet. His blood runs cold at what he sees written in big, bold letters.

**Pastor Wilkes’ Sanctuary for Troubled Youth**

**“We will guide your child back into the lord’s loving arms”**

“You’ll love it there!” Gwendoline insists. “I-It’s a place for at risk youth and young people who are having, you know, thoughts.”

Harry can see his hands trembling as they grip the pamphlet, but he can’t exactly feel them, he can’t feel anything. His entire body is numb as he keeps reading that damn slogan.

*We will guide your child back into the lord’s loving arms.*

How? How do these people guide children back into the lord’s arms? Are they trying to create pure children of God or religious zombies? What are their methods? Are they-

“You’re thinking too much,” Gwendoline snaps, knocking Harry out of his train of thought. “Harry, look, I didn’t want us to have to come to this, but you have forced your father and I to take drastic measures. We plan on starting a new life, and it would make no sense to drag old baggage into it. We want you to spend two months there, then come back to us so we can all live together in our new home. You either do this, or never face us again. Your choice.”
Harry swallows the growing lump in his throat. “Never face you again?”

“Leave,” Carter says before Gwendoline can say anything else. “That’s what she means. You either do this or leave.”

And as much as Harry wants to act like he doesn’t need the affection of his parents, he can’t find it within himself to do so.

“Understood,” He sighs. “When should I pack?”

~

Harry has always found the simple act of stargazing a very dull activity, but now, as he lies on the bench in the garden and stares up at the clear night sky, he thinks it’s the most therapeutic thing a person can do. The stars have a certain glimmer to them that remind Harry of Louis’ eyes, how they would sparkle in the morning light when he first woke up.

“Beautiful eyes for a beautiful bird,” Harry mumbles out loud.

“Now who are you talking about?”

Harry’s breath hitches and his eyes squeeze shut when he hears that voice, that high, raspy voice that always causes his heart to mimic a crazed animal trying to escape its cage. He doesn’t search for the source of the voice, momentarily fearing that he’s simply hearing things. However, that fear is eradicated when he opens his eyes and sees Louis staring down at him. The man looks as beautiful as ever, even with the dark circles under his eyes. Harry can’t help but get up from the bench and pull him into a tight embrace, almost cutting off his oxygen with how tightly he’s holding him.

“Missed you too,” Louis says. It’s slightly hard for him to breathe, but he makes no move to push Harry off of him. In fact, he squeezes him back even tighter.

“How did you get in here?” Harry asks, breathing in the citrus scent of Louis’ hair.

“The twins snuck me in,” Louis answers. “Don’t worry, they made sure the cameras weren’t able to see me.”

“Why did you come here?” Harry asks, nuzzling his cheek against Louis’ hair, reveling in the softness of it. “Not that I don’t want you here, I’m just-”

“I’m leaving.” Louis eagerly interrupts.

Harry remains silent for a while, keeping his face buried in Louis’ hair. There are a million and one things going through his mind, and none of them have a shred of coherency.

“Leaving?” Harry frowns. “Where are you going?”

Louis pulls away from the embrace, keeping his hands on Harry’s shoulders. He looks up at Harry with a huge smile and eyes that shine just as brightly as the stars above, causing Harry’s heart to flutter.

“I don’t know,” He answers. “California, New York, Texas, Arkansas… wherever the road takes us.”

Harry’s eyes widen. “Us? Who’s going with you?”
“Everyone,” Louis giggles. “Zayn, Liam, Niall, Perrie, and Cara. We’re all leaving this place for good. I’m on my way to meet them at Wonderland.”

Harry leans forward and presses his forehead against Louis’, looking deep into his excited eyes before he gives him a small kiss on the lips. Pure satisfaction zips up his spine and spreads through his entire body. The feeling of Louis’ lips against his own is like water for his parched soul, especially since he’s gone weeks without it. He pulls away from the kiss, softly panting against Louis’ slightly parted lips.

“You came to say goodbye?” He asks, his voice soft.

“Of course not,” Louis chuckles as Harry just made a ridiculous assumption. “Why on earth would I leave you here when I can take you with me?”

Harry takes a giant step away from Louis, nervously scanning his surroundings as if his parents are going to appear at any second. He’s suddenly overly conscious of the world around him.

“Harry,” Louis says, his voice soothing. “I know you’re scared, but you have to leave, ok? You can’t stay here.”

Harry vigorously shakes his head. “No. I’m not leaving.”

Louis sighs as if he knew Harry was going to say that. “Look, babe, I know how much you crave your parents’ approval, but you’re never gonna get it. You’ll never be happy if you choose to stay with them and waste your life trying to earn their affections. You’re not a child anymore, you’re a man. It’s time to live life the way you want to live it.”

“You don’t understand,” Harry mutters, his voice wavering. “All my life, the only consistently positive thing I’ve had is my parents’ love. It’s too familiar for me to leave it.”

“Their love?” Louis sneers. “Harry, I hate to break it to you, but whatever love they had for you was destroyed at the ball.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Harry rushes out. “I can get back in their good graces. They gave me an ultimatum.”

Louis’ eyes narrow. “An ultimatum?”

Harry nods. “Yes. I either leave and never see them again,” an unpleasant chill goes down his spine at the thought of that. “Or… I can spend a couple of months at a sanctuary.”

“A sanctuary?” Louis drawls as if the words are foreign to him. “What kind of sanctuary?”

Harry sighs, already knowing how Louis’ going to react to this. “It’s a place where troubled youth can rid themselves of.”

“Oh fuck no,” Louis groans, his body visibly deflating. His eyes squeeze shut as he wraps his arms around himself. “Harry, please. I know what this is and I fucking hate it!”

Harry winces at his tone. “There’s no need to be dramatic. I know it’s not ideal, but…”

“It’s the fucking worst!” Louis shouts, causing Harry to take a step back. “Harry,” he takes Harry’s hand in his and locks eyes with him. “Please, I am begging you not to put yourself through this. You don’t deserve to feel ashamed of who you are. Your happiness and mental health are on the fucking line. Please make the right decision.”
“Bluebird-”

“Don’t,” Louis says through gritted teeth. “Don’t try to soften me with sweet words, because it’s not going to work. Please don’t do this, just…” Louis trails off as he starts to get more and more overwhelmed. “Please, please, please don’t do this.”

Harry smiles softly, trying to calm Louis down even though he’s on the verge of his own breakdown. “It’s ok, love. This is the way things are supposed to-”

“Bullshit!” Louis cuts him off. “You expect me to believe that someone like you is meant to be miserable for the rest of their life? Do you honestly expect me to believe that? Bullshit!”

“Louis, I-”

“Harry, please come with me,” Louis pleads. “You don’t have to do this. You and I can go out there and just be, just exist without people telling us it’s wrong to do so. Don’t you want that?”

“More than anything,” Harry admits.

“Then come with me.”

Harry shakes his head. “No.”

“You’re being fucking ridiculous!” Louis shouts. “You don’t need your parents’ love. I can give you all the love you need. I can take care of you. I can be everything you need me to be. You don’t need approval from people who lock you up inside a house as if you’re a fucking animal!”

Harry takes a step back and turns around, heading back to the house. He can hear Louis calling his name and shouting for him to come back, but he continues to move forward. He knows that Louis won’t follow him out of fear of being caught on camera. Louis’ shouts rattle inside his brain until he enters the house and shuts the back door behind him. He leans back against the door and slides down to the floor, burying his face between his knees when he feels the marble flooring beneath his bottom.

“Well, that was fun to watch,”

Harry doesn’t have to look up to see that the voice came from Margaret. Of course she saw the whole thing.

“What do you want?” Harry asks, finally looking at her. Her hair is loose and sticks out everywhere and she’s wearing a powder pink nightgown. “Do you have some never before seen pictures to show me? Now would definitely be the perfect time, huh?”

“No,” She answers, crouching down in front of him. “I want to tell you that you’re a fucking idiot.”

“What?” Harry grimaces.

She rolls her eyes. “You have a chance to get away from here with someone who actually gives a shit about you, and you’re not taking it. That’s idiotic.”

Harry rolls his eyes. “I don’t need to be scolded by someone who’s just as reluctant to leave as I am.”

Margaret is silent for a while, looking as if she’s fighting an internal battle, before she closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. “I have nothing.”
“Excuse me?”

“I have nothing,” Margaret reiterates slowly. “There’s nowhere for me to run to, I can’t take care of myself, and I get terrified whenever I think about leaving the only life I’ve ever known, so I stay here… with mommy and daddy.”

Harry looks away from her, suddenly feeling guilty about the harsh things he said to his siblings. “I’m sorry about that.”

“Don’t be,” She says. “I hate to admit it, but you were right. Every single thing that you said was true. A little hurtful, but true.”

Harry bites his lip to keep himself from laughing at that.

“It’s ok if you laugh,” She snorts. “No need to spare me from feeling shame.” she suddenly looks serious again. “Harry, I’m going to be honest with you, more honest than I’ve been with anyone else. There’s no hope for me. This house, Gwendoline, Carter… that’s my life. That’s the reason why I’m so angry all the time, why I spend half of my days completely wasted, and why I planned an elaborate scheme to destroy you. I know that I don’t act like I care about what mother and father say, but I do care.” she laughs bitterly “I care so fucking much. I try to convince myself that I don’t by being rebellious every once in a while, but it never works. I care because they’re all I have. But you? You have something. If you don’t take a chance with Louis, you’re going to regret it for the rest of your life.”

Harry looks back at her, his body slightly trembling. “But I’m scared.”

Margaret rolls her eyes. “Of what? Happiness? Being around people who love you for who you really are? Not spending the rest of your life trying to control your thoughts in order to please two people who you will never please? Yeah, that sounds really scary.”

Harry glares at her. “Don’t be so damn condescending.”

She shrugs. “Sorry. Hard not to be when I’m faced with stupidity.” she gets up from her crouching position, rising to her full height and stretching out her limbs. “I’m gonna go to bed. It’s getting late.”

“Goodnight, then,” Harry mutters, keeping his eyes on his lap.

Margaret doesn’t say anything as she turns around and starts walking down the hallway to the kitchen. The moonlight spills through the uncovered windows, creating an eerie feel to her movements. Suddenly, she stops and looks back at Harry.

“June 9th is Eli’s birthday,” She says. “April 22nd is Preston’s, and November 6th is mine.”

Harry grins at that. “Today is November 6th.”

“Yes,” Margaret sighs. “Twenty-seven years old. God, how time flies.”

“Happy birthday, Margaret,” Harry says, his tone nothing but sincere.

She gives a slight nod before she speaks again. “Also… I don’t hate you. In fact, I don’t think I ever did.”

Harry gapes at her as she looks forward and proceeds to walk down the hallway and disappears right around the corner, not once looking back or saying another word.
The Wonderland parking lot is currently a very unpleasant place to be. Not just because it’s eleven o’clock at night, and the area can get a little dangerous around that time, but also because it’s freezing cold.

Louis is wrapped up in a jacket he stole from Niall, but it does nothing to keep his body warm. He, along with Cara, Perrie, Niall, and Zayn, is waiting on Liam to finish loading everyone’s bags into the back of Zayn’s van.

“Hurry up,” Louis groans, his teeth chattering.

“This would be a faster process,” Liam grunts as he throws another bag in the van. “If I had a little help!”

“Oh, quit your whining,” Cara teases, grabbing a bag and tossing it in the van with ease. “I’ll help.”

As the two of them load the remaining items in the van, Louis looks around the area for the thousandth time and, once again, sighs when he sees no sign of the man he wants to see. He’s losing hope with every second that passes.

Perrie places a hand on his shoulder and gives it a squeeze. “I don’t think he’s coming, babe.”

Louis sighs. “He most likely isn’t.”

“You don’t need him,” Niall insists, patting Louis on the back. “There are plenty of guys out there just waiting for you to charm ‘em.”

Louis just nods, not trusting his voice to stay neutral. The thing is, he doesn’t think he’ll ever be able to move on from Harry. Unfortunately, Harry has left a mark on him that will never fade. His voice, his face, his laughter, and his mere presence are all permanently stuck in Louis’ mind, and he’s sure that he’ll never wish for them to fade away.

“Ready!” Liam shout with a clap of his hands.

Everyone piles into the van, chattering about the many places they can go to. Louis is considerably less excited than everyone else, but he hopes that that will change as soon as they leave this town, officially putting the past behind them. Zayn takes the driver’s seat and Cara is right next to him on the passenger side. Liam and Niall are sitting comfortably in the back seat while Perrie and Louis are in the very back where the bags are located. Perrie has her arms wrapped around Louis as his head lays on her chest, softly rubbing small circles into his back.

“You’ll be ok, Lou,” she says softly. “I know it hurts right now, but soon, the pain will go away.”

“I just don’t believe that,” He sighs, his exhaustion leaving him emotionless. “I want to, but I just don’t.”

Perrie gives him a kiss on the forehead. “I know, hun.”

He closes his eyes and focuses on his breathing as Zayn begins to back out of his parking spot and drive out of the vacant lot. Louis is just about to drift off into a deep sleep when Zayn suddenly stops the van, causing everyone to lurch forward. Louis’ eyes fling open as he sits upright and gawks at him.
“Why the fuck did you do that?!” He shouts.

Zayn ignores him as he turns his head to look back. His eyes are wide in disbelief as he stares right past Louis and Perrie and out the back window. Louis’ eyebrows furrow in confusion as he also looks back, freezing when he sees what caused Zayn to grow speechless.

Just a few feet away, illuminated by the bright red tail lights, Harry stands behind the van. He’s dressed in plaid pajamas and an old pair of converse he found in the basement. Every other pair of shoes he had in his closet were too fancy for a road trip.

Before his mind can trick him into believing that all of this is simply a dream, Louis scrambles out of the van and runs to Harry at full speed. With a wide smile on his face and his arms spread open, Harry meets Louis halfway, laughing when the man jumps up and wraps his legs around Harry’s waist.

“You came,” Louis breathes, burying his face in Harry's mess of curls. “You actually came.”

Harry playfully scoffs. “You didn’t think I was gonna let you have all the fun, did you?”

“No,” Louis answers honestly. “I didn’t want to believe that you…”

Louis feels too overwhelmed to finish his sentence. The only thing he has the strength to do, is squeeze Harry with all his might.

“I didn’t bring anything,” Harry admits sheepishly, letting go of Louis as he gets back down on the ground. “I just left the house and got on a bus without a second thought.”

“That’s fine,” Louis assures, bringing his hands up to cup Harry’s face. “I have everything you need.”

Harry believes that statement with his whole heart.
On his second day on the road, Harry wakes up to Louis leaning over him, his eyes hooded and his lips set in a small smile. He smiles back at him as memories from last night flood his mind. One of the things he remembers is that they’re somewhere in Vermont. He attempts to stretch out his limbs, grimacing at the lack of space he has at the very back of the van. He and Louis are the only ones in there. The others are probably blissfully sleeping away in their hotel rooms. Harry wanted to join them, but Louis insisted that they’d stay back, watch the stars, and screw around. The two of them were so exhausted afterward, they just fell asleep, paying no mind to their awkward positioning.

Harry groans as he massages his neck. “Hmm, my neck is killing me.”

Louis leans down to give Harry’s lips a lingering kiss. “Hmm, that’s too bad.”

Harry gapes at him. “You’re not gonna do something sweet like, I don’t know, offer to massage it?”

Louis snorts at that, pulling away from Harry with a poorly contained laugh. “Babe, if you want a massage, then ask for a massage.”

Harry pouts. “But… I want you to offer it.”

At this point, Louis doesn’t even try to contain his laughter. It flows out and reverberates throughout the entire van. “Why do you want me to offer? Just tell me what you want me to do, and I’ll consider doing it.”

“No,” Harry practically whines. “I want you to offer. It lets me know that you care.”

“How is me offering to-”

“How is me offering to-”

“Louis,” Harry interrupts, his voice deepening.

Louis can feel a familiar warmth coiling at the pit of his stomach. It causes his face to flush, his toes to curl, and his heart to beat just a little bit faster. For the first time this morning, Louis takes notice of just how angelic Harry looks. The sun streaming in through the windows create a halo effect on top of his nest of curls. His naked body is littered with purple and light red marks from last night, and they strangely make his body look a lot more pale than it really is. His eyes are slightly glazed over from the fact that he just woke up, and they seem to stare right into Louis’ soul. Louis’ breath grows more and more ragged as he takes in every small detail, receiving pleasure in knowing that Harry is looking at him in the exact same way.

Louis licks his chapped lips and sighs. “Do you want a massage, babe?”

~
After a rather eventful morning, Louis and Harry finally get dressed and get out of the van. However, Harry wants to get back in when he takes notice of how short Louis’ shorts are, but Louis flat out refuses, complaining about how sore he feels. They stretch out their limbs, giving identical sighs as they enjoy the limitless space they now have.

Perrie comes out of the hotel first with bright eyes and a confident stride. Cara comes out of the hotel a moment later, followed by Zayn and Liam.

“Niall’s still asleep!” Perrie giggles as she approaches the van.

“Are we gonna leave him?” Louis asks. “I’m not opposed to that.”

Cara scoffs, waving a dismissive hand. “Nah, we wouldn’t do that. We’d never abandon our favorite blon-“

Perrie audibly clears her throat.

“Our second favorite blonde.” Cara corrects.

Zayn smirks. “Why would we leave him when we can… wake him up?”

Louis raises an eyebrow. “What’s on that sick little mind of yours?”

“We’re gonna soak him with the water in the cooler!” Perrie rushes out, unable to maintain the mystery.

Zayn scoffs as he opens the back of the van and, with Liam’s help, pulls out a red cooler. The sounds of water sloshing around and cans clinking together can be heard from it.

Cara rolls her eyes, but it’s an action that stems from adoration rather than annoyance. “You were doing so good, babe,” her eyes shift to Louis. “I’ll record it for you. There’s, uh, something you need to do, right?”

Louis grins and gives a slight nod. “Yeah,” he grabs Harry by the arm and tugs him back to the van. “You and I are going somewhere.”

Harry frowns. “But I want to watch Niall get soaked.”

Louis scoffs and shakes his head, but his expression gives away how endeared he is. “Come on, love. There’s something we need to do.”

“We?” Harry asks, looking bemused.

Louis nods. “We.”

They’re silent for a moment, looking at each other with eyes filled with nothing but adoration. For Harry, this is the moment where he finally grasps the miraculous reality of this entire situation. It’s him and Louis against everything that plagues the world. From now on until the very end, they’re going to face everything, hand in hand, while being true to themselves with no apologies. It terrifies Harry how uncertain the future is, how there can and will be so many difficulties that he’ll have to face, but he’s ready, he’s ready to face every challenge with Louis by his side.

“What’s happening?” Liam whispers, closing the back of the van.

“They’re having a tender moment that none of us will ever understand,” Perrie answers with fond eyes. “I live for this type of shit.”
“And it’s gone,” Louis says, looking pointedly at his friends.

Harry laughs, grabbing the sleeve of Louis’ jacket and guiding them to the van. “I guess we’ll see you later. Hopefully he’s not taking me somewhere where no one can hear me scream.”

“That could mean two things,” Cara says with a suggestive smile.

Harry gapes at her. “Get your mind out of the gutter!”

“Have fun,” Liam drawls. “But not too much fun.”

“No promises,” Louis says before he gets in the van. “And don’t leave your keys in the ignition, Zayn. Someone could steal your shit.”

“I was hoping someone would come along and kidnap you,” Zayn says monotonously, and he would most likely sound completely serious to someone who doesn’t know him.

Louis completely ignores him. He starts up the van before he reaches across the console to take Harry’s hand in his. Giving it a slight squeeze, he backs out of the parking space and drives right onto the nearly vacant road. The drive is comfortably silent. Louis keeps his eyes on the road while Harry watches every tree and small business pass by in a blur.

Eventually, Louis parks right by the entryway to a desolate park. The fence that surrounds the park is rusty, the playground within it looks as if it’s two seconds away from disintegrating, and the grass is dead. Harry looks around the area with uncertain eyes and pursed lip, and Louis wants to laugh at how adorably lost he looks.

“Come on,” Louis orders lightly, giving Harry’s hand one last squeeze before he gets out of the van.

Reluctantly, Harry also gets out of the van, slamming the door behind him. He stays rooted to the ground as Louis goes to the back of the van, opens it, and pulls out a baby blue backpack. The bag is tattered, old looking, and obviously something that would belong to a child. Louis slams the back doors shut and cradles the bag to his chest. He walks straight past Harry and stands right at the entryway of the park, looking down the cobblestone pathway as if it leads to something life changing. Wordlessly, he reaches his hand out to Harry without looking at him. Still hopelessly confused, Harry approaches Louis with unsure steps and holds his hand.

Louis finally looks at Harry and grins. “This is my victory lap.”

Harry’s eyebrows furrow at that. “What?”

Louis laughs lightly. “This is my victory lap… and I want you to join me. At the end of this pathway, there’s a bridge built right above the most beautiful river you’ll ever see in your life. I want you to run with me, ok? Can you- hey!”

Louis cuts himself off with a laugh when Harry starts to run down the pathway, dragging Louis right behind him. Louis squeezes Harry’s hand as if it’s a lifeline and starts running at full speed, keeping up with Harry’s long strides as to not fall over and kill the moment. The freezing air bites their skin, they’re running a great risk of slipping due to how slick the pathway is, and immeasurable joy consumes their bodies and seeps out in the form of manic laughter. They look insane, but they don’t mind one bit. They run right past the playground and into the expansive forest, their grips never softening. The sun is shining through the gray clouds frantically covering the sky, and everything looks dead and phenomenally gorgeous at the same time.
When the two of them finally storm onto the nearly ancient but sturdy bridge, Louis brings them to a complete stop. They’re out of breath and a tad bit sweaty, but their smiles are huge and the electricity that flows between them is palpable. Harry takes in his new surroundings and gazes in awe at everything he sees. The river beneath the bridge is... breathtaking. The crystal clear water flows rapidly to Harry’s right, and if he looks close enough, he can see a vast assortment of fish and lizards. It truly is the most beautiful river he’s ever seen in his life. He turns to Louis with wide, wondrous eyes, and Louis stares back at him with so much love that Harry can feel it in his very soul.

“That was…” Louis looks down at his feet and shakes his head. “The most empowering moment of my life.”

Harry steps forward and kisses the very top of Louis’ head, nuzzling his nose into his soft hair. “I’m glad,” he steps back, still holding on to Louis’ hand. “Why are we here?”

Louis doesn’t say a word as he lets go of Harry and walks right past him. He approaches the side of the bridge and rests his elbows on the railing. His grip is tight on his backpack, and his eyes give nothing away as he stares out at the rushing water. He gives a slight nod, seeming to assure himself of something, before he turns around and faces Harry with a nervous smile.

“I’m…” Louis trails off in order to get his thoughts together. “I’m about to share things with you that I have never shared with anyone else.”

Harry’s expression suddenly turns more serious than anything else. “Really? Are you sure? Are you-”

“I trust you,” Louis says more to himself than to Harry. “I... I trust you. Can we sit down?”

Harry nods, instantly getting down on the ground and sitting cross-legged. Louis gets down and sits in the exact same position, laying his backpack right in front of him. With trembling fingers, Louis unzips the bag and pulls out five items; a brick, a ruby ring, a burned baby blanket, a watch, and, in all its glory, his textbook, The Art of Being a Gentleman. Harry analyzes the items that are now in front of him, wondering what they all have in common.

“Before we begin,” Louis starts. “I want to say that the brick has no significance.”

“Then why is it in there?” Harry asks.

Louis’ expression hardens. “I want all of this shit to sink.”

Harry is confused for a moment before realization dawns on him. “You’re… throwing everything in the river?”

"Yes,"

“Why?”

“I’ll tell you,” Louis says, and his tone is the most vulnerable it has ever been around Harry. He just stares at the objects for a moment, and Harry can’t tell if he’s deciding which one to start with or reminiscing. Finally, Louis picks up the ruby ring, caressing the gem with his thumb.

“This... is a piece of shit,” he says, frightening Harry with how much hatred is dripping from his voice. “I remember when I first saw this ring. It was on the index finger of a lady by the name of Jillian Astaire.”
Harry’s eyes widen. “Victoria’s mother?”

Louis sucks his teeth and nods, his body going rigid. “Yep. She came over to our house for the very first time when I was eight. She came alone when there wasn’t an event or anything, which I didn’t find weird because, you know, I was eight. The first thing I noticed was this ring. I used to think that it was so beautiful. I had never seen anything like it and now, as an adult, I know why.”

He turns the ring between his fingers. “It’s an ancient relic recovered from the jewelry box of some uppity princess who died centuries ago. It’s the only one of its kind. People try to replicate it, but they can never get it quite right.” He sighs. “I’m rambling, sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Harry assures, reaching out to place a hand on Louis’ knee. “Take your time.”

Louis is silent for a moment before he continues. “Whenever she came over, she always came right before I had to leave for my piano lesson. Before I would leave, she’d have conversations with me. She was such a nice lady. On my eleventh birthday, she gave me this ring just because she saw how much I loved it. One day,” he takes a deep, shaky breath. “I-I came back early from my piano lesson. I heard these noises coming from my father’s study, so I…” He clenches his fists. “I opened the door and… there she was, right on top of him, moaning her fucking head off!”

Harry’s jaw drops at that.

“I just stood there,” Louis’ voice is barely above a whisper. “I just stood there for the longest time, because I physically could not move. I don’t know exactly how long I stood there until my father finally noticed me, and when he did, he pushed her off of him and tried to explain himself to me while he was pulling his pants back up.” He scoffs, feeling disgusted at the memory. “I didn’t want to hear it. I just ran to my room, locked my door, and ignored him whenever he tried to talk to me. And do you wanna know the most fucked up thing about this? He thinks that moment is one of the reasons why I’m gay. The day after I came out to my parents, he tried to feed me this bullshit. He told me that my mind is just rejecting women because of what happened.”

Harry shakes his head. “Ignorant prick.”

“Yeah,” Louis breathes. “An ignorant prick. These people… they label us as sinners and abominations while they commit every sin in the book. Fucking hypocrites. It’s as if they think God gives them free passes or some shit.”

Louis puts the ring in the backpack and picks up the baby blanket. His hands are shaking as he bunches up the delicate, bear patterned fabric. “I won’t spend too much time on this one. I’m rushing everything out and you’re just gonna have to keep up.”

Harry nods, fully prepared to keep up with Louis’ onslaught of words.

Louis takes a deep breath before everything starts to pour out of him. “When I came out to my parents, my mother had a full on mental breakdown. She started breaking things, cursing, and spitting out bible verse after bible verse. When I was born, this was the first blanket I was wrapped in. She stormed upstairs, rooted around for it in her chest, came back downstairs—” He chokes out a sob he was trying to hold in. “She came back and she threw it in the fireplace, and when I tried to get it, she charged at me. It took three maids to hold her back and, God, that’s all I wanna say.”

Harry leans forward on his knees and wraps his arms around Louis, trying his best to calm the man down as his breathing grows horrifyingly irregular.

“You’ve said enough,” Harry whispers, kissing Louis’ cheek. “You’ve said more than enough, bluebird. Please don’t push yourself.”
Louis shakes his head as he gently pushes Harry back. “I’m fine, ok? I promise.”

Harry leans back into Louis’ space to give him a lingering kiss on the lips, trying his best to show at least an *ounce* of his limitless love through the action. He pulls back and sits back down, waiting for Louis to continue. Louis manages to calm down his breathing before he stuffs the blanket in the bag and picks up the watch. He smiles wickedly as he eyes the brilliant, solid gold accessory.

“My father’s watch,” he says. “No backstory, I just wanna toss this shit because he loves it more than he loves himself.”

Harry chuckles. “I can bash it with the brick if you want.”

Louis’ laugh is loud and reverberates throughout the forest. ”Let’s keep it intact. I don’t wanna draw this out for too long,” he picks up the textbook with steady hands, running his fingers across the gold lettering as he does so. “This needs no explanation.”

Harry shakes his head, his eyes watering as he looks down at the book. Louis isn’t the only person who wants it to drown. Harry wants zero reminders of how he actually tried to change this brilliant human being, how he mistook his unique traits for legitimate flaws.

Louis stuffs the book, along with the brick, in the bag, zips it up, and holds it to his chest. He and Harry wordlessly get up from the ground and approach the railing. The water beneath them appears to be moving more rapidly than before, and Louis chalks it up to his nerves overtaking him. He feels disoriented from the myriad of emotions that clog his mind, and he feels as if he’s going to vomit at any minute.

He’s so caught up in his thoughts, he flinches when he feels a hand on his shoulder. He turns his head to see sincere green eyes staring back at him, and instantly, he feels as if nothing else matters but staring into those eyes until his final moment on this earth.

“Together?” Harry breathes.

Louis bites his lip to keep in the tears that are threatening to fall. He nods before he holds the bag out to Harry by one of the straps. Harry grabs the bag by the other strap, looking at Louis with a determined expression.

“On three?” Louis asks.

Harry nods. “On three.”

“Ok,” Louis sighs. “...One.”

They dangle the bag over the railing.

“...Two.”

They close their eyes and take deep breaths.

“...Three.”

They let go.
~The End~

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