“What’s your name?”

“Harry.” He draws the word out slowly, hesitantly - like he’s not sure about it. The guy knots his hands behind his back. “Harry Twist.”

“Right,” Niall says, eyes lingering suspiciously on Harry before looking back to Louis. “You wanna buy Harry a drink?”

Louis lets his eyes drip back to Harry, to his wide eyes and the way his shoulders curve down. He really is pretty – Louis will be the first one to admit it and the last one to ever say it out loud. Louis almost smirks and his lips twitch as he tilts his head, “Not particularly, no.”

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AU: Harry Styles tries to get lost in a place he’s never been. Louis Tomlinson has been perfecting the art of being lost for years. What they don’t expect to find is each other.

Notes

This is a pinch hit for the HL Summer Exchange and I hope you enjoy! The prompt will be at the very end as it contains spoilers.
I had a lovely time writing this story and any vague references to romantic comedies are non-intentional and definitely my own fault.

Additional Warning:
- Louis suffers a (not described in detail) career ending injury prior to the beginning of the story. Part of the narrative is him coming to terms with the way his life has been changed and a prominent scar along his body. All mentions are brief and non-graphic.

Title is from: Turning Page by Sleeping At Last

See the end of the work for more notes

Your love is my turning page
Where only the sweetest words remain
Every kiss is a cursive line
Every touch is a redefining phrase

The waves hit the sand with a simple rhythm Louis depends on. The abstract timing keeps his strides in the same motion, each sneaker hitting the hardened sand ten times between waves, shoulders loose and back straight.

He runs just outside of the foamy edge of the sea, careful not to get his shoes damp. The sun hasn’t settled into the sky yet - barely peeking up over the horizon, preceded by sharp oranges and dull yellows as it comes. It’s windy like it shouldn’t be in May but he’s done this in worse conditions. Pouring rain and mud up to his ankles with coach yelling to move faster comes to mind.

There are seagulls soaring overhead and then ducking down, dragging their toes over the water and rising again; a stray call to each other that goes unanswered. Louis doesn’t listen to music when he runs - taking preference with the waves and the birds, the gentle thud his shoes make on the sand; he tries his hardest not to listen to his body.

Eventually, he’s forced to hear it anyway. To listen to the way his right knee protests under the weight of two miles – a distance that didn’t used to feel like a marathon. He has to hear the way his hip pops and feel the stretch and burn of his torso being pushed too far. Even then, he pushes a bit further, ignores it a bit longer until the protests have become screams and his lungs have joined in too. That’s when he slows to a jog; finally, to a walk.

People used to say he was blessed by his body. His quickness and flexibility – the way his feet seemed to do things before his brain could process, the way he could fling himself in front of a defender like he was a soldier going after a grenade.

He’s not sure what those same people would say now if they could see him: thousands of miles from home in a country that’s never been his, running at dawn so no one can see him do it. He doesn’t know what they would say – surely not blessed, though. He can walk. He can run short distances. He’s alive. This is what he’s supposed to be thankful for. He’s selfish for thinking anything otherwise, for being anything other than thankful. He’s heard it before.
Louis pauses before he turns back toward home, focuses on the rabbiting of his heart and the
thrum of his blood echoing in his ears. He lifts his hands in the air and twists his hips to loosen his
back, his eye catching on the slow procession of long haul trucks on the highway just above the
edge of the beach across the cove. There’s another movie shooting here for the summer - he’d
overheard someone mention it the night before at Niall’s bar.

He bounces on his toes to combat his tightening calves as his heart slows to a steady beat instead
of a pound. He rests his hands on his hips as he turns back toward home.

The sky is fully blue by the time he curves from the beach up the back steps of his rental house,
letting himself in the back door and leaving his sandy shoes outside.

His rental is more lavish for a home than he would have expected to have at his age. But after the
accident came a lump sum of cash he no longer wanted and burning shame that made him leave
home for good. He chose the most ridiculous house he could find in a place he’d never heard of it
and packed his bags. That was nearly three years ago.

There’s shiny granite counters in the kitchen and oak wood on the floors. Windows as high as the
ceiling dot each room including a full glass wall in the master bedroom. There are enough
bedrooms in general he could house his entire family if he ever got around to inviting them to stay.
There’s a hot tub off the master suite balcony that overlooks the cove and a garden he pays to
have maintained when he’s too lazy to do it himself. He converted one room to an office on the
first floor – a room with an expansive desk facing the windows and enough room to pace when he
needs to think of ideas for a new article.

It’s the house he would have dreamed of building after he made a professional team, maybe
extended his contract. He tries his best not to be bitter about the way things worked out instead.

The house is cool and quiet as he shuts the door behind him, only the lull of the air conditioner
hazy in the background. There are few things Louis is proud of this far along in his twenty-six
years. Things like his middle sister’s first word being ‘fuck’ courtesy of his loud mouth and the
fact his little brother carries around a football because he wants to be just like him. Things like
being able to go on a daily run when he wasn’t supposed to walk normally ever again.

Then there’s the things he’s not always proud of but get him through the day - like his relentless
and meticulous daily routine. He always starts with a run, two miles down the side of the cove and
then a walk back as the sunrise. He starts the coffee drip on his way to the shower and turns on
sports highlights in his room while he gets dressed. He texts his family while he eats half-burnt
toast and eggs and then downs a full cup of black coffee before he starts writing.

Sometimes he thinks it’s funny – how he writes about a sport he no longer plays. The editors must
have gotten a kick out of seeing his application two years ago. The guy who was destined to be
great, and then who disappeared into the west coast of America, sentenced to write about it all
from the sidelines. It took time for Louis to fall in love with writing properly - to not let his
bitterness seep into the way his words came out on the page. He thinks he’s getting there now.

He works until the evening and usually spends his mornings reviewing highlight tapes from the
night before and streams international games as they happen on one of his three monitors. He
writes up dry bone play-by-play pieces to fill in on Sports pages and then he lines up phone
interviews for features in the afternoons - barely pausing for lunch most days. Late afternoons, he
likes to work on features and more in-depth pieces that land him on syndicated front pages and
magazines.
Some days, when he feels like it, he takes his laptop to head to a new scene for the longer pieces - usually finding himself in Niall Horan’s bar of all unlikely places to focus.

He first wandered into No Name while the rental house was under construction and a California heat wave was nearly suffocating him. He ordered a beer and sat in a back booth, hoping to stay anonymous. No one ever knew his name in the States but the accident and the following fall from the top had a splashed across headlines from coast to coast in eighty countries.

His quiet booth stayed quiet for almost two hours that first day - at least until there was a brown-haired guy in dark-rimmed glasses sliding into the seat across from him. He introduced himself as Niall Horan, owner of the very bar Louis was in, and he didn’t stop talking for the next ninety-minutes. He got Louis talking too – begrudgingly with each word he said like pulling a tooth. By the time he left that first evening and he promised he wouldn’t come back – would avoid Niall and his sociable personality at all costs.

Somehow, he found himself going back the next day under the guise of building a routine but two days turned to a week turned into a month and a year and now Niall is his best friend and the one person who knows everything about him.

The windy morning turns into an overcast day but it’s still warm on the back patio of No Name – warm enough for Louis to eat dinner and work without a jacket at least. He’s tucked in his usual table in the back, a half-eaten club sandwich and his laptop open next to him. The patio is empty for the most part and the quiet conversations don’t bother Louis so much. As long as he’s not forced to be part of them, that is.

There’s a slight breeze off the bay that coincides with boots scuffing on pavement. The sound makes him look up as a guy walks up the curving path to the patio.

Louis knows he is a stranger immediately; It’s noticeable by the way he walks in with the same hesitancy Louis did the first time, looking around like he’s waiting to be spotted and then relaxing slightly when he sees that no one is even paying attention. No one besides Louis, but he’s not someone who matters anymore.

The guy is pretty, objectively speaking – this stranger standing in the middle of the patio, unsure where he should go next. He twirls a key ring on his finger and Louis adjusts his aviators to make it look like he’s still staring at his screen. His editor would prefer if he was still looking at his screen – but she’s three-thousand miles away in London, so.

It’s not like Louis is going to invite the guy over for a chat but there’s just something about the way he stands, his chin tucked down and hands in his pockets like he’s making himself smaller that makes it so Louis can’t look away. His blue shirt is haphazardly unbuttoned halfway down his chest and the six or so rings on his fingers give him away as more of a rock star than a tourist fresh off the Pacific Coast Highway.

People come to Malago Cove because they’re lost or because they don’t want to be found and Louis is hard pressed to put this guy in either category. His black jeans hug his thighs and his shirt has a panther prowling over the right shoulder – it’s not exactly the best outfit for going unnoticed. Louis drags his eyes away when Niall sweeps from behind the outside bar with a wide smile.

“Are you lost?”

“No, I don’t think so,” the guy says.
That voice. His words sound like honey underwater and Louis has to consciously keep himself from looking over this time. There’s an accent there that sounds like home but Louis can’t quite place it.

“I’m visiting for work,” the stranger says into the silence. It stays quiet and Louis revels in the seeping itchiness of it. “Uh, renting the house on the other side of the bay.” He clears his throat, “The one with the pink door.”

Louis can hold out for hours in utter silence. He prides himself on a stiff jaw and stone-cold stare. Niall – his sweet Irish friend who wants to be tougher than a field mouse has any right to be – can’t stand silence or worse, being rude.

“Welcome to the cove, then.” Louis can hear his smile without looking. Niall is the softest person he’s met since he moved to America– and it’s a miracle they’re even friends, honestly. Louis showed up in his bar a few more spikes and hidden pokers than any stranger had a right to be prepared for. According to Niall, he still does.

“What brings you in here?”

“Liked the name I guess.” Louis rolls his eyes and looks away at the quip – there’s no name on Niall’s bar. That’s the whole point of it.

Niall laughs and there’s light between the gaps, warmth. “Places with no names tend to keep strangers out,” Niall says. “Not invite them in.”

“Well, I’m hoping I won’t be a stranger for long, then.”

Louis barely types out two more words before Niall is introducing himself to the stranger and leading him back toward the bar, telling him about all of the things to do here like it’s a tourist trap.

“I can introduce you to some good people, too,” Niall says. “It can be lonely without a couple of friends. Like, Louis over there.”

Louis tenses when he looks up at Niall “What about me?” He asks, one of his eyebrows curving up.

“You’re a nice guy,” Niall says and it sounds like a punchline.

Louis tries not to smile. “I am.”

“So, do you want to be nice enough to buy—, “he frowns and looks back at the guy with a panther on his shoulder, “What’s your name?”

“Harry.” The word draws out slowly, hesitantly - like he’s not sure about it. The guy - Harry - knots his hands behind his back. “Harry Twist.”

“Right,” Niall says slowly, eyes lingering suspiciously on Harry before looking back to Louis. “You wanna buy Harry here a drink?”

Louis lets his eyes drip back to Harry, to his wide eyes and the way his shoulder curve down. He really is pretty – Louis will be the first one to admit it and the last one to ever say it out loud. Louis almost smirks and his lips twitch as he tilts his head, “Not particularly, no.”

There’s a beat of silence, the stranger holding Louis’s eyes like he’s in a competition. Louis looks away when Niall starts laughing in a high-pitched guffaw as if Louis has just told a particularly
good joke. “He’s rough around the edges,” he offers as an explanation to Harry. “We’ll just put your first drink on the house for now.”

Louis swears he can feel Harry’s gaze on the side of his face but he doesn’t look back. He feels it when Harry looks away too, says something to Niall about the kind of drink he likes most. Louis goes back to his laptop, his writing. The last sentence trails off in the middle and he hits the backspace key until the words disappear altogether and he tries to figure out what it is he wants to say.

He loses track of Niall’s conversation with the stranger – with Harry – after a while. He’s writing an article about the impact of being ambidextrous in football and it’s taking more concentration than he actually possesses on a mildly sunny day with the bay twirling off in the distance.

The sunset lights the sky up in shades of orange and pink and the first time Louis looks away from his computer in hours is just to admire it.

“Look at the stars, look how they shine for you,” Niall croons as he spins from the bar to Louis’s table with a wide grin. He’s holding two beers and he sets them both down, wiping his hands on his jeans.

“Shut up,” Louis says with an eye roll. He takes the beer and lifts it in cheers - Niall doesn’t usually bring beer when he comes to chat.

Niall doesn’t miss a beat as he slides in the empty spot across from Louis. “You want dinner or no?”

Free food is one of the perks of Louis’s friendship with Niall though he does try to eat out of his own kitchen most of the time. “I have leftover pasta salad from last night, I think,” Louis says after a mental inventory of his refrigerator. “What happened to your little friend?”

Niall stares at Louis for a silent beat. “You mean Harry?”

“Little friend, yeah.” Louis smiles slowly and Niall groans.

“Little friend sounds pervy.”

“You took it there.” Louis lifts his eyebrows at Niall and then reaches for the beer he had brought over. It’s a dark one which Niall only does when he wants to tell Louis something heavier than the lyrics of a Coldplay song. Louis is going to try to evade whatever it is for as long as possible. “So, where’d he go? You scare him off already?”

Niall flips Louis off as he takes a sip of his beer. "It's his first night in town, he needed to unpack some stuff. Or something."

Louis wonders what kinds of things he has to unpack - more garish printed shirts, probably. "What's he even doing here?" By his voice, Louis makes it sound like he owns Malago Cove.

"He said he’s working on the new movie they’re shooting," Niall says. “Rogue or Riot or something.”

"So not running away from something like the rest of us," Louis notes. The trucks Louis saw this morning, curve back into his memory. He should have known there’d be a new swath of people coming with them.

Niall snorts, "You hear the guy say his name? He acted like he’d never said it out loud before. Clearly something is up but I'm not going to be the one ask about it."
"Well I'm not going to ask him either, then," Louis says with a smile. "Glad we agree."

"As if you would ever care enough to find out." There's no venom in Niall's words, he just knows Louis well enough by now. "How are you?" Niall holds Louis's eyes when he asks and now Louis knows what the surprise beer is for. Niall's worried.

"I'm fine," Louis says. The word by itself doesn't seem to say enough so he tries to implore with his eyes. He's not terrible - he's certainly not great. Fine is what it is. Fine isn't bad.

"You're not happy."

Louis puts a hand to his chest, faking offense. "What?"

Niall rolls his eyes again. "You're not happy, Lou. You're going through the motions and I'm getting worried."

"Motions?" Louis raises his eyebrows, "Motions of my routine? My job? My life? What would you like me to be doing instead?"

Niall shrugs, "I don't know. I just don't want you to be sad."

Louis can't help his laugh. "I'm not sad, Niall. I'm just a bit bitter about my life sometimes, there's a difference."

"You admit it so openly," Niall mutters.

"Blue eyes, bitter and bi." Louis puts his hands up in front of him and wiggles his fingers, "Catch the show on 10th and Misery tonight."


Louis huffs out a laugh and studies the wood grain of the table. He's had this conversation with Niall before and it's ended badly too many times. Of course, Louis wishes he could be happy - fully happy. Instead he settles for little happy moments. Like two minutes ago when he was teasing Niall about his new friend - that was a happy moment. This moment right here - not so much.

"I want that for myself too," Louis says instead of rehashing how happiness isn't in the cards for him anymore - how everything he thought he wanted to was destroyed in a car accident on a curvy backroad. That's usually when Niall throws something at his head and tells him he's an idiot. He's not in the mood for that with such a beautiful sunset overtaking the sky.

Niall stares at him - his eyes doing a terrifying thing where they seem to be reading invisible ink on Louis's face. Ink he never meant to be there in the first place. "Good," he settles on. "You deserve to be happy."

Louis smirks, "If you get too sentimental, I will throw up." Niall just rolls his eyes as he lifts his beer to his lips.

Once the sun has set fully and just left traces of color against the darkening sky, Louis abandons Niall to the night crowd and makes his way back home. Multi-colored houses dot the edge of the bay like a bag of pastel Skittles with fading light bouncing off the water behind. Tonight, he notices when he walks past the house with the pink door - the one Harry-the-stranger is supposedly staying in. The lights are on inside, a warm backlight to the darkening street. Louis barely pauses before he keeps going.
After the first time, Louis starts to kind of see Harry everywhere.

He’s at the grocery store and Harry’s there too, twisting an apple between ringed fingers. Louis stares at the ground when he walks past - already knowing Harry is the type of person who will make polite conversation. Even if Louis was a dick the first time they saw each other. He has the type of face that says he wouldn’t pass up a chance to say hello. Louis really hates that kind of face.

Louis is picking up the mail at the post office and Harry jogs past in a grey sweatshirt and a beanie, his face tucked down again like he’s hoping no one will notice. He’s at the same coffee shop Louis goes to - three people behind him and then he’s just leaving the Chinese place Louis goes to get his take out on Sunday nights. He’s in the back of the coffee shop and crossing the street to the baker, ducking around the corner of the hardware store.

Most of the times he sees Harry, it’s at Niall’s bar. It’s part of Louis’s routine to go most afternoons to work on his writing, and it seems to become part of Harry’s routine as well. Sometimes he only stays for a few minutes to chat with Niall, other times he orders food and eats in an isolated corner.

Louis walks past Harry’s house with the pink door each night on his way home and now that he knows it’s where Harry is staying, he can’t help but look when he goes past. It’s not as though he can help it - unless he wants to crawl through someone else’s backyard and jump a couple of fences to his own house. He could probably stop staring, though.

Some nights the lights are off and sometimes they’re on. Louis doesn’t want to wonder about what Harry Twist does in the dark of a lonely house but it seems he can’t be helped. He can’t help that he’s a bit curious about the guy. Not that he’s exchanged any words with him - probably permanently barred himself from the opportunity with the way things went down that first day.

He breaks down and actually puts ‘Harry Twist’ into a Google search to see if he’s missing something about the guy but there’s nothing there. Well, except for a Twitter account for a balloon modeler based out of Suffolk but that guy is about fifty and bearded. Not quite the same Harry as the one lurking around Malago Cove. Louis settles himself with the fact he may not be anyone important at all. Just a guy working on a movie, stumbling across a beach town on accident. Just a guy in a panther shirt Louis corrects - because he’s never getting over that.

“What’s his deal?” Louis asks two weeks after Harry has rolled into town because he can’t just let anything go. He’s curious. Harry has just left the bar and Niall is still smiling after him like a mum watching her son go off to school. “He keeps coming back here.” He doesn’t mean for it to sound like a crime but it comes off that way.

“Dunno,” Niall says. “Think he just likes to have someone listen to him, honestly. Not ask him too many questions.”

Louis hums and stares at the doorway where Harry has just disappeared. He forces himself to look away once he realizes he’s doing it. He taps his fingers on the keys in front of him, not pressing hard enough to form words on his screen. “What does he do? For the movie, I mean.”

“Sounds like admin stuff, like a PA,” Niall says. “He had a lot to say about fonts this morning, actually. He hates Comic Sans.”
“Everyone hates Comic Sans,” Louis notes.

“He’s quite funny, too. A lot of good stories about like, traveling and stuff.”

Louis stares at Niall blankly. “Did I ask?”

Niall raises his eyebrows, “No, but the way you stare at him every time he comes in makes me feel like you might want to.”

Louis drops his mouth in a perfect circle and shakes his head. “I do not stare.”

Niall shrugs, “Suit yourself.”

“I don’t,” Louis calls as Niall disappears into the back kitchen with a bin of dirty glasses. “I don’t,” he repeats to himself, quieter. He’s not sure who he is trying to convince.

* *

Stop staring at Harry and his house. Louis decides it will be his resolution halfway through his Wednesday run the following week. His run where he can’t find a rhythm because his mind insists on throwing Harry at him.

He doesn’t even know why he keeps floating up in his thoughts like an unwanted ghost. He’s seen plenty of pretty boys in his time - kissed boys on both ends of the pretty spectrum. Harry isn’t that wildly different from the others. Not that he’s thought about whether or not Harry could be different from the others.

He makes himself sprint the rest of his run as punishment for too many Harry-related thoughts and he doesn’t stop until the edges of his vision go dark and his lungs protest against his chest. Then he settles into a jog and does his best to forget about Harry Twist.

He’s doing really well with not thinking about him until that night because Harry is actually outside of his house when Louis walks by. Louis doesn’t see him at first, determinedly staring at his shoes instead of the house with pink door when there’s a slip of movement out of the corner of his eye. He follows it to see Harry sitting on the top step right in front of the house - clashing terribly against the door in an electric rose-colored jumper.

He doesn’t seem to see Louis at first but then he turns his head just slightly and they lock eyes. They hold each other’s gaze for longer than they need to but Louis can’t make himself look away. Then it’s a small thing, innocuous really, when Harry lifts his hand to wave. His elbow rests on his knees and he stretches his fingers outwards with his lips tucked under his almost-smile like a peace offering.

And that’s when Louis does what any normal human would deem to be the worst possible response - he looks away and keeps walking.

* *

There are some mornings when Louis wakes up and he forgets just how much he detests his life. There are some morning when he knows before he’s even fully conscious the way his cards have been played - the game he’s been left to handle. This Saturday morning is the latter.

The blankets on the bed are wrapped around his legs but it’s not cool enough to untangle and pull them back up. Instead he finds himself listlessly running his fingertips over the scar he’s been left with. He knows intimately where it curves and bows out, the topography of the new layers of skin from the middle of his ribs to the edge of his knee. He has historical data as well - where the
stitches took the longest to heal, where the two surgeries to rebuild his hip took place. If he closes his eyes tight enough he remembers what it all looked like the night of the accident - the inky blood he didn’t think was his.

He physically kicks his leg to make himself stop dwelling. He stops the drag of his fingers and crosses his hands over his chest.

“Get it together, Tomlinson,” he says out loud and then drags himself out of bed. Some mornings are harder than others but he gets through them just the same.

Harry, in his pink jumper, flits through Louis’s mind like a dream while he runs. Louis doesn’t know what Harry’s face did when he didn’t wave back but his mind supplies options for him all morning. He’s a piece of work - he knows. He has a sharp tongue and cold eyes but he’s not sure that Harry deserves either one. And he’s done it to Harry twice - not even mistakenly. Two, fully conscious decisions to be an asshole to someone who hasn’t given him a reason - unless Louis wants to count the panther shirt.

Harry sits on the edges of Louis’s thoughts through the morning while he showers and goes to get coffee, while he makes a to-do list for the rest of the weekend and sends a few interview requests by email.

The only time his mind decides to relinquish Harry from his thoughts is while he’s studying paint chips at the hardware store in the middle of the afternoon. The landlord wants to repaint his front room and asked Louis to choose the color since he’s been in the house for so long already. The problem is that he can’t really decide which one to choose.

His eyes split time between a grey with a blue undertone and a grey with browner undertone. He thinks of his mum then, she’d say the grey with blue to match his eyes. He actually rolls his eyes at the thought. He can’t go matching his walls to his eyes but as he reaches for the browner grey he pauses - because who the fuck said he can’t match the paint on his walls to his eyes?

He’s about to start a pros and cons list about it when someone else turns down the same aisle pushing a cart in front of them. Louis automatically steps closer to the wall with the paint cards to create more space but pauses when he actually sees who it is.

Straight from his thoughts to an in-person sighting, Harry’s eyes go wide like a deer caught in headlights with nowhere to run. Louis is surprised too but he doesn’t show it quite so visually, his face steadily blank.

“Sorry,” Harry says quietly though Louis can’t figure out what he’s apologizing for. He stops himself when he remembers their last few interactions. Harry probably thinks Louis hates him - is apologizing for his mere presence in the same aisle. And, just...Louis can’t have that. He’s a jerk, he’s rude, he’s cold - he’s everything everyone has ever said about him. But there’s something about Harry that makes him, for once, want to fix it.

“You’re Harry, right?”

Harry nods, “I am.” His knuckles are white where he holds the handle of the cart and Louis doesn’t know if he should be proud of how intimidating he must be or embarrassed. “I’m Louis,” he says with his hand to his chest. “I don’t think we’ve officially met.”

Harry stares so hard that Louis has to glance away first just because he can’t stand it.

“We seem to be in the same place a lot,” Louis says with a slight smile. He’s going to be nice if it kills him. He will not have people flinching away from him in the paint aisles of hardware stores.
“So, I thought I’d say hello.” Unlike last night, he adds silently.

“Hello to you too,” Harry says.

There’s no smile on his lips as he shifts his weight. He seems to wither in the attention from Louis’s eyes, his chin lowering slightly. His face is unfairly pretty - big green eyes with a sharp jawline and cherry lips. Louis catches himself staring at Harry’s mouth and quickly moves back to his eyes. His skin itches in the silence.

“What are you building?” Louis pointedly looks down in the cart Harry has stopped inches from his hip - a couple of wooden boards, a new power drill, and a small can of wood stain with a wide paintbrush.

Harry looks at Louis curiously for a moment before following his gaze to the cart between them. “Oh, that. I’m fixing the deck at the place I’m staying,” he says. “One of the boards is kind of coming up.” He looks back to Louis and half smiles, “I actually ate shit this morning when I tripped over it so I figured it might be time to do something about it.”

Louis smiles without being able to help it. If he did something like that, no one would ever hear about it and yet Harry shares it openly - with Louis of all people.

“Did you hurt yourself?” Louis does an obligatory graze of Harry’s body with his eyes to check and because he’s only human, really. He notices Harry’s black shorts and running shoes - proper sporty for a hardware store run. His grey sweatshirt has a donut on it and the neck is cut apart haphazardly.

“My chin snagged on a nail,” Harry says. He tilts his chin up and shows off a bit of a gash on the underside of his jaw, halfway covered in a purple Band-Aid. “As I was falling, I imagined a stray nail going through my cheek and taking my whole career with it, actually.” He smiles and then his face immediately looks stricken as he shakes his head quickly.

“Your career as what, a model?” Louis asks as Harry’s jaw tenses.

“Something like that,” Harry says, his voice tight.

Louis raises his eyebrows because there’s something strange happening on Harry’s face, his eyes darkening and his lips pressing together tightly. “I thought I knew you from somewhere,” Louis says to ease the tension.

It definitely doesn’t work. Instead he watches the color drain even further from Harry’s face, his hands fisting at his sides. “What?”

Louis blinks and licks his bottom lip. Sometimes his humor can be offensive but he’s not sure that particular comment was. As with all things, having to explain his sarcasm lessens the impact significantly. Considering Harry looks like he’s about to have some sort of asthma attack, Louis lets his comedic pride fold down for the moment.

“You were implying your modeling career would be ruined,” Louis says. “I was just playing along and saying that must be where I recognize you from. Like if you were actually a model.” He huffs and scrunches his nose. “It loses some of its flavor when I have to draw it out like this.”

Harry blinks at him in complete silence and then smiles slowly. It doesn’t reach his eyes. “Sorry, lost me there for a second. I get it now.”

Harry seems like a smart enough guy - not someone who would lose the thread on a sarcastic comment but Louis lets him have it. Everyone’s hiding something. “Well, you’ll have to be
quicker on your feet next time,” Louis says with a quick smile.

“Guess so,” Harry says, holding Louis’s eyes for a beat longer than is quite normal. He clears his throat when he looks away. “It is nice to meet you officially,” he says. “This place does seem pretty small.” Louis tries to keep his eyes from bulging at the vast understatement.

“Do you need help?” Louis asks before he can think it through. There’s just something about the fact that Harry is buying a power tool to fix a board in his porch that is partly endearing and partly scary. It may be his civic duty to help him before he hurt himself - not to mention the karmic ground he’s trying to make up for from the last two weeks.

“With the deck?” Harry shakes his head, “I think I’ve got it.”

“Do you?” Louis tilts his head, his tone automatically teasing. “What makes you so sure?”

Harry rocks back on his heels and his mouth twitches before he bites on his bottom lip. “I watched a tutorial on YouTube this morning.”

“Did it tell you to get an automatic drill or was that a spur of the moment decision?” He can’t help but tease Harry as naturally as breathing. There’s no explanation for it other than he likes the way Harry half smiles when he does and his eyes shine like he’s in on the joke.

Harry opens and closes his mouth twice before frowning. “They were using one to build the support beams in the video.”

Louis laughs. “Yeah, well, if you were actually building a deck from nothing, you’d be in good shape.” He lifts the drill from Harry’s cart and back onto the nearest shelf. “As it is, I think you just need a hammer and a good screw honestly.”

Harry bursts out laughing - it’s the only way to describe the way his laughter barges out from between his lips, his eyes lighting up.

Louis blinks. “What?”

Harry swallows and his face flushes like he’s embarrassed. “Good screw.”

Louis hadn’t even realized he said it, to be honest. But now he smiles, “Anyway,” he says pointedly, “I do know a thing about building decks. I could be very useful to you.” He claps his hands together and tilts his head at Harry. “How about I come to yours around five? I need to run some paint back to my place first.”

Harry studies Louis carefully, the ghost of a smile still on his lips. He looks like he’s calculating something and then he nods. “Yeah, okay.”

“I think I can see some remnants of your blood here.” Louis smirks when Harry squeaks from across the yard. “Kidding,” he adds on belatedly.

Harry frowns at him and then goes back to his task of painting the new board with water-resistant stain while Louis takes the rotted board out of the deck. It comes out with a sickening crack. He carries the board to the side of the house and dumps it on the ground before circling back.

They’ve been working in companionable silence for the last hour or so. Louis had immediately regretted his decision to volunteer to help Harry and thought about not showing up at least twice in the time it took him to order the grey-blue paint and take it to his house before heading for
Harry’s yard isn’t fenced in so it looks right out onto the bay, the waves gently rolling against each other and reflecting the late afternoon sunlight in tiny rainbows. It’s the perfect view, Louis thinks. His eyes catch on Harry, the way he paints the board with intense focus, his lips pursing in a whistle Louis can’t quite hear. He’d lost the donut sweatshirt by the time Louis showed up and replaced it with a grey t-shirt instead. Of all the thing Louis wondered about Harry - how much ink is on his skin was not on the list. He can’t help his wandering gaze though, studying how the haphazard pieces come together up his arms. He stops himself from wondering what pieces he can’t see.

Harry must be able to feel Louis’s curious gaze because he looks up after a moment. His lips quirk up on one side and then he’s back to staining the board, careful strokes of the brush.

“Is your landlord paying you back for this?” Louis asks dumbly for lack of anything better.

Harry straightens and curves his back as he twists to stretch. “I didn’t ask,” he says. “I just figured it needed to be done. So, I’m doing it.” He shrugs and kind of smiles before going back to painting his board. With each passing moment with Harry, Louis feels more like a dick for the way he treated him the first day he showed up at No Name.

There’s a football wedged under the porch and Louis bends to pick it up, pawing it out of a pile of dirt until he can get it between his feet. It’s more natural than walking, he thinks, as he dribbles around the grassy area where Harry isn’t painting. He flips the ball on top of his shoe and then to his knee and back down again, repeating the same on the other side.

Football has been his go-to for his entire life - the one thing he can do when nothing else quite makes sense. He remembers kicking it around as distraction when he was a kid as his parents argued and then pounding shots against the goal to let out steam the first time he realized he wanted to kiss a boy. He stops himself before he can remember all of the times on the pitch - victory seeping down his spine and losses that took the pit out of his stomach. Both of those hurt too much to think about properly.

He stops the ball against his foot, his breathing more ragged than it should be, and he notices Harry staring at him again, a small smile dancing on his lips.

“What?” Louis rests his foot on top of the ball, bending his knee.

“You’re quite good at that,” Harry says. “Do you play?”

Louis shrugs, “Used to.” He passes the ball to Harry and watches as it smoothly rolls past him. “I take it you don’t?”

Harry jogs to the ball and dribbles it back in the general direction of Louis. He looks like a drunk footie player in Louis’s honest opinion, the way he dodges out to get the ball and kicks it too strongly for his own gait. In his defense, he is holding a paintbrush in one hand but Louis decides he won’t excuse it as a handicap.

“Is it that obvious?” Harry stops the ball with his foot and nearly tips over with the motion. Louis can’t help his smile though he tries to hide it with a cough.

“You didn’t like, kick around with your mates as a kid?” Louis asks. “That’s where I got my basics.”

Harry shrugs and rolls the ball under his foot. “Not really. I can do a trick, though. My mum
taught me.”

“Go on, then.” Louis nudges his head at Harry. “Impress me.”

Harry smiles as he sets the paintbrush on the edge of the can of stain. He starts bouncing the ball on the tops of his shoes then kicking it up to bounce on his knees the way Louis had been earlier. Instead of letting it drop back to the grass, though, he steps back and kicks it with the toe of his tennis shoe.

The ball shoots straight up into the air and Harry dodges to get under it but Louis knows what’s going to happen next. He can only watch as Harry tilts his face back and lets the ball collapse right on his nose with a sickening thwack.

“Fuck,” Harry yells out as the ball trips into the grass and rolls away. He covers his face with his hands and Louis takes a helpless step closer. “It was supposed to go on top of my forehead.”

Harry’s voice is muffled by his hands but Louis hears him anyway.

“Are you saying this isn’t part of the trick?” Louis gestures at Harry and slightly laughs over the end of his words.

“Not even close,” Harry says. There’s a trickle of blood between two of his fingers that makes Louis step even closer.

“I think you’re bleeding,” he says, eyes going wide when Harry drops his hands from his face. There’s definitely blood coming from his nose and his top lip. Harry spits onto the ground and it only really makes everything look worse. “I take that back, I know you’re bleeding.”

Harry puts his hands back over his nose and mouth, “This is embarrassing.”

Louis is already walking past him and back to the house. “You’ll have to get over that bit so I can help you,” he says. Harry doesn’t say anything but Louis can hear his footsteps close behind him. “I can’t believe you bashed your own face in with a football and I had to witness it.”

The kitchen is thankfully right inside the back door so Louis can push Harry into a chair at the table and start unrolling paper towels from the roll near the sink.

“The trick usually looks much cooler than that.” Harry takes his hands away from his face and a stray drip of blood hits his shorts. “Fuck me,” he groans as he puts his hands back up over his face.

Louis doesn’t indulge in a response - though his mind has plenty to provide. He just raises his eyebrows and continues wadding paper towels in sections. “Press these to your nose,” he says as he wraps Harry’s fingers around the first ball. “And don’t tip your head back,” he adds quickly as Harry starts to do just that.

“Sorry,” Harry says but it’s muffled by paper towels and his hands.

Louis smirks and goes back to the sink to wet his second wad of towels. “It’s fine,” he says. “I’ve got an army of little siblings who have had more bloody noses than I care to remember. Not to mention I’ve had my own share of mishaps.”

“Never kicked the ball in your own face, have you?”

Louis turns off the sink and squeezes out the excess water from the paper towels he’s been wetting. He turns to Harry and leans back on the edge of the counter. With Harry’s hand over his mouth, Louis can only really see his eyes and he’s taken aback by just how intensely green they
are. There’s a smudge of dirt on Harry’s forehead and he has an urge to brush it away with his thumb. The desire swats him upside the stomach and he curls his fingers against his palms to quell it.

“I’ve kicked a ball in my face plenty,” Louis says, back to Harry’s original question. “I’ve got a scar in between from my eyes from getting kicked in the face by a cleat when I was twelve too.” He can read Harry’s surprise by how his eyes go wide when Louis draws his finger along the scar. He also has a scar from his ribs to his knee and a metal screw in his hip from a guy who was intoxicated while driving but he doesn’t offer to show that one.

“You’re tilting your head back again,” Louis notes, nudging his head toward Harry. He tips it forward so quickly it makes Louis smile again. “I used to tell my little brother that if he tipped his head back when his nose was bleeding, blood would come out of his eyeballs instead of his nose.”

Harry makes an affronted noise. He pulls his hand back an inch to say, “That’s terrible,” before pressing it down again.

“Yeah,” Louis scrunches his lips together, “My mum wasn’t particularly happy about it.”

Harry smiles - or at least his eyes curve up like he’s smiling. Louis ignores the warmth in his stomach because - no. It’s just a no.

“It should have stopped bleeding by now,” he says, pushing off from the counter. He slides the garbage can over for Harry to drop his paper towel in. He’s definitely not volunteering to get his blood all over him - he won’t even do that for his siblings.

“I think it has,” Harry says, pressing his hand to his nose and then pulling it away to inspect for any new blood.

Louis hands him the wet paper towels, “Use this to clean up. You look like you could be in a horror movie.”

“Cheers,” Harry says with an eye roll, rubbing the paper towel over his face anyway. Louis wets another one and squeezes it out before handing it to him.

“Do you have a first aid kit somewhere? Think you might need something for that lip.”

Like a reflex, Harry sticks his tongue out to feel over his top lip. It’s not unlike what Louis’s little sisters would do. “Upstairs bathroom, I think.”

Louis takes off up the stairs to get it without much thought about hesitating. He isn’t all that familiar with Harry or the house and he gets a swoop of butterflies like he’s snooping as he goes up the stairs.

He opens up the drawers in the bathroom counter and finds them empty, same with the cupboards underneath the sink, before he spots the latch under the mirror. He pulls it open and his eyes comb over the shelves - mostly for the first aid kit but partly because his curiosity cannot be stopped. He scans through the Tom Ford cologne and Colgate toothpaste, tweezers and teeth whitening strips, plus an entire line of moisturizers and lotions on the middle shelf before he actually gets to a red box with a white cross painted on the front that he grabs out.

Back downstairs, Harry has a bottle of wine on the table where he’d been sitting and he’s just turning from the cupboard with two stemless wine glasses in the crook of his elbow. His other hand is still holding the tissue to his face so at least that’s positive. He smiles sheepishly when he realizes Louis is watching him.
“Pretty sure alcohol thins your blood,” Louis says. “Not ideal for a bloody nose and a bloody lip.”

“It’s not even bleeding anymore.” Harry pulls the tissue away to prove his point. There’s a bit of blood they both spot at the same time and Harry crumples it in his hand to hide the evidence.

“So, you want to celebrate with a drink?”

Harry sets the glasses on the table with a dull thud. “I actually was just going to have wine and watch the sunset but I thought it might be rude not to ask you to join me considering you got me a first aid kit and helped with my deck and all.”

Louis blinks a couple of times in the silence. “Watch the sunset and drink wine?” He can’t remember meeting someone who did that kind of thing except for, possibly, his grandparents.

If Harry thinks Louis is judging him, he doesn’t show it. “Yeah, so are you in or what?”

“I could use a drink, honestly,” Louis says with a shrug. He’s not so sure about wine being the drink but he’ll do with what he has. “Wait, I’m supposed to be fixing your face first.”

Harry pulls a wine opener out of a drawer and sets it on the counter. “It feels fine, to be honest.”

Louis hums and opens the first aid box on the table. “Sit,” he says with a nod of his head at a chair. “I’m not going to be responsible for you getting an infection that turns out to be a flesh-eating virus because you didn’t disinfect your wound.” His karma should be on a roll after his afternoon of good deeds.

Harry blanches but sits. “Are flesh eating viruses a common concern in Malago Cove?”

“Mm, not sure,” Louis says. He tears open a packet of antiseptic gel and unseals a cotton swab. “Maybe more likely in the Amazon.”

“I’ve always wanted to go to the Amazon,” Harry muses. “Now watch me get a flesh-eating virus in America instead.”

“Not on my watch,” Louis says, holding up the cotton swab, shiny with gel on one end. “I’ll save you.”

“My hero.”

“Tilt your chin,” Louis instructs as he leans closer to Harry.

Harry tips his head all the way back on his neck and laughs. “Idiot,” Louis says as Harry tilts his face back to an equal level.

Louis puts two fingers under Harry’s chin to steady him and watches his smile tip from his face. He’s closer than he’s ever been to Harry - closer than he’s been to another human in months, probably. He can see the unevenness of Harry’s skin and the bits he hasn’t gotten around to shaving. Harry smells like summer, like warmth and flowers with a bit of sweat from working on the deck all afternoon. There’s sea breeze in his hair and Louis holds his breath to stop himself from inhaling deeply.

“Might sting,” he whispers because it feels like anything louder will shatter the moment. The cut going up his lip isn’t too bad but Harry hisses when Louis touches the end of the swab to his skin.

“Bad?”

“A bit,” Harry says through gritted teeth.
Louis is gentle with the next swipe before pulling it back slightly to inspect his work. “No flesh-eating viruses for you,” he says as he takes another step back to get some distance in between him and Harry. “Your career won’t be ruined.”

Harry stays perfectly still. “Career?”

“As a model,” Louis supplies, throwing to cotton swab in the garbage.

“Right,” Harry says with a nod but Louis catches the deep inhale that follows after it. He definitely doesn’t mention that this is the second time Harry has looked like he’s seen a ghost when Louis mentions his job.

* *

As far as views go, Harry may have the monopoly on the sunset.

Louis gets an excellent sunrise vantage as he gets dressed for his runs each morning and the sunset is still gorgeous from his balcony but not like this. The canvas is uninterrupted from Harry’s back porch and despite hesitating over the wine and sunset invitation, Louis is actually enjoying himself.

He’s surprisingly comfortable on one of the two loungers on Harry’s back deck and as the sun sinks lower, so does the level on their shared bottle of wine. The night air is still warm and Harry is an easy conversationalist - even if the only things they’ve really talked about are places to eat in Malago Cove and their favorite wines.

“Niall says you’re working on the movie they’re filming? That’s why you’re here, I mean.” Louis refills his glass with the deep red Pinot Noir. He hasn’t had wine in a while and he’s forgotten how easy it is, how smooth it goes down.

Harry is quiet for a beat until Louis looks up at him. Then he folds one knee closer to his chest and puts his foot on the lounger. “Yeah,” he says without offering more.

“What do you do?” Louis asks. No one can ever say he’s not inquisitive.

Harry takes a sip of wine and runs his lips under his teeth. Louis realizes he’s staring too late. “I just like, run errands and stuff,” Harry says. “Make sure everyone’s in their places and things.” He starts to squint one eye and then shakes his head once. “That’s about it.”

“Sounds fun,” Louis says for lack of anything better. It’s not like he watches that many movies or has ever had an interest in working on one

“It is,” Harry says. “I really love it.”

Quiet drifts in again but Louis doesn’t hate it. He doesn’t feel like he has to say anything to fill it as they sit there - no inane comments to fill the gaps.

“Do you really want to go to the Amazon?” Louis asks with his eyes closed, pulling a thread from their earlier conversation inside.

“Yeah, I do.” Harry’s voice is deeper after three glasses of wine and Louis doesn’t particularly like the fact he’s noticed. “I want to go everywhere, I think.”

Louis peeks one eye open to see Harry is in his mirrored position, his hands resting over his stomach and his eyes closed. He closes his own eyes and relaxes back into the lounger again. “Where have you been?”
“A lot of places,” Harry says after a moment. “I’ve been really lucky to travel a lot these past few years.”

“For work?”

There’s a longer pause this time. “Yeah.” Before Louis can poke, Harry intercedes. “What about you? Do you travel much?”

“I used to,” Louis says, remembering team trips all the way back to the time when he was a kid. Championships in faraway places and summer training in foreign countries. Now he hasn’t left the cove in three years. He goes home a couple of times of year but that usually coincides with a holiday or one of his mum’s countless charity dinners and galas. “Not so much anymore.”

Harry hums and Louis senses solidarity - Louis didn’t ask about the mystery in his own answer so he leaves Louis’s alone too. “Where’s the best place you’ve gone?”

“Ever?”

“Ever.”

Louis inhales and tries to stop the slideshow happening his mind on one particular place instead of the constant montage. “I loved South Africa,” he says finally. “They had the World Cup there when I was eighteen and it was like the air was shaking everywhere we went because of the excitement.”

He can take himself back there so easily when the crowds roared until his ears were ringing, where he ate more corn on the cob than he had before or has since. He remembers the way he felt too - the possibility of the future itching at his fingertips and the way he knew without a doubt he’d be in the World Cup someday. He was the best in his age in all of England - the future was his to grab. He just didn’t realize how shaky his hands would be.

“Did you eat corn on the cob?”

Louis is tugged from his memories like a fish hooked out of water. “What?”

“Corn on the cob,” Harry repeats. “I spent a summer in South Africa a couple of years ago and I ate so much corn on the cob, I had to swear it off at all future barbeques.”

Louis startles himself with his laughter, his eyes opening to look over at Harry and find him smiling to himself with his eyes still closed. “There was a lot of corn on the cob, yes,” Louis says a moment later. He blinks against the fading night and tries to memorize the colors of the sunset. Sunsets and sunrises always make him wish he could paint or draw or take photos on something better than his iPhone. They make him want to hold onto moments rather than wait for them to slip by.

“What about you?” He asks once he remembers how conversations work.

“My favorite place?”

“Your favorite place ever,” Louis confirms. He looks away from the sunset to study Harry as he thinks. His eyes are closed and his fingers twitch where they rest on his stomach but he’s perfectly still otherwise. Louis has the odd sensation of wanting to be able to see whatever is going on in his mind, whatever slideshow of his travels he has going - how much of it is like Louis’s own, what places they’ve both been to already.
"I think Jamaica," Harry says finally. "I was there last year and I remember laying on a surfboard in the middle of a little bay and I couldn’t hear anything besides my breathing and the waves. The water was like, a perfect blue and it melted right into the sky." He starts to open his eyes and Louis looks back toward the sunset quickly before he gets caught staring. "It was like I existed completely alone," he says. "It was perfect."

Louis doesn’t say anything out loud but he nods, hoping Harry will see. He wonders what part of being alone was so perfect - what was wrong with the company he had. He knows he won’t be brave enough to ask.

"How’s my face?" Harry asks once the silence drags on. He tilts his face toward Louis, a smile on his wine stained lips.

Louis thinks he’s as attractive as the day he walked into Niall’s but he doesn’t say that. “Your lip is a little swollen,” he says instead. “And your nose is surprisingly flatter - a bit like Squidward to be honest.” His laughter is met by Harry’s. “But I think you’ll live.”

"Excellent," Harry says, his lips breaking apart in a real smile. “I was worried.”

They both stare at each other for a moment with nothing but the quiet sounds of the waves in the bay, dancing along the shores and retreating again. Louis breaks first. He clears his throat and drains the last remnants of his wine. “I should probably get going,” he says. “I need to finish an article and eat something besides wine for dinner.”

"You’re a writer?" Harry asks even as Louis puts his feet on the ground to stand. “I notice you usually have your computer at No Name.” Harry swallows at his own words, like it’s a mistake to have noticed.

"I am," he says. “Surprisingly, I get a lot done at Niall’s. Not that he’s much help.”

"What do you write about?"

"Sports, mostly," Louis says without elaborating. He can be a sports writer without a reason, he knows this.

"Cool," Harry says as he puts his own feet down and starts to stand. It’s nice not to have to explain his back story for once, Louis thinks. To not have to say why he writes about sports instead of playing.

Louis takes both wine glasses back to the kitchen and Harry follows with the empty bottle of wine. He takes the glasses from Louis and runs water in them and the bottle in the sink before turning off the faucet.

"Sorry we didn’t finish the deck," Louis says as he shuts the back door.

"S’Alright," Harry says. “I think I can handle the rest. Just put the board in and hammer the nails.”

"And definitely don’t use a power drill."

Harry smirks, “Noted.”

This time Harry follows him through the house and to the front hallway where Louis opens the door to leave.

“I had a fun time today,” Harry says. His voice seems somehow quieter and more serious on this side of the house.
lingers and so he fills it. “I had a good time too, for what it’s worth.”

“Good,” Harry repeats back to him. He’s looking at Louis like he wants to add something else but
it never comes. He lets Louis step out onto the porch and then wishes him a goodnight. Louis
looks over his shoulder when he’s on the sidewalk and finds Harry still leaning against the
doorframe, watching him go.

* 

They become friends after that - like a one-way ticket sealed with blood. It turns out it’s rather
hard to see someone’s face bleeding and then to go on living as though they don’t really exist.

Of course, Louis doesn’t really think about it like that until a few days later at No Name when
Harry comes in around the dinner hour the way he usually does. It just makes sense for Louis to
meet his eyes and then nudge his head back toward his own booth as an invite. Harry doesn’t
hesitate to take it, walking over with a small smile aimed at his shoes.

“Sit,” Louis says when it looks like Harry’s not planning to.

“You sure?” Harry twists one of his rings around his finger. “I was planning to eat dinner and that
might be kind of annoying if you’re trying to work.”

His voice trails off and Louis can’t help his stare. He has no idea why someone as considerate as
Harry has been placed on earth at the same time as him but he’s not going to question it.

“You’re right,” Louis says. “Please sit on the other side of the bar so I don’t have to watch you
eat.”

Harry’s eyebrows actually lift like he’s considering it before Louis laughs and shuts his computer.
He can’t show his hand too soon - can’t let Harry know that he’s the first person besides Niall to
make Louis almost soft.

“I have to eat too, you know. It’d be nice to have some company.” He raises his voice to add in
Niall’s direction, “Now if we could just get some service in this place.”

And so, it goes.

Harry comes into Niall’s as often as always and usually sits with Louis even if he’s occupied by
work. Some days Harry is more talkative and others he has a book with him and they share the
quiet before the night crowd rolls into No Name. Niall takes to the inclusion of Harry in his
friendship with Louis like a house on fire. Louis is pretty sure it’s what he was hoping for all
along.

For a week straight, Harry has night shoots for the movie and disappears in the mid-afternoon until
he wakes up the following afternoon. Niall tries to pry it out of him - what the movie is about and
if anyone famous is in it but Harry keeps his mouth shut. Louis tries not to find it attractive the
way Harry tries not to smile when Niall asks, the way his eyes stay lit up and a smile threatens to
burst through his smug attempt at a blank face.

“I can’t tell you anything,” he says, his smile threatening to give him away.

“You told me the title,” Niall says with the edge of sass in his voice.

“The fact it’s called ‘Rogue’ is common knowledge in the industry,” Harry says with a flick of his
hand like a proper film snob.
“What are you doing on a night shoot, though?” Louis asks. “I thought you did admin stuff. Do they need you doing admin at two in the morning?”

Harry blinks slowly and opens his mouth to answer but Niall beats him to it. “He moves people to their marks too,” Niall says. “You need that even if it’s pitch black out.”

“Yeah,” Harry says, albeit lamely.

Louis spares him a lingering glance and then looks at Niall. “My apologies, Mr. Horan, I didn’t realize you were such a film buff.”

“Are you not?” Harry asks, almost too loudly.

“A film buff?”

“Do you watch a lot of movies? Do you have a favorite actor?”

Louis considers the questions with a tilt of his head, as odd as it is. “I don’t keep my finger on the current pulse of cinema, no.” He smiles just slightly, “Are you hiring or something?”

If he had to call it, he’d say Harry relaxes then - it’s something in the way his chest curves in. “I was just wondering,” he says slowly, eyes dipping to the table between them and then back to meet Louis’s. “How much you knew about like, current celebrities.”

“Nothing,” Louis says, proudly. “Don’t bother with people who’ve got money coming out of their noses for some auto-tuned bullshit or memorizing a few lines.”

Harry blinks quickly and Louis is struck again by just how green his eyes are. “It’s more than memorizing lines,” he says with a furrowed brow. “It’s an art, you know. And people, actors, feel the story they’re telling. They can get really invested in it, in the human part of storytelling.”

“Okay, calm down, Tom Hanks,” Louis says with his hands up in front of him. “I’m just talking shit. I really don’t care about stuff like that - regardless of how talented they may be. I’m not interested.”

Harry nods, his lips pressed tight together and Louis has the distinct feeling he’s holding something back.

“Now, if David Beckham walked in here, Louis would bust a fucking nut,” Niall says, laughing over his own words. Harry starts laughing too, a small thing that gets bigger until he’s hiding his face in his hands at Louis’s expense.

Louis raises his eyebrows and nods gamely, “To be fair, that’s quite true.” Like that, whatever tension was in the air is completely gone.

That weekend Louis volunteers to substitute coach a little girls’ football match one Saturday while his friend Stan is out of town. He’s surprised to see Harry and Niall standing on the sidelines with their hands wrapped around cups of coffee once the game starts. Niall waves with his whole body when he catches Louis looking and Harry is subtler with a raise of his cup and a soft smile. It takes more focus than Louis is used to actually focus on the game especially when his mid-fielder sits down in the grass and starts to pick flowers in the middle of the second quarter.

“I liked her the best,” Harry says afterwards when Louis complains about it. The complaint is halfhearted at best because Rosie had been supremely sweet when she presented Louis with the flowers after he yelled at her to get off the field. Yelled nicely, he should say. He probably won’t
tell Stan about the flower incident when he comes back.

“Why’s that?” Niall asks. They’re at a diner by the park - one of the twenty-four hour ones that constantly serves pancakes, which they’ve all ordered. Harry’s came with a smiley face in strawberries and whip cream and Louis accused the waitress of playing favorites.

“Because it’s totally something he would do,” Louis says with a bit of pancake in his mouth. “Look at that man and tell me he wouldn’t pick flowers instead of play an organized sport.”

Niall looks at Harry like he’s considering and then he bursts out laughing. “I could see you doing that now, honestly.”

Harry grins, “What gives it away?”

“Besides the way you let a ball fall flat on your face a couple weeks ago?” Louis raises his eyebrows and Niall cackles. Louis already filled him in on the full debacle with the deck and the football.

Harry smiles. “Yeah, alright. What about you, then?” Harry tilts his head at Louis. “You seem ultra-competitive, why aren’t you bragging about all the trophies you’ve won?”

Niall flat out chokes on his bite of pancake and splutters into his plate but Louis stays perfectly still. He looks at Harry with a slight smile on his face and Harry meets his eyes. He tries to gauge if Harry actually knows something or if it’s an offhand comment. After a moment, decides it’s the latter. He licks his bottom lip and shrugs, “Too many to list, really.”

If Harry catches the hesitation, he doesn’t show it. He focuses more on helping Niall get some water so he can recover from his near death choking experience. Louis doesn’t bring it up again.

Louis finds that most of his time with Harry is spent on his back porch - the way their whole friendship started - like a record on repeat. Louis still walks past Harry’s place on his way home each night and sometimes, on the days he doesn’t see Harry at the bar, he’ll wander up to his front door and see if he’s home. It all feels a bit retro to Louis when he knocks but he doesn’t really think about it when Harry answers.

The very first time he spontaneously came by, Harry seemed shocked and then played a gracious host as he tried to offer Louis everything in his refrigerator before Louis just stopped responding to his offers and just grabbed a beer before heading out to the back porch.

“I’m using you for your sick view, not your homemaking skill,” Louis said over his shoulder.

“And the excellent company?” Harry called, grabbing his bottle of rose and following.

“Questionable,” Louis said drily, though he couldn’t help his smile.

It gets to the point where Harry leaves the door unlocked and Louis comes in once he finishes work. They usually have a beer or drink wine but mostly they talk. More than Louis has talked to one person in his entire life, he’s pretty sure. There’s just something about Harry - it seems these days everything comes back to that ineffable something.

He’s easy to talk to and Louis wants to hear what he has to say too. It’s easy and genuine and never has Louis had a friend like Harry. Though Louis never tells Harry everything, it’s easy to tell him almost anything.

“What are you most afraid of?” Harry asks one night when there’s no one listening besides Louis, the stars and the sea. He does this sometime, asks questions out of nowhere or maybe just as they
come. It caught Louis off guard the first time - when Harry asked what he thought was beyond outer space - lightness or darkness. To be honest, Louis actually laughed when Harry asked until he realized he was serious.

Louis hums to buy himself some time and to let Harry know he’s thinking. The easiest route is saying losing his family but he’s not sure that’s what Harry is after. If they were talking about phobias, he’d have asked when they were with Niall. That’s the things about these nights under the waning sun and then under the stars - they’re just for them.

Louis doesn’t look at Harry when he talks, he usually doesn’t out here. Instead he confesses to the moon and knows Harry hears him too. “I think that I spent a lot of my life knowing, or thinking I knew, exactly what I would be doing by now.” He rubs his lips together and smooths his thumb over the edge of the beer bottle, not sure how much to say. “Growing up kind of changes your mindset,” he skirts the truth this time, “And circumstances, I think.” He feels like he’s not making sense but Harry makes a sound of acknowledgement so Louis keeps going. “I spend a lot of time feeling lost and like I don’t have a purpose. Which is normal at our age but like,” he tilts his head back and forth, “My fear is that I’ll spend my whole life thinking what could have been that I won’t enjoy what’s right in front of me.”

He closes his eyes as soon as he finishes. He’s just opened a can of worms on his own and now he has to wait for Harry to pull off the top - ask him what life he’s missing, prod out the details of what purpose he wants so badly. Louis won’t tell him - of course he won’t. He’s barely told Niall up to this point but still, he waits. It doesn’t come.

“What are you most afraid of?”

Louis opens his eyes and turns his head to look at Harry but he’s not looking back. He has his eyes closed with his face to the sky. He’s not going to press Louis - he’s just asking for a chance to put his bit out there into the night. To let it flit out like a butterfly no one can catch.

Louis settles back and closes his eyes. “What are you most afraid of?”

Harry barely hesitates this time. “That I don’t actually know myself. I consume myself with my work and I have since I was seventeen.” His voice is still like honey but there’s a purpose, Louis has a feeling this has been banging around in his head for more than just tonight. “I’m afraid that I’m defined by my work and not by anything else.”

Louis doesn’t sit quietly as well as Harry did. “So, what are you going to do about it?”

Harry actually laughs. “Hey.”

Louis looks over and smirks at his offended face. “What?”

“You’re not playing fair.”

Louis shrugs and goes back to how he was laying originally.

He doesn’t expect it when Harry answers. “I have a list of things I want to try,” he says. “Like, things I’ve wanted to do but haven’t made time for. I feel like I’ve been trying to keep up appearances with friends and like, the industry, but I don’t know much about myself.”

“What kinds of things?” Louis asks without looking, not sure how many questions he’ll be afforded considering he didn’t give Harry any.

“Really terrible things that will make you laugh,” Harry says and Louis can hear his smile.
“I won’t,” Louis promises with a grin. He’s a dirty liar.

“I ordered a bunch of cookbooks because I’d really like to learn how to actually cook,” he says. “And I want to get into painting even though I’ve never done it. I have a camera I want to use more. I don’t know - I just want to do things I haven’t. Try things outside of my comfort zone, I think.”

“You’re going to think I’m giving you shit,” Louis says. “But I think that’s all really cool. Very admirable.”

Harry rolls his eyes when he glances over but a smile is playing at the corners of his lips. “Yeah, well, I’m an admirable guy in general, so.”

Harry makes good on what he says that night, though; he has miniature quiches cooling on the counter the following week when Louis comes by. He has on an apron that makes it look like he’s wearing swim trunks and a lei so Louis ridicules him about that for a while before admitting the quiche is actually one of the better ones he’s had.

“Mind you, I’ve had like three quiches in my entire life,” Louis says. “So, don’t get a big head.” Harry ducks his face down as Louis grabs another from the tray. He swears his cheeks go pink but he doesn’t say anything.

They don’t always have serious conversations when Louis comes over - they compare favorite books and bands, debate their favorite pick-up lines of all time, argue a bit over ice cream and whether double stuffed Oreos are better than the normal ones. They don’t tend to agree - considering Harry doesn’t eat the frosting on Oreos and weirdly enjoys Peppermint ice cream, both of which blow Louis’ mind.

“I love gummy bears,” Harry says over his own laughter when Louis is glaring at him for the Oreo comment. “Does that help you to like me more?”

“You like gummy bears?”

“Love.”

“I’ve never seen you eat a gummy bear in my life,” Louis says as if they’ve known each other longer than a mere month.

“You haven’t seen my dick either, doesn’t mean it’s not there.”

Louis raises his eyebrows and widens his eyes, “Whoa, there,” he says to keep himself from saying anything else.

“That got a bit out of hand,” Harry says, the tops of cheeks dusting pink in the kitchen light coming outside through the windows.

“A bit,” Louis says with an eye roll. He doesn’t need to occupy himself with thoughts of Harry’s dick while in his presence - that’s just a no. “Back to the gummy bears.”

Harry grins. “I get this thing, with movies I do, I always get kind of obsessed with one thing and eat it all the time. Like a snack.”

“And gummy bears are your current choice?” Louis nods, “Okay I’ll take it. But what’s the craziest snack you’ve been obsessed with?”

Harry purses his lips, thinking. “I shot a movie in France and got particularly into corned beef.”
Louis curls his lip, “Disgusting.”

“Careful, Lou,” Harry says, “Your American is showing.”

Louis gasps and flips Harry off, pressing down on the rolling heat in his stomach at the simple nickname. As if no one has shortened his name to one syllable before. No one as handsome as Harry ever has, that’s for sure.

Louis tells Harry about his siblings at home and how guilty he feels for living so far away. He talks about his job and how he wishes writing would come easier but that he does enjoy it when it does, when words flow from his fingertips. Harry tells Louis how he’s not always happy in his job though he doesn’t quite offer an explanation why. That, Louis has learned, Harry’s job, is a touchy subject.

There’s something sacred about it - the nights they spend on the porch. Louis is ever-curious about Harry and it never seems to get cured even as he gets to know him better.

Harry is loud and open, laughing and teasing so easily - charming to just about everyone - but there’s another side too. The Harry who sits across from Louis reading quietly during the afternoon and the Harry who turns in on himself if he thinks he’s said something offensive, or shared too much. There are times when Harry seems like he wants to tell Louis something, when he swallows and folds his hands like he’s got an announcement but it usually goes as quick as it comes. He’ll make a joke or discuss how he made an accidental charred lasagna the night before and it ended up tasting semi-decent. Louis doesn’t prod him to say more and it’s in a mutual agreement that Harry doesn’t push him either. It’s unspoken but it’s there.

* * *

It’s on one of the nights they spend out on the porch toward the end of June that Louis can tell something is off. It’s nothing serious - he doesn’t think. Harry is just quieter and Louis fills the silence a bit more than usual although he doesn’t mind. Being known as a recluse and working from home has led to a lot of quiet days in the past three years and Louis likes getting to talk to someone again, surprisingly likes listening just as much.

The sun is sinking when Louis’s phone starts ringing and he realizes it’s a phone interview with a Premier League coach he was supposed to have the following morning. With time differences, Louis realizes it is morning for him. “I have to take this,” he tells Harry as he’s already standing. Harry has his eyes closed but nods just the same, otherwise unmoving.

Louis ends up at Harry’s kitchen table scrawling notes on napkins with a purple pen he found by the sink. He doesn’t have his questions prepared but getting a coach on the phone is no easy feat so he makes do with what he has.

Harry wanders in after a while, probably wondering what has happened. Louis tries to pull a face and motion with the phone and his pen but he’s not sure the message is clear. Either way, Harry takes it. He shrugs and goes about washing out their wine glasses and locking the back door. He disappears after that and Louis only has half a mind to wonder if he’s gone to bed. He probably has to work early and wasn’t exactly expecting someone to conduct an interview in his kitchen.

Louis can’t leave, though. He likes Harry, he respects his space but his job - writing about football - is everything he has left of his old life. He won’t let it go for anything and he won’t risk a bad interview because it’s inconvenient. It’s his only thought on the matter before he’s back to furiously taking notes, scanning his brain for highlights from the tapes he watched just this morning.
He hangs up an hour later with his hand completely cramped, his phone on two-percent battery and warm to the touch. He goes back over his notes for another twenty minutes, wanting to fill in any blanks before he goes home to re-type the interview. He’s nothing if not meticulous. Plus, Harry must be well asleep by now so it’s not like Louis is bothering him.

He’s shocked, then, when he goes to leave and finds Harry in the next room curled up in an armchair. He has a blanket over his lap and a book opened on top of it, a dull lamp on the side table casting some light. There’s a candle on the table and it’s doused the entire room in vanilla. Only when Harry shifts to turn the page does Louis see he’s wearing black-framed glasses, the rings ever-present on his fingers cast off somewhere else.

It’s a lot.

Not even in the way that Harry is endlessly attractive to Louis but in how settled he seems. Like he may be his most comfortable in a quiet room with a candle and a book. There’s also the way that Louis has a flash of something bigger - being curled up on the couch while he types his notes and Harry reads. Finishing at the same time and going to bed and… No.

Louis clears his throat to get Harry’s attention so that somehow the train in his mind will get back on track and stop going rogue in all the places it shouldn’t. “I’m done now,” Louis says when Harry looks up. “Sorry about that.”

Harry folds the edge of the page as he closes his book. “It’s alright. Was it an interview?”

Louis nods. “With one of the coaches of a match this weekend. It’s kind of a big deal,” he says. “So, I couldn’t like…not answer.”

Harry smiles, “I’d be quite flattered if you ignored work for little old me but you definitely don’t have to. Plus, I got some reading done.” He sets the book on the side table and stands, the blanket on his lap falling to the floor. “It’s another of the things I want to do while I’m here - read more. So, you’re helping me, really.”

Louis watches as Harry folds the blanket, his black yoga pants hugging his thighs in sinful ways. When Harry’s done folding, Louis clears his throat again because he catches himself staring at Harry’s ass. He definitely needs to get out of Harry’s house - he also needs to get laid - but first things first.

“I should probably head out,” Louis says, “I want to get this typed while I still remember the details.”

“Yeah, of course,” Harry says as he leads Louis to the front door.

For the first time Louis can’t think what to say as he opens the door and they both pause. He’s just been assaulted by a lot of emotional images about seeing Harry reading a book and it’s left his mind blank.

Harry, evidently, has something else on his mind. “I have a question. And this might be asking too much,” he says. He smiles without showing his teeth, his hands slipping into the kangaroo pocket of his sweatshirt. “I was wondering if you’d like to go out with me sometime? Like, on a date properly.”

Louis stays perfectly still and doesn’t let his eyes so much as flinch. He definitely didn’t see this coming and up to this point couldn’t even defiantly say whether Harry was into guys at all. “I think this is a hero-complex thing,” Louis says with a smile. “When people save you from flesh eating viruses so you get attached and ask them out a couple of weeks later.”

Harry smiles slightly and shakes his head, “Don’t think so. I’ve had a bit of a crush on you since
the first day I got here so this has been a long time coming.”

“That’s flattering,” Louis says with a tilt of his head, “But I can’t go out with you.” He looks away and swallows so he misses the initial hit of the words against Harry’s face. When he looks back, Harry is still staring at him, wide green eyes imploring.

“Why not?” He swallows and shifts his weight. “Can I ask?”

Louis’s lips twitch and he’s not sure how to answer. How to say that he has too many problems and too much baggage to let himself be a proper boyfriend - and too much pride to let himself be a half-assed one at that. He shrugs. “Guys like me don’t go out with pretty boys like you,” he says with a smile and he hopes it sounds like an apology.

Harry almost smiles but not quite. He doesn’t chase Louis out of his house, luckily. Just nods and takes one hand out of his pocket to run through his hair. “Don’t know whether to be flattered or offended.”

Louis slips out the front door with another shrug. “Flattered, definitely,” he says. “If I wanted to offend you I would have agreed to go out with you.” He doesn’t give Harry the opportunity to say anything else. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Haz.”

He doesn’t look back over his shoulder as he walks away but he doesn’t hear Harry shut the front door either.

* *

Louis is pretty sure Harry is avoiding him.

It doesn’t take more than a day for him to figure it out when, for the first time, Harry doesn’t show at No Name and he’s not home when Louis walks past afterward - though he does ring the bell twice.

“You heard anything from Harry?” He asks Niall the next afternoon before he’s even started working on his long form piece for the day.

“He came by last night after you left, actually,” Niall says as wipes a cloth along the bar top.

Louis let’s his surprise show through his eyebrows but otherwise stays perfectly still. Malago Cove isn’t that big - he’s pretty sure he would have noticed Harry walking past him last night if their paths crossed.

“He had another one of those night shoot things,” Niall continues, unbothered. “Saw him again this morning actually and he looked exhausted.”

Louis nods. “So he’s alive, then.”

Niall laughs, clueless to Louis’s investigation into whether he’s irreparably broken their friendship after turning Harry down. “Alive and well. Tired, probably.”

“Right.” Louis nods and then remembers his paying job he needs to actually do. “I’m going to go write now,” he says lamely, heading for his usual table.

Louis feels bad, is the thing. Had it been three years ago, he would have been the one to ask Harry out before he even had a chance to introduce himself. He wouldn’t have hesitated. But that’s not him anymore - that guy disappeared the night of the accident, and Louis hasn’t found him since.
He hates that he feels bad, is the other thing. Louis Tomlinson does not worry about whether people like him or whether he’s hurt their feelings. That’s been true since he was a kid, not just since his car was ran off the road. He has a sharp tongue and a tough touch - moves through the world like a bull in a china shop as his coach used to say. He doesn’t concern himself with whether handsome boys don’t want to be his friend anymore or what he’s done wrong. That’s not him. And, yet.

Writing is sluggish and Louis hates the words he puts on the page. He curls his lip when he re-reads his work and then closes his laptop without saving. If the document is still there when he goes to work on it later, he’ll make an attempt at fixing it. Otherwise, he’ll take it as a sign from god and start all over again.

He waves at Niall as he heads out into the street, the sun still high overhead. Louis tugs the straps of his backpack, feeling the weight of his laptop against his back.

He’s considering going to Harry’s when he actually sees Harry walking on the other side of the street. It he’s honest, he doesn’t see Harry first but his shirt - bright blue with palm trees, if he judges correctly. It’s hard to say for sure as Harry ducks into the art shop and disappears. It all happens so quickly and before he can really think it through, Louis is halfway in the middle of the street and bee lining for Bliss Art.

He can’t say he’s been inside many art stores in his life. His writing is his only creative outlet and even that is only an extension of his desire to use his feet instead. He’s happy to find there’s no magic code to get in the store and he steps inside smoothly.

He sets out to find Harry because he can’t think of any other reason to be in Bliss Art at all - not even a fake reason. He walks quickly from aisle to aisle, barely noticing the people pressed close to the shelves as they look at different papers, stamps, sequins, colored pens and pencils. He’s waiting for his eyes to catch again - and when they do he almost trips over himself. Harry’s shirt is all Louis sees for the first moment - deep sea blue with palm trees and ripples of waves he can see clearer now, hanging off of him in contrast to a pair of black jeans hugging his legs in all the best ways.

Louis swoops behind one of the racks of oil pastels like a spy in a movie he’s never wanted to be in. Harry is studying a wall of paint tubes, his pointer finger and thumb tugging on his bottom lip as he looks intently at the colors. There’s a blue basket down by his feet and two large canvases lean up against that. He’s made quick work of the store, clearly. Louis bends his knees to hide further when Harry offhandedly glances in his direction like he can feel Louis watching. He watches in suspense as Harry takes two tubes of blue from the wall and plops them in his basket.

Harry must sense Louis when he starts walking over because he glances up when Louis is barely a few feet away, his eyes going wide and jaw tensing. There’s a brief moment where Louis thinks he may turn and run. By the way Harry’s eyes dart toward the exit beyond Louis’s shoulder, he thinks they may be on the same page.

“Harry, hey,” Louis says in his most casual voice that now sounds a bit choked, if he’s honest. He has no idea what he’s going to say next.

Harry smiles without showing his teeth and tilts his chin down slightly. “Louis, what are you doing here?”

“Are you saying I can’t be in the art store?”

Harry shakes his head, “Of course you can. I just didn’t know you liked art stuff.”
“I do,” Louis lies, and shakes his head. “I don’t. I really don’t but I saw you come in here and I followed.”

Harry raises his eyebrows, “And why would you do that?”

“Because we’re friends, H.” Louis smiles, “I harass all of my friends like this.” Harry kind of laughs but it’s not all there. “And I didn’t see you yesterday, so.”

“You don’t see me every day usually,” Harry says dismissively. He grabs another tube of paint, this time purple, and tosses it unceremoniously into his basket.

“Anyway,” Louis says to pointedly change the subject of his desperate tendencies. “I’m happy to see your bucket list is continuing.”

“Once I master one thing, I have to start another before I get bored.” Harry’s smile is cheeky and Louis can’t help his own smile in response.

“You’re saying you’ve mastered cooking, then? The charred lasagna from last week notwithstanding.”

“Hey,” Harry drawls, “The oven was too hot, that’s not my fault.”

Louis weighs his head back and forth. “Eh, kind of is,” he whispers. He barely ducks in time when Harry swats at him.

“I made blueberry lemon muffins this morning and then like, a simple glaze over the top,” he says with a smile. It draws off to something else when he adds on quieter, “They were really good.”

For the first time, Louis can feel the elephant between them, the tense space of what happened two nights before. Louis just wants it to go away.

“About the other night, Harry -”

Harry shakes his head to cut him off. “Please, don’t say anything. I’m already embarrassed enough as it is.”

Louis feels the words spiral in his chest heavily and he hates it. “Harry-”

“I said don’t,” Harry says quickly over him. “I will literally put my hands over my ears and start screaming. It was a mistake and we don’t need to rehash it.”

“Real mature,” Louis says with an eye roll. “Can you please just listen to me? No screaming. Then I promise we can drop it.” He can’t believe they’re having a conversation like this in the first place. Anyone else and he would have just let their friendship fizzle away without a fight. Anyone else but Harry.

Harry takes a deep breath and let’s it out slowly. “You have thirty seconds before we’re never discussing this again.”

Louis takes it with a smile. “Don’t even need that long. I just want to say, don’t be embarrassed,” he says. “I’m the one who said no, I should be embarrassed to have missed the opportunity to say yes.” Louis did not give those words permission to come out - nothing past the first two sentences was his plan.

Harry licks his lip and half-laughs, an airy little sound like maybe he can see the panic in Louis’s eyes now that he’s stopped speaking. “Is this you changing your mind - or?”
“No,” he says, maybe too quickly. He smiles to soften the edges of it. “I just wanted to tell you I didn’t want what happened to change anything between us. Like, yeah, it’s a bit awkward and now I’m a little embarrassed to be bringing it up but,” he shrugs, “I like you and I like that we’ve kind of become friends.” He bites down on his back molars to make himself stop rambling.

Harry’s lips twitch like he’s trying not to smile. “Kind of become friends.”

“Yes,” Louis repeats. “Pals, buddies, friends.”

“Sure, yeah,” Harry says. “I’m glad too.” He tilts his head to the side and squints. “So, we’re not talking about this anymore, right?”

Louis smirks, “Never again. Promise.”

Harry nods and reaches for a yellow tube of paint. It makes a sharp sound as he drops it in his basket. “Do you have plans for this weekend?”

Louis never has plans. It’s part of the glory of being a bit of a recluse and freelancing an ocean away from the rest of the colleagues. It’s not something he can say out loud so he pauses for a second like he’s actually scrolling through his day book. “Not particularly, no.”

Harry grabs a pink tube from the wall and runs his thumb over the edge. “Niall mentioned something about going to Terps? Or Tulips? Something like that.”

“Terps,” Louis says right away, smiling. “He told you about that.”

“Asked me to come,” Harry says quieter. “On Friday night.”

Louis feels like Harry’s earlier question about his plans for the weekend was a backhanded test to see if Louis would invite him to come along with him and Niall. Louis can’t particularly say he failed it considering he hadn’t remembered Niall’s plans anyway. He shakes his head, “I forgot all about that actually.”

“Are you going?”

Louis squints, wondering how much Niall explained his inane obsession with checking in on other bars in the cove - competitive scouting he calls it. “Yeah, probably. Niall doesn’t like to go alone and it’s always a bit funny to see how worked up he gets over things. You’ll love it for more than the free drinks, I promise.”

Harry smiles and swallows. “So it’s okay if I come too, then?”

Louis’s stomach swoops at Harry’s courteous attempt to not intrude. “Of course,” Louis says, with a huffed laugh. “You can’t possibly miss the chance to see Niall turning red when he sees something No Name can’t afford to have.”

“Cool,” Harry says once and then again. “I’ll be there, then.”

“Good.” Louis tries to bite down on his fond smile but he’s not sure it works. There’s just something about Harry that his stomach in a constant state of swooping. “I’ll let you get back to your paint now. I expect to see a masterpiece by the time you finish it.”

The corner of Harry’s mouth curves up. “Ina Garten in the kitchen, Van Gogh on the canvas -”

Louis pulls a face, “Don’t finish that, please.” Harry laughs and Louis lets it wash over him. “Okay, I’m actually leaving now. See you on Friday if not, before?”
“Right,” Harry says with a nod. He waves the pink tube of paint at Louis before dropping it in his basket. “See you.”

Terps is loud when Louis walks in on Friday night - the music shaking the walls and people pressed shoulder to shoulder. It’s kind of what he hates about the nights Niall decides to see what the rest of the bar scene is up to. Louis likes No Name because it stays quiet for the most part and it’s a chill atmosphere - it’s the reason other people seem to enjoy it as well. Louis watches a girl in a black skirt climb on top of the bar and decides pretty firmly that she would not enjoy the vibe at No Name.

Niall isn’t too hard to spot at a booth near the back. He’s got his arms crossed and a full beer in front of him, his eyes grazing slowly over the crowd. Louis has been to Terps with him once before, when they first opened, but evidently there’s a new bartender Niall wants to investigate.

“You look super creepy staring at everyone like that,” Louis says as he slides into the booth across from Niall. “Heads up.”

“I’m not staring,” Niall says as he tears his eyes away from the girl on top of the table, “I’m observing. Getting the vibe off the crowd.”

“Vibe off the crowd,” Louis repeats drily. “Great.” He slips back out of the booth - unsure why he sat in the first place without a drink in his hand. “I’m getting a pitcher,” he says as he walks away, hoping Niall hears him. He can only stay sober in a place like this for so long.

The crowd converges on Louis as he walks, people swaying into him and drinks spilling at his feet two separate times. By the time he makes it up to the bar, he’s ordering three rounds of shots for Niall, Harry and himself plus the pitcher of beer just to save himself from having to get up again anytime soon. The bartender shoots him an impressed look that he returns with a small smile. He’s working on the being nice to strangers thing.

He scans the bar while he waits, pleasantly surprised when he notices Harry coming through the front door. Harry cuts across the floor with ease, his shoulders curved and head tucked down like he’s hiding. Louis let’s his eyes meander from Harry’s black leather jacket to his black jeans and black boots with silver buckles and then back up to his artfully messy hair as he ducks into the booth with Niall. Louis watches him slide to the very back side even as Niall lights up to greet him. It’s odd, the way he’s just sliced through the crowd. Louis doesn’t think anyone even stopped to look at him or noticed him going through - like he was trying to be invisible. Successful at it as well.

Harry visibly jolts when Louis arrives at the edge of the table with the drinks but when he actually sees that it’s Louis he noticeably calms, running his hand through his hair and giving Louis a sheepish smile. Louis wants to know badly - worse than he has before - what Harry’s deal is. Why he’s so clearly trying to hide in the middle of a bar. Still, he doesn’t ask.

“Oh Christ,” Niall says as Louis slides the tray on the table. “Were they having a fire sale?”

“I don’t like to make more trips than I have to,” Louis says, mostly for Harry’s benefit. He slips in the seat next to Harry with a small smile. “You alright?” He doesn’t know if Harry’s beeline had been intentional or if he’s nervous about Terps but, as is becoming usual, Louis needs him to feel at ease.

“Good, yeah,” Harry says, matching Louis’s smile. Louis can smell his cologne and it’s like a drug he could get high off of - which is slightly concerning considering he doesn’t know what
perfume his own mum wears. Not that Harry is his mum. Whatever.

Niall pours three pints from the pitcher, perfectly avoiding residual foam like the real bartender he is. Louis applauds until Niall flips him off.

Conversation flows as freely as it always does between the three of them even with the last couple days of tension on Harry and Louis’s parts. Louis is comforted by Harry’s voice like a physical motion, the low honeyed drawl something he’s missed the past few days he hasn’t seen him. He loves the way Harry tells stories - long winded and winding like arriving at the ending isn’t exactly the point. If anyone else did it - he’d have tuned out, but there’s something magnetic about the way Harry talks, his slow voice demanding attention along with the way he smiles over his own words.

It’s a lot to take in, really, but Louis copes the best he can by taking his allotted number of shots and drinking a few more glasses of beer. He readily accepts the whiskey sours a random girl buys for all of them and might laugh too hard when Harry winces over the taste of his.

“Not a whiskey boy?” Louis nudges his shoulder with a small smile, Niall flirting with the girl who just bought the drinks. Louis is pretty sure she was just being nice but it’s not stopping Niall’s Irish charm from flowing out freely.

“Prefer wine,” Harry says. He takes another long drink and closes his eyes as he swallows. “Or tequila.”

“We could easily get you tequila,” Louis says, “You don’t have to suffer through the whiskey.” He laughs as Harry pulls another face at his next sip.

“I’m fine,” he says. The corner of his smile quirks up, “I’m trying new things, yeah?”

Louis is about to ask if Harry has started trying out his paints yet when the girl at the edge of the table interrupts them.

“Do you know who you look like?” She squints her eyes at Harry and snaps her fingers quickly, thinking.

Louis feels rather than sees Harry tense up next to him. He half wants to put his hand on his knee to steady him which he wholly blames on the most recent shot he’s just downed.

“No,” Harry says quietly. Louis doesn’t even think the girl hears him.

“No, it’s him,” Louis says loudly, his voice grabbing the girl’s attention as well as Niall who had been watching the exchange with wide eyes. “Except we never went over what you model exactly, Harry.”

Harry unfreezes, the coldness of his green eyes lighting with a sudden warmth. “Feet, actually.”

Harry’s hand tightens around his glass, knuckles going white and his jaw clenching in a tense line. His whole demeanor is sending waves of unease in Louis’s stomach and he wants to make it all go away.

“Ah, who is it?” She bites her lip and squeezes his eyes shut. “Someone super familiar, I know it.”

Harry still looks like a frightened cat as his eyes fall to meet Louis.
Louis snaps his fingers the way the girl just had. “That’s right. A foot model.” He turns to her and licks his lips, “Do you recognize people by their feet? Maybe he can show you his toes to see if it rings a bell?” Louis winks to soften the sass in his voice and the girl rolls her eyes back at him.

“I actually can’t,” Harry says solemnly, dragging Louis’s attention back to him. “I have to sign a contract before I take my shoes off around anyone,” he says with the same level of seriousness. “It’s a liability thing. With the insurance.” He doesn’t crack a smile until the very end and the girl sighs dramatically like it’s the worst thing she’s ever heard.

“Maybe you just look like someone I know,” she dismisses with a stiff smile, turning her attention back to Niall and whatever it is they had been talking about.

As the conversation shifts to a safer topic, Harry gives Louis a thankful smile, and Louis starts to think there’s not a lot he wouldn’t do to make Harry smile. And that is possibly the most concerning statement that has passed through his mind in the entirety of the last month.

Niall is the next to buy shots and then Louis buys tequila sunrises for everyone at Harry’s request and slowly they all three experience a steady decline in coherent conversation. The crowd in the pub swells and slowly starts to dissipate as midnight comes around and leaves, the three of them sipping beer to steady their comedown.

Niall and Harry are having a lively debate over the best Eagles song and watching it is a bit like watching a runaway circus. Louis feels happy for the moment - not worried about anything except the edge of his beer pressing to his lips. He keeps catching Niall looking at him - probably wondering about the soft smile Louis can’t seem to throw away.

For once it’s nice to just be in the current moment without overthinking it. The current moment, of course, is nice enough to include Harry and his loud laugh along with a wave of cologne whenever he shifts that seems more intoxicating than the half empty Tequila Sunrise Louis stopped nursing twenty minutes ago. Louis keeps catching himself studying the side of Harry’s face and the leather jacket he’s chosen to wear, the way his rings catch the light when he twitches his fingers.

“I’m going for a smoke,” he says to both of them though they don’t seem to be paying attention.

“I thought you were quitting,” Niall says, stopping the Eagles conversation abruptly.

“I don’t remember saying that,” Louis says as he gets out of the booth. He stretches his arms over head and curves his back slightly. It makes his shirt ride up on his stomach and he catches the way Harry’s eyes linger on his hip - the edges of the scar he’s probably just seen. Louis drops his arms without returning his gaze. “I’ll be back,” he says to no one in particular turning away to weave his way through to the patio he saw when he first walked in.

There are more gaps to sneak through now and less people spilling drinks, the pleasant end of the night where people are either chatting or sloppily making out in dark corners.

Outside is markedly cooler, though the summertime air of late June still hangs heavy. There are flickering lanterns of lights hanging around the patio and a few quiet tables of couples. Louis finds an empty space of brick wall near the street and leans against it. He pulls a cigarette from the pocket of his jeans, a lighter from the opposite side.

He has been meaning to stop smoking, it’s true. It’s not a habit he ever meant to get a hand on but for some reason after the accident, he wanted to do things to his body he couldn’t do before. Smoking for one, tattoos up and down his arms for another. He’ll work on it, he decides as he wraps his lips around the cool edge. The smoking thing. It’ll be on his to-do list.
He closes his eyes and tips his head back on his first inhale and then draws his chin down as he exhales, his heartbeat slowing now that he’s away from the crowd inside.

When he opens his eyes, it’s to find Harry standing right across from him like a vision, his hands tucked in the pockets of his black jacket, his lips standing out cherry red against his pale skin.

“Fancy seeing you out here,” Louis says to mask the surprise running hot in his blood.

Harry shrugs and takes a step closer. He has a smile that makes Louis a little nervous; something in it is just on the edge of cocky.

“I only carry one cig,” Louis says before he takes another drag. “It’s supposed to help my self control.”

“We can share,” Harry says like Louis has offered.

“Didn’t offer,” Louis says out loud, flicking just the end of his cigarette.

Harry plucks it from his fingers with a bit of a goofy grin, “Didn’t ask.” He places it between his lips and takes a shallow drag like he’s doing it for show, breathes it out in a huff as he offers it back.

“You don’t do that often, do you?” Louis raises his eyebrow and lets the cigarette dangle at the top of his thigh. Harry didn’t cough out but he smokes like he’s afraid of it.

“Was it that obvious?”

Louis smiles and god Harry is getting him somewhere deep in water he’s never been in. Louis is the guy who ridicules someone for pretending to be cool and smoking; he’s not supposed to be the guy who finds it somehow sweet that Harry tried to be cool for a moment there. He thinks he may be losing his grip quicker than he is willing to admit.

“I have a question,” Harry says then, moving to stand right in front of Louis. He’s close - too close maybe. His voice is dustier than it usually is, rough against the night air.

Louis’s eyes drop to his lips and then back up to his eyes. When he takes his next drag, his hand is trembling. “I might have an answer.”

Harry blinks, green eyes laser focused on Louis’s face and it makes him want to squirm away. He holds perfectly still and doesn’t even blink, waiting. “Why won’t you go out with me?”

Louis’s eyebrows raise just slightly as he exhales out the corner of his mouth. After everything, he really didn’t think Harry would bring it up again, maybe the liquor has made him brave. Louis stubs the cigarette on the wall behind him for a moment’s reprieve from having to answer. “We’ve been over this.”

“I see,” Harry says evenly, unaware of the turmoil in Louis’s head. He licks his lip and takes a step closer; the toes of his boots kiss the front of Louis’s trainers. “But I don’t think I agree with you.”

Louis swallows but his voice is broken. “No?”

Harry smirks and Louis can smell whiskey and tequila and summertime but he can also see darkness in Harry’s eyes like he hasn’t seen there before. His lungs stop working he waits for Harry’s next move.
“We’re together almost all of the time,” Harry doesn’t smile as he speaks, his eyebrows pulling together. “You make me feel safe when we’re together, like I can say anything and you won’t judge me. You always make me laugh and even when I’m stressed out I’d rather be with you than alone.”

Louis fish mouths and then bites his lower lip. “Me too,” he says finally. “All of that for me, too.” It may be the most honest thing he’s said yet.

Harry licks his bottom lip and Louis tracks the movement. “On paper, those sound like things people in a couple say.”

Louis swallows, “Or friends.”

“Maybe I should add that I want to kiss you more than I want most things. That I think you have the prettiest blue eyes I’ve ever seen.”

“Harry,” Louis warns, or something. He’s not sure what’s happening now - so used to having the upper hand.

“Go out with me,” Harry says, a smirk playing on his lips. “Nothing has to change.”

“Except?” Louis can hear there’s more Harry wants to add.

“Except maybe then I could kiss you.”

Louis barely inhales when Niall’s voice cracks the night.

“What’s happening out here?” He yells from the doorway of the pub. Harry looks stricken as he paces back from Louis as Niall comes around the corner of the patio. “There you are. Thought you maybe died of smoke inhalation.”

“We’re outdoors,” Louis says dully, not letting his voice betray his racing heart. “It’s not possible.”

“People die in forest fires all the time,” Niall says wisely. “They’re outside.”

Louis shakes his head, “We’re not doing this.”

Niall shrugs, “Fine. But we are doing Torpedo shots so you both better come in here.”

“Okay, we’re coming,” Louis says with a pasted-on smile, starting to follow after Niall’s retreating figure. He pauses to look over his shoulder at Harry - Harry who looks like he’s just been near a bomb detonation with his hair sticking up and his cheeks flushed, his hands knotted together in front of him like a trick gone wrong. “You coming?” He says softly, just for them.

Harry meets his eyes and Louis sees something else in them now. Something he can’t understand, can’t read quite right. “I’m coming,” Harry says, just as quiet.

Louis nods and turns back to the bar; he knows without looking that Harry follows.

* 

Louis is dying. He takes that back - death would be sweeter than this, he thinks, as he climbs up his back steps and lets himself into his house. Running with a hangover was not his finest idea by a long shot. In his mind, the fresh air was supposed to do him good but after he threw up into an oncoming wave he took that thought immediately back. He swears his sweat is pure alcohol and
that his head is being hammered on by tiny little men with anvils who are out to get him. Or that’s what it feels like at least.

He needs to shower and get back in bed, he thinks as he slides his back door shut. He needs to not wake up for the next eighteen hours or however long it takes his body to pay for his sin of drinking half the alcohol at Terps and staring at Harry all night. Eighteen hours sounds about right.

The doorbell ringing right then is about the equivalent of a shot being fired and Louisreacts accordingly, covering his face and groaning loudly. He’s planning to ignore it as he heads for the stairs and then it rings through the house again and he knows he’s got to answer it. Mostly so he can tell whoever it is to fuck off but also because if they ring the bell again it will be the nail in his hungover coffin.

There are three more knocks before he gets his hand on the door knob and he’s hoping the world is actually on fire outside and someone wants to rescue his miserable ass because he’s not too sure what his reaction to anything more mundane will be. He doesn’t really get a chance to find out because when he opens the door, Harry is standing there. Harry who makes everything in Louis pause all at once with one look - something that definitely needs to stop happening.

He’s in his grey donut sweatshirt with his black shorts and he looks adorably hungover as well, if the puffiness under his eyes is anything to go by. His dry lips seem to crack over his sheepish smile at Louis’ gruff, “What are you doing here?” Harry makes him want to respond more eloquently but the tiny men with the anvils in his head will have no such thing.

To be completely honest, Louis had kind of expected a couple days of radio silence from Harry considering how last night had ended on the patio. Maybe Harry is getting stronger with each rejection, like the Hulk, and somehow Louis is only getting weaker. Doesn’t quite seem fair like that.

Harry lifts his hands, two cups of coffee held in one and a brown paper bag in the other. “I was feeling miserable about my life so I bought coffee and a couple of pastries and thought maybe you’d like to share?”

Harry may very well be the love of Louis’s life but he’s definitely not going to say that out loud. Instead he says, “Well, if you’re sharing, come on in.”

He pretends not to notice how Harry’s smile widens as he steps over the threshold. Harry takes his shoes off by stepping on the backs and leaves them by the door, forging his own path toward Louis’s kitchen. Louis is two steps behind - mostly in shock because he rarely takes his shoes off in his own home, let alone does he expect other people to.

Harry sets the coffee and pastries on the granite island and then takes a seat at one of the tall bar stools. Louis almost joins him and then stops himself - it feels like too serious all of a sudden.

“Let’s eat in the den,” he says, reaching for both of the coffees. “Watch something on TV.”

If Harry is disappointed by the change in location, he doesn’t let on. There’s just something that made his stomach flip to see Harry move around his space so comfortably, like he belongs. There’s also the fact he doesn’t think he can hold his body up any longer without throwing up so collapsing into the couch is as good idea as any.

Louis puts Harry’s coffee on the table and melts back into the corner of the couch with his. He takes a sip and lets it burn his tongue knowing the healing power of caffeine is headed straight for his veins. Hopefully.
“What’s in the bag?” Louis asks as Harry opens it.

“A few different things - cinnamon roll, ham and cheese croissant, maple bar, a danish.” He glances at Louis and looks away quickly, “Wasn’t sure what you liked.”

Louis’s stomach does the thing again. “Me?” He shakes his head, “What do you like best out of all of that?”

Harry peers into the bag, considering, and it’s a sweeter scene than should be allowed. Louis reaches for the television remote for something to do.

“I think the cinnamon roll,” Harry says finally as the television click on.

“Great,” Louis says. “Otherwise you would have had to fight me for the croissant.”

Harry laughs as he reaches into the bag and then stops. “I forgot napkins. Do you have some?”

“This isn’t a fancy restaurant, H,” Louis says with raised eyebrows. “You can get crumbs on the couch.”

It doesn’t sway Harry though, he’s already up off the couch and out of the room in the direction of the kitchen again before Louis is even done speaking. Louis takes the chance to take a deep breath and click through the channels until he comes on an old episode of Friends and tosses the controller down. After what happened last night, how close he got to folding into Harry, he needs to get it under control.

They’re friends. He made sure it’s all they could be and drew it out in black and white. Friends don’t get flustered over pastries and coffees. He’ll remind himself as many times as necessary until he starts to believe it.

Once he’s back with the napkins, Harry carefully puts the croissant on one before handing it to Louis and then taking the cinnamon roll for himself and settling back into his corner of the couch, opposite of Louis.

The croissant is buttery and flaky - feels a bit like an orgasm on Louis’s tongue, not that he’d ever tell Harry that. Harry and orgasms can’t be in the same thought, it’s not healthy.

“Last night was fun,” Harry says just before he takes a bite of the edge of his cinnamon roll. “I haven’t gotten that drunk in a long time.”

Louis smirks and swallows his own bite of croissant. “Why not? Too mature for binge drinking?”

Harry rubs his lips together and shrugs. “I just haven’t had a reason to, I guess.”

“And last night’s reason was?” Louis asks, wondering what made last night good enough to get drunk for someone who doesn’t make it a habit.

“New friends, I guess,” Harry says quietly. He takes another bite of his pastry, tongue first and Louis has to look away.

They watch a couple episodes in mostly silence, wayward comments interrupting every once in a while. Louis tells Harry the croissant has brought him back to life and Harry’s cheeks turn pink, which Louis quite enjoys. They end up splitting the danish - a blackberry one - and that kind of saves Louis’s life too.

Even in the pain of his hangover, Louis finds it as easy as always to be with Harry. Something
about him settles everything in Louis - and he notices it so often, it’s starting to become something he waits for. He knows when Harry’s around, he’ll feel at ease. A drug without trying.

The only flaw, really, would be that the entire time Harry is sitting there Louis keeps imagining what his mouth would taste like to kiss - if blackberry danish and cinnamon would become his favorite flavor combination. Louis keeps going back to what Harry said the night before - about wanting to kiss him.

If only Harry knew how badly Louis wants to taste his lips too, to learn everything about him inside and out. The scariest thought is that he thinks he could really fall for Harry if he gave himself the chance. Everything over the last few weeks has proved that to him. And that, that, is why he has to be so careful to hold himself back.

“What are you doing Tuesday?” Harry asks, effectively pulling Louis from his thoughts.

Louis blinks dumbly. “Tuesday? What’s Tuesday?” He barely keeps track of the days as it is - unless he’s on deadline of course.

“July fourth, is all,” Harry says with a shrug.

“Fourth of July,” Louis repeats, his eyes widening as he puts the week together in his mind. “That’s Niall’s favorite adopted holiday.”

Harry smiles, “Is it really?”

“Oh yeah,” Louis says. “He turns the bar into a red, white, and blue hell complete with a star-spangled carpet and a firework show on the beach.”

“Niall’s Irish, right?”

“Fully.” Louis grins, “But he loves a good celebration.”

Harry scrunches his lips. “I could see that.”

“You ever been in America for the fourth?”

Harry nods easily, “Usually in LA, actually.”

“LA?” Louis whistles lowly. “Big movie star in Hollywood, eh?”

Harry flinches but he laughs, “Just have some friends there.” Louis doesn’t miss the darkening pink on high on his cheeks.

“Fair enough. You want to slum below your status and come to Niall’s? Tickets sell out like months in advance but we get special perks.”

“Tickets?” Harry’s eyes go wide.

“Tickets,” Louis confirms with a nod. “All you can eat barbecue and booze.”

“And blaze,” Harry says, eyes shining. “With the fireworks.”

Louis groans and looks away. He still can’t figure out why he likes Harry so much especially when he’s this embarrassing on a normal basis. “So, you’ll come then?” Louis knows it’s nothing special to invite Harry - Niall would have done it anyway.

“The movie isn’t shooting for the week,” Harry says. “So, yes. Definitely.”
Louis tugs his knees up on the couch and rests his head along the back as Friends comes back on. Friends marathons on Saturdays are the saving grace for hangovers he thinks. He’s about to tell Harry so but when he glances up Harry is already asleep, his head on his hand and the coffee held limply in his laugh.

If it were Niall, Louis wouldn’t miss the opportunity to wake him up brutally - with something loud or gross. But it’s not. It’s Harry. And that makes Louis want to get him a blanket more than anything. He doesn’t know what the fuck he’s supposed to do with a feeling like that.

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No Name stands apart from the rest of the restaurants and bars on Tuesday night - going against its own standard method of operation of blending in every other day of the year. There’s a balloon arch over the entire building and the classic star spangled red carpet leading toward the back porch. People are already lining up out front and being let in by an intimidating looking guy Louis hasn’t seen before. The sun has begun to sink and a cool warmth has settled, the sea breeze keeping it from being muggy. It smells like charcoal barbecues and there’s the whizzbang of a firework from around the cove every once in a while.

Louis is eyeing it all from the safety of the sidewalk, mentally preparing himself for the mayhem when Niall pops out of the side door and waves at him.

“How does it look?” He yells with a wide grin, ducking around a group of girls in red and white striped dresses.

“Like freedom threw up all over it,” Louis says back as drily as possible though he can’t hide his smile very well. “You’ve out done yourself,” he says once he’s closer and can truly inspect the red carpet with white stars.

Niall has a white polo shirt with a small American flag pin on the collar and he still beams at Louis. “I love America,” he says proudly. “And this night makes us more money than the rest of July combined.”

“Ah, there it is,” Louis says, knowingly. “Dirty capitalism infringing on the purity of the holiday.”

Niall rolls his eyes, “As if I’m the only one. Go on in the back and check it out. The cove is looking gorgeous, if I do say so myself.”

“No different than any other day, then.” Louis ducks when Niall tries to hit him, “I’m being serious,” he says as he runs toward the side entrance.

“Go have a beer and try not to be insufferable,” Niall calls after him. Louis lifts his middle finger in the air and hopes he sees it.

The back porch of the bar is set up mostly the same way it always is but each table has been replaced with a high top and a centerpiece of flags and red flowers. The bar is stocked with Jell-O shooters done in the same patriotic fashion. There’s a line of kegs along the bar and red and blue solo cups in neat stacks. There’s a DJ in the corner, tucked out of the way - and speakers dotting the edges of the wide patio. Most people are pressed up against the railing overlooking the beach and tide while others huddle around tables eating. Louis counts at least three barbecues and two long buffet tables of food that are enough to get his stomach to gurgle. When he sees the corn on the cob, he thinks of Harry. He’s excited for Harry to see the spread - to see what Niall will do in the name of a good crowd.

Louis gets himself a beer and barely turns from the keg when he sees Niall directing the setup of
three beer pong tables along the far side. It reminds Louis a lot of uni - though he was usually on the fray at parties like this. He preferred quieter nights to get ready for early morning training. He used to complain about it - leaving parties early and sober to wake up with the sun. He’d take all of those complaints back now for the chance to be playing still. He takes a sip of his beer to drown the thought.

Niall is glowing as the music gets turned up slightly louder, a busier crowd pushing outside from the inner room of the bar. “I love this night,” Niall says with a grin, getting beer from the keg.

“Where’s Harry?”

Louis shrugs. He should have stopped at Harry’s and brought him over earlier in the afternoon. Hindsight.

“Speak of the devil,” Niall says suddenly. “Here he comes, a vision in white.” He whistles as Harry steps up onto the porch and Louis rolls his eyes, pretending he doesn’t check Harry out just the same. He has on a flowing white shirt halfway unbuttoned and black jeans, his hair pushed back from his face with a pair of sunglasses.

Harry smiles when he sees them, coming right over. “This place is packed. I’ve never seen so many people here at once.” He barely dodges out of the way as Niall flicks his arm.

“I told you it was a big deal,” Louis says. He tries not to notice how Harry wedges himself between Louis and the wall of the bar, not letting himself be out in the open.

“I believed you,” Harry says, the corner of his mouth quirking up. “Kind of.”

“Well, enjoy it,” Niall says finishing his beer. “I, on the other hand, need to make sure the fire department gets our waiver in for the fireworks. They’re always late.” He walks away without further explanation, looking a lot like a man on a mission.

“Let’s get you a beer,” Louis says once Niall has gone. “And then let’s eat. I can only stare at food for so long while resisting.”

Harry smiles and gestures at Louis to lead the way to the kegs. After, they heap paper plates with piles of barbecue - short ribs and chicken, fries, and pasta salad. Harry picks out miniature cupcakes with thick frosting, inspecting the tray for the best ones for a full minute. Louis notices a girl staring at Harry with narrowed eyes and then tilting her head as if to get a better look at him. Louis can’t explain why but he automatically steps closer to Harry, blocking her view. She meets his eyes and immediately her cheeks turn red before she whispers something to her friend and they dodge away from the food table.

“I think I got the best ones,” Harry says when he looks up, a smile dancing on his mouth. “Not too much frosting hopefully.”

“Excellent,” Louis says, nudging him toward an empty table he’d spotted earlier. Harry goes willingly, clearly oblivious to the curious girl from the buffet.

The table is close to the back edge of the railing overlooking the cove and Louis let’s Harry take the backside, hidden away from the rest of the crowd again. It feels automatic now, to let Harry be the one hidden, and Louis doesn’t know why. He knows it’s automatic because they’ve done it a lot but he doesn’t know why it’s necessary in the first place. He’ll let Harry tell him, he thinks. Whenever he’s ready to explain.

“Did you start painting yet?” Louis asks as they start eating. In their corner it somehow seems quieter, the speakers blaring music pointed in the other direction.
“I did,” Harry says. He thumbs over some barbecue sauce on his bottom lip. “This morning, actually.”

“Just in your house?” Louis asks. He has no shame in his short rib eating, his hands sticky with sauce already.

“I’ve been doing it on the back porch,” Harry says. “I got the canvas all set up with the easel and everything.”

“And?” Louis waves one hand in the air, prompting. “Are you Monet reincarnated?”

Harry laughs, loud and bursting. It’s Louis’s favorite of Harry’s laughter, if he had to pick. “No, I don’t think so. I wasn’t sure what to paint for the longest time. I just started dabbing paint colors eventually.”

“Impressionism,” Louis says knowingly. “That’s hard to master, or so I’ve heard.”

Harry smiles, “You always do that.”

“What?”

“You never make me feel stupid about things.” He shakes his head, “That doesn’t make sense. Just, whenever I tell you something and even if you make a joke, I know you’re not actually being mean. You make me feel like what I’m saying is important. Even if it’s definitely not.”

Louis thinks he hears his blood rushing in his ears at the compliment. He’s never been told something like that to his face. “Of course it is,” Louis says. “I hope there aren’t a lot of people who are mean to you, by the way. I better not be the exception.” He hears the warning in his voice but he doesn’t think Harry does.

“You’d be surprised,” Harry says. He takes a bite of chicken and looks out over the water. The way he says it, so unbothered, makes Louis want to shake him. Shake him until all of his secrets spill - the reasons he hides, who has made him feel like he’s not important, when he lost himself, how he decided he needed to be found.

“Can I see it?” Louis asks. “The painting.”

Harry shakes his head right away. “No way. Not until I get something worth showing, at least.”

Louis whistles lowly, “Oh look at you. So sure you’re going to make something worth showing.”

Harry laughs, his eyes crinkling. “Something better than rainbow blobs, okay?”

Louis tilts his head back and forth, weighing. “Fine. I’ll wait. I’ll have you know I’m not very patient.”

Harry licks his bottom lip. “Lucky for you, I am. Patient and resilient.”

Louis gets the odd feeling Harry is talking about something more than the paintings but then he sees Niall ducking through the crowd and heading right for them.

“How’d it go with the fire people?” Harry asks when Niall is close enough.

“We’re good to go,” he says. “Just sent Matt and Henry down to the launch zone to get ready.”

“Launch zone?” Harry sounds impressed and Louis rolls his eyes. Niall always has a flare for
dramatics when it comes to his parties. He starts explaining the preparation of the launch zone and pointing Harry’s gaze in the right direction, voice animated and excited.

The sun has dipped low enough to nearly disappear but there’s still faint lights in the sky. Louis would venture they have another hour before fireworks start. He slips away from Niall and Harry quietly, going back to the bar for an armful of Jell-O shots before returning.

“Save some for the paying guests,” Niall says when Louis returns, his excitement from explaining the launch spot declining rapidly.

Louis hands Niall one with a sweet smile. “Take this. And then a few more. You’re a bit grumpy.”

Niall glowers at him but doesn’t drop his eye contact as he slips the lid from the plastic container and slides the shot into his mouth. He gags as he swallows. “It’s really strong,” he says with a pulled-up lip. “Not so tasty this year.” Someone yells his name from across the patio and Niall is gone again, leaving Harry and Louis to only each other.

“On that note,” Louis smiles, “Would you like some Jell-O?” He pushes the pile of plastic containers toward the center of the table as Harry wipes his mouth with a napkin.

“Can’t really say no, can I?” Harry smirks. “Considering you stole them from the paying customers.”

Louis rolls his eyes, “Just for that, you’re going to do an extra.”

They do the first one together and Niall is right - it’s strong enough to actually taste like vodka and there’s a pleasant burn in Louis’s throat once he’s done. Harry doesn’t seem to enjoy the pleasant burn and gags slightly instead. On the next shot though, Louis has to stop as he watches Harry.

“What are you doing?” He asks incredulously, staring at Harry’s tongue lying flat as he holds the shot up.

“What?” Harry lowers the plastic cup slightly and closes his mouth. “What am I doing where?”

“With your tongue.”

Harry blinks and pulls his eyebrows together. “What about my tongue?”

Louis’s eyes bulge. “Are you kidding?” He gestures at Harry’s face, “You were sticking your tongue out as you took the shot. That’s why you don’t like it. You’re tasting it too much.”

“What’s wrong with my tongue?”

Louis can’t help his laugh. “I can’t believe you don’t know. Go on and take it, I’ll show you.”

“I can’t,” Harry says. “You’re making me self-conscious.”

Louis rolls his eyes. “I’m not asking you to piss in a cup. Just take the damn shot.”

Harry’s eyes go wide. “I hope you don’t ask me to pee in cup at a party ever.”

Louis can’t help his laugh though he tries to sound menacing when he says, “Take the shot, H.”

Harry pauses and then slowly lifts it to his mouth. Again, his lips part and his tongue slips out. Louis points obnoxiously. “That.”
“What?” Harry puts the shot down again. “I don’t get it.”

“You’re supposed to just put it in your mouth and swallow. It doesn’t go on your tongue,” Louis says. “You’re not a dog.”

Harry stares at him like he’s growing a second head. “What are you on about?”

Louis groans and picks up a shot from the table. He runs his finger in the rim to loosen the sides and then drops it in his mouth seamlessly, swallowing when he closes his mouth.

Harry blinks a couple of times. “What’d I miss?”

Louis takes a step around the table and closer to Harry. He takes the shot from his hand and makes sure the Jell-O is loose. “Open your mouth.”

Harry stares, blinking slowly before he does it. His plush lips part and Louis almost aborts the mission altogether. He should not be so close to Harry when he looks the way he does, opening his mouth at the slightest suggestion.

“Okay, tip your head back.”

Harry does, slightly, his eyes never leaving Louis.

Louis licks his bottom lip, his stomach shaking for reasons he can’t explain. He lifts the plastic cup to Harry’s mouth, barely managing to not spit through his laughter when Harry sticks his tongue out.

“No,” Louis says, smiling. “Put that back.”

Harry smiles and then readjusts his mouth, his tongue slipping back inside his lips.

Louis presses the edge of the cup to Harry’s bottom lip and tips it, using his finger to push the Jell-O where it sticks. He watches, mesmerized, as the red blob slips between Harry’s lips and into his mouth. He sets the cup back on the table and then stares at Harry - who definitely should have swallowed the shot by now.

“Oh my god,” Louis says, “Swallow it. Don’t let it melt in your mouth.”

Harry tilts his head back to normal, his eyes panicking as he shakes his head.

“What?” Louis can’t help his laugh. “Just swallow.”

Harry makes a pitiful noise and then he chews the shot three times before swallowing, his face contorting under the taste. He grabs the last piece of chicken from Louis’s plate and throws it in his mouth, chewing rapidly with his eyes squeezed shut. Louis barely holds himself up on the table, laughing so hard his eyes water.

“You are helpless,” he says when he catches his breath.

Harry licks his lips. “Well. That was awful.”

“Understatement,” Louis intones. He takes another shot from the middle of the table and downs it smoothly. “I didn’t know how important your tongue was to your technique.”

“I panicked,” Harry says.

“Clearly,” Louis says drily, setting his empty shot cup down.
“I’m going to take another one,” Harry says. “And I’m doing it my way.” Louis motions him ahead, not about to repeat what happened moments earlier. He can’t help but giggle as Harry takes the last shot, tongue and all. Harry’s cheeks are pink when he finishes and it only makes his lips look darker - even prettier according to Louis.

Niall climbs on the table near the bar and gives a warning for the firework show and then people are converging on the porch, pressing out of the bar and the front patio to the back like a stampede. Louis and Harry end up pressed next to the railing in the commotion, people behind and to their sides, the music getting louder as everyone edges for the best view.

Louis’s side is pressed to Harry’s and he can feel how tense he is, the line of his jaw giving him away as well. “You okay?” Louis asks as quietly as he can.

“I’m fine,” Harry says tightly, his face angled down. Louis looks behind him and notices they’re getting some stray looks from the people near them - some people twisting around Louis to see Harry.

Louis knows Harry is pretty - it’s widely accepted at this point, he thinks. He’s not sure it’s enough for people to stare so blatantly, to study him like he’s in a zoo. It makes something warm twist in Louis’s throat. He wants to ask who Harry is - what he’s done to make himself known like this, known to everyone but Louis. Instead, he says, “I think we can see better on the beach. Come with me?”

He feels Harry’s tension release like an exhale when he nods, “Please.”

Louis thanks whoever is in charge of the sky that he knows No Name like the back of his hand as he grabs Harry’s wrist and pulls him further to the side, slipping under the railing to the ladder leading down onto the beach. Louis takes it first, without speaking, and he finds Harry right behind him, long legs getting stuck on the bars and then straightening until he gets to the bottom. Louis’s heart is racing in his chest, feeling like they’ve just made a getaway, when Harry smiles.

“I don’t really like crowds,” he says.

Louis knows, not for the first time, Harry isn’t telling the truth. “Like I said, the view on the beach is better anyway.”

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Harry stares at him and it’s quiet for a beat, the loud voices from the porch above smothered by the pulsing beat of the music. “Okay,” he says. “Thanks,” he adds, quieter and Louis nods. Harry isn’t telling him the truth - he’s known for a while now, he thinks - but he trusts Louis to get him out of situations he doesn’t want to be in. That kind of feels like everything Louis could ask for.

They take their shoes off and head out onto the beach, skirting the edge of the water and away from the other groups of people who’ve had the same idea. Near an abandoned pier it’s most empty and that’s where Louis chooses to stop, plopping unceremoniously in the sand. Some of the sand kicks up under the edge of his jeans but he’s not bothered, especially when Harry joins him, kicking his long legs out in front of him with a smile.

“This is like a front row seat,” he says.

Louis stares for too long and then he matches his smile and stares back over the water. “Only the best,” he says. Louis presses his fingers further into the sand where it has cooled along with the waning daylight.

“It’s so peaceful,” Harry says, eyes fixed on the water. The waves dance in small swirls on low tide, a glossy finish over them now that the sun has all but disappeared.
“Probably won’t say that when the fireworks start,” Louis notes with a smirk. “Opposite of peaceful, honestly.” He catches Harry rolling his eyes out of the corner of his gaze.

“Right now, in this moment,” Harry drawls, “I feel very peaceful.”

“Good,” Louis says. “Everyone deserves a bit of peace every now and then.”

“Yeah?” Harry looks over and Louis glances at him before focusing on the ocean.

“Yeah. Why is that weird?”

“No.” Harry shifts in the sand. “Where are you most at peace? I’m curious.”

Before everything that has happened, it would be such an easy answer it’s laughable. Running down the pitch with a ball between his feet - no hesitation. He can’t say that anymore. It’s not peaceful the way it once was; in fact, now it sends a flutter of nerves through his stomach at the thought of playing in a game, all the ways he could break that he didn’t think about before.

“Did I stump you?” Harry asks, voice light but his eyes searching Louis’s face.

“Not yet,” Louis says stubbornly. “I’m still thinking.” He tries to picture it - the moment his heart slows to the rate of comfort and nothing seems like too much. The answer dances around the edges of his mind like a fog before it finally lands. “When I’m writing, I guess,” he lies. Right here with you is the truth he doesn’t say out loud.

Harry flinches at the first pop of the fireworks over the water. Flinch isn’t even an adequate description for the way he pulls his knees to his chest and ducks his head between them. Louis can’t stifle his laughter this time even as Harry straightens out his limbs again and adjusts the sunglasses on his head nonchalantly.

“That didn’t just happen,” he says, his cheeks dusting pink under the glow of the next firework.

“That completely happened,” Louis says, not bothering to hide the glee in his voice.

Harry smirks, “You know, this Fourth of July thing isn’t really working out for me. Between the Jell-O shots and the bombs in the air.” He flinches again as the next firework crackles against the sky - the scattered groups around them making exaggerated “Ah,” sounds.

“I’m here, though,” Louis says with a grin. He pulls his knees up and tucks his toes in the sand. “That has to be worth something, doesn’t it?”

He tries his very best to ignore every butterfly in his stomach when Harry gives him a soft slow smile and says, “Something, yeah.”

The fireworks go on for longer than they really need to, according to Louis. They’re pretty against the dark sky and when three go off all at once it does fill the sky like stars. But there’s only so long he can watch it before it gets rather boring. He does find ways to occupy the time by sneaking glances at Harry, the way the different colored lights shine off his face before casting him in shadows again. After the first few loud instances of fireworks, Harry seemed to calm relatively quickly - eyes cast upward and a soft smirk on his lips.

“Should we head back to No Name?” Harry asks once the show has finished and the families around them start to dissipate back away from the water.

“Eh.” Louis shrugs a shoulder, “It’s usually packed and sloppy by now. Do you want to risk it?”
Harry laughs. “Not particularly, no."

“Should we stay here for a bit?” Louis asks hoping Harry will say yes.

“That sounds good,” Harry says, pointing his toes out in front of him.

They stay quiet for a moment or so, eyes cast out over the water, smoke starting to thin in the sky.

“Hey Harry,” Louis asks when he’s brave enough, heart thudding in his ears.

“Yeah?”

Louis licks his bottom lip. He knows he can ask Harry anything but he’s not so sure about his next question. “It seems like people look at you a lot,” he says and it’s as dumb out loud as it was in his head. “Like maybe they know you from somewhere.”

He doesn’t look away from the water, his body stays frozen as he waits for Harry to respond.

“I know,” is what he comes up with finally. Louis is about to press him for more when Harry gives it to him on his own. “I’m not actually a PA on Rogue.”

Louis glances over at him, “What are you?”

Harry looks right at Louis then, their eyes meeting. “An actor.”

Louis nods. “Okay.” The first thing that flashes in his mind is the day at No Name when Harry grilled him over the serious art of acting. Maybe he should have known then.

“Okay?”

Louis shrugs, “I mean, congratulations?” He raises an eyebrow and Harry cracks a smile for the first time in a few minutes.

“You’re not mad I lied to you?”

“Not really,” Louis says. “You still work on the movie and stuff. A bunch of girls clearly are harboring crushes on you.”

Harry smirks, “They’re probably just confused.”

“Why didn’t you tell us before? That you’re actually in the movie?”

Harry shrugs this time. “I kind of wanted to be nobody here. I liked that you didn’t know who I am.”

“Still don’t, love.” Louis scrunches his nose, “I don’t recognize you from any films or anything.”

“Ouch.”

Louis laughs, “Should I? Are you a big-time movie star? Should I get your autograph?”

Harry’s laugh matches Louis. “No, no, definitely not. Nothing like that.”

“Would I recognize you from anything?” Louis asks, smiling slightly.

“Don’t think so,” Harry says but as his eyes cast off toward the ocean again.
Louis doesn’t think he’s telling the whole truth yet - if he was a no name actor, there wouldn’t be so many curious gazes. Harry definitely wouldn’t try to hide in plain sight. Even Louis is smart enough to recognize that.

“Did you know there’s such a thing as a Vampire Squid?”

Louis blinks at the abrupt change of subject, mind going absolutely blank. “I didn’t.” he says when he gets his bearings. “But thank you for the informational tidbit there.” If Harry wants to talk about something else, Louis will be the first to oblige him. “Did you know there’s a Vampire Bird native to the Galapagos Islands?”

“Is there really?” Harry asks with wide eyes before launching into his next weird animal comparison.

They exhaust the topic sooner rather than later and Louis suggests they head back towards their houses, offering to show Harry the route that keeps them most off the main roads.

The water acts as a reflecting glass for the moon giving off just another light they can guide their way down the beach. There’s the effervescent crackle of fireworks every once in a while, but nothing in comparison to the show Niall has put on. Louis smiles to himself at the thought - Niall must be thrilled. That, or still running around the bar trying to make sure everyone is having the best night possible.

As usual, walking with Harry is pure comfort. They don’t have to talk about anything in particular and there’s no timeline to beat as they curve along in the sand.

“I have a question,” Harry says as they get closer to the stairs leading up to the main stretch of houses.

“I’ve heard this before,” Louis says drily, toe of his shoe flicking up a bit of sand. He bumps Harry’s hip gently to make him walk closer to the water, the firmer ground.

Harry laughs. “You'll have heard this next part before, too.”

Louis shakes his head, “You don’t give up easily, do you? Is this what you meant at dinner earlier? You’re persistent?”

Harry’s smile is clearly pleased even if he aims at his toes. Louis tries to hide his own smile as he looks up to the sky.

“I’m not going to apologize,” Harry says. “Just tell me, what would it take for you to change your mind?”

“Ask me again,” Louis says, eyes still cast upward. “Go for it.”

Harry stops walking and Louis pauses like Harry is an anchor. He finally brings his eyes back to a level stare with Harry’s and half smiles. “Go on.”

He sees the confusion flicker over Harry’s face as the smile melts - probably wondering if Louis is backing him into some sort of humiliating trap. Louis swallows and shifts his weight on his feet. If only Harry knew that he’s the one who trapped Louis - weeks ago as it is.

Harry’s fingers tap on the sides of his thighs, his rings glinting in the moonlight. “Will you go out with me?”

Louis lets the words hang like a firework and then longer to let them disintegrate into smoke.
Harry looks deadly serious, his lips tight and eyes trained on Louis’s, the light breeze barely ruffling the top of his hair.

Louis rolls his lips together, studying Harry’s face. As if he doesn’t know what he’s going to say. As if the last few weeks haven’t felt like the slowest roll to this moment - the inevitability so thick only now can he taste it. “Sure,” is what he says. “You seem pretty desperate for it.” He winks. “Least I could do.”

He laughs at the way Harry’s face morphs to appalled, his mouth dropping open. Louis starts walking again and Harry isn’t slow to follow. “I hate you,” Harry says. “I really think I do.”

“You want to take me out and you hate me?” Louis’s eyebrows curve up. “Not sure that’s a good game plan.”

Harry is quiet and Louis has to look over to make sure he’s still there. “Did you mean it? You’ll go out with me?”

Louis stops again because he can’t believe he’s misled Harry so many times he’s still not sure when Louis is being serious. He’s actually quite impressed with himself over it, honestly.

“Of course I meant it,” Louis says, any joke fading from his lips at the earnest look on Harry’s face. He looks breakable in his vulnerability - like Louis could absolutely tear him to pieces with one word and Louis hates it. He promises, there with the stars and the waves as his witnesses, that he won’t do it - not to Harry. “Of course,” he says again.

Harry swallows and nods, a slight smile playing on his lips, eyes lighting up again. “Is it because I told you that I’m actually an actor and not just a PA?”

Louis puts his hands up, “You got me. That star power just gets me every time.” Harry laughs and bites his lip and Louis just can’t wait to kiss him - actor, busboy or poet - he really doesn’t care.

Louis is decidedly not nervous.

There are things that make his palms clammy and his stomach hollow - things like heights and turbulence on planes. Things like going on dates has never been on that list. Which doesn’t explain why he’s pacing around his house an hour before he’s supposed to be at Harry’s for dinner, running his hands through his hair and chewing on his bottom lip, his heart racing.

He’s not nervous.

He’s just completely losing his mind at the prospect of the night in front of him. Harry wants to cook him dinner which isn’t so unlike the things they’ve done before except now it has a label. It’s not just them hanging out - it’s A Date.

Louis isn’t well versed in dating anymore - not that he was ever that good at it anyway. A few spare dates and falling into bed together doesn’t count, he doesn’t think. He doesn’t want to mess it up - not now that he’s dragged this out to be a spectacle in the art of temptation and the tease before he finally agreed to it.

He wants it to be good - he wants Harry to be impressed by him, he doesn’t want Harry to regret asking him. He cares too much is the problem that has him pacing in front of his couch in a pair of jeans he rarely wears and a maroon tee he keeps in the back of his closet for Important Things. The fact he reached for it automatically while getting dressed to go to Harry’s scares the ever-living shit out of him.
Not for the first time, he considers changing into something Harry has seen him wear before but he stops himself (again). He rolls his eyes at himself, grabs his keys from the counter and slips on a pair of black Vans by the door before going outside. If anyone asks him why he’s leaving so early for a date two blocks away - he’ll just say he can’t read the clock. The truth is he’s going to buy flowers and a bottle of wine and he would be caught dead before ever admitting that out loud.

Louis is only fifteen minutes early by the time he’s standing in front of Harry’s door, a bouquet of baby pink peonies and ferns clutched in one hand, a bottle of the most expensive Pinot Noir the grocery store offered held in the crook of his elbow. He takes a deep breath, tells himself to get it together and then he knocks.

When Harry opens the door, Louis doesn’t regret his barely worn jeans or his new shirt. Not when Harry is in a pair of black jeans not torn at the knees and a floral shirt that has no wrinkles, his hair soft looking and styled back from his face. He looks like he’s walked from a page of a magazine and Louis thinks he might find a problem in taking his eyes off of him during dinner.

“I brought flowers and wine,” Louis, ever the most eloquent, says first. He holds the flowers out for Harry to take.

Harry smiles, his dimple curving in. “Did you know peonies represent romance and good omens?” He takes the bouquet and backs up a step so Louis can come in.

“Of course I did,” he says, stepping on the heels of his shoes to take them off. Harry swings the door shut behind them. “It’s why I picked them out, you know. Proper romantic evening you’ve planned and all.”

“Really?” Harry’s eyebrows lift and Louis can’t hide his smile.

“No,” Louis says, laughter huffing over his words. “Of course I didn’t know that.”

Harry’s lips twitch as he leads Louis back toward the kitchen. “Good. I thought maybe someone had abducted the Louis I asked out in the first place.”

Louis laughs, “Don’t you worry about me changing. I’m pretty stubborn.”

“Eh, questionable,” Harry drawls. He grabs a vase from the cupboard over the refrigerator and Louis wonders if it’s his or belongs to the owner of the house. He starts to fill it with water.

“Excuse me?” Louis raises one eyebrow. He sets the bottle of wine on the table, noting the two candles and formal place settings with cloth napkins like a sophisticated restaurant.

“You may be as stubborn as you claim to be but I still got you to go out with me,” Harry says. He sets the vase in the center of the table, and pats his hands on his jeans to dry them. He doesn’t give Louis a chance to respond to him. “Do you mind pouring the wine? I just need to make sure the pasta is finished cooking.”

Louis opens and closes his mouth like fish before he heads for the drawer where the wine opener is. For once he’s at a loss for a sassy comment and he has the bubbly sensation in his chest that Harry may just be onto something.

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“I don’t know if I’m going to keep believing you when you say you’re just learning how to cook.”

Harry laughs as he discards his oven mitts and slips into the chair across from Louis.
“I’m serious,” Louis says. He takes a sip of his wine and sets it down between a basket of warm bread and a Caesar salad fit for an Italian restaurant. Harry’s chicken parmesan is perfectly golden, the sauce not overcooked at all.

“I just read the recipe,” Harry says with a shrug. “Followed the instructions.” He motions for Louis’s plate to serve him, heaping the steaming pasta before the chicken. “I know it’s hard to believe.”

“H,” Louis says seriously, “I follow the directions on the back of a macaroni box and it still doesn’t turn out this well.”

Harry smiles, clearly pleased though he tries to hide it. “You haven’t tasted it yet. Could taste like dog food.”

Louis scrunches his nose as he accepts his plate back. “Oddly not as hungry now, thanks.”

Harry laughs, filling his own plate. He sets it down and takes a sip of wine. “Maybe I can go into gourmet dog food. That’s a niche market I could fill.”

“You’d have to adopt a dog to test recipes on,” Louis says. “Maybe a couple so they don’t get obese.”

Harry smirks. “I wish I would have thought of that when I was younger and begging my mum for a dog. I could have made it an entrepreneurial effort.”

“Hindsight is twenty-twenty,” Louis notes.

He cuts off a piece of chicken and slips it from his fork to his mouth. It falls apart in his mouth so perfectly, he narrowly avoids moaning out loud. He doesn’t really enjoy cooking and he hasn’t had an actual meal cooked for him in longer than he cares to remember. By a pretty boy, no less.

“Doesn’t taste like dog food,” he says, going for another bite. “So, my point stands. You are a closeted chef who is pretending to learn to cook for your own enjoyment.”

Harry chews his own bite thoughtfully. “Sounds like the plot to a book but, no. Prior to a couple of weeks ago, kale salad with a lemon vinaigrette was my go to.”

Louis gags loudly. “Glad I didn’t agree to go out with you any earlier, then.”

Harry laughs and it’s the loud bark of a sound Louis is slowly falling for, the way it bursts from Harry’s lips like he can’t contain it.

“I love your laugh,” Louis says right then, the honest truth. The words seem to hang in the air, a physical weight for a moment too long. Louis doesn’t regret it but he feels his cheeks flush anyway. He knows things are supposed to be different between them - now that it’s a date and not just a night between friends. But, still. Maybe he’s gone from hesitant to head over heels faster than he really should have.

If Harry thinks so, he doesn’t show it. He just bites his lip and looks away for a moment. When he meets Louis’s eyes again, his lip has slipped from the grip of his teeth and he smiles softly. “Thank you,” he says, the highest point of his cheeks going pink.

Louis doesn’t say it out loud - he’s not a complete idiot - but he thinks that shade of pink may be becoming his favorite color.

It’s as easy as always from there - talking about absolutely nothing as they eat dinner. Harry
making a verbal list of what he next wants to cook and Louis volunteering as taste tester; Louis showing Harry pictures of his youngest siblings jumping on the new trampoline his mum bought; both of them exchanging stories about bests and worsts - memories, vacations, presents, test scores - and on and on.

“What was your worst first date?” Harry asks once they’ve mostly finished eating, just pushing the last bits of food around their plates.

Louis leans back in his chair, trying not to smile. They’ve never really discussed past relationships and now that Harry is breaching the topic, he finds that he’s edging on curious as well.

“I don’t date a lot,” Louis says, almost like a disclaimer. “But one of my mates set me up in uni with a guy who,” he tilts his head back and forth, “Wasn’t so interested in the dating part of the evening.”

Harry raises one eyebrow. “Explain?”

Louis licks his bottom lip and reaches for his wine. He rests the side of glass against his chest. “He wanted to sleep with me and was quite bothered he had to sit through dinner first.”

Harry’s eyes widen when he laughs, shining. “Did he just announce it in the middle of the dinner?”

“Well, it was already going horribly for the first hour.” The memory dances through Louis’s mind and he smiles. It was utterly ridiculous. “We had nothing in common, he loved to talk about himself more than anything and cut me off every other word. And then we were leaving and he was shocked that I was planning to walk home alone. He said that I at least owed it to come to his place considering he’d had dinner with me.”

Harry looks slightly scandalized. “No you didn’t.”

Louis’s eyes flick from Harry’s mouth drawn tight to his concerned eyes. “I didn’t. I knew that too.” Harry relaxes slightly and Louis can’t explain the butterfly feeling between his lungs - that Harry is so intense over something that happened in the past. “I actually laughed in his face which made him turn intensely red and then I left.”

“You should have kicked him in the balls.”

Louis faux gasps, “I would never.”

Harry laughs, “Yeah, sure. Between the two of us, you seem more likely to kick someone in the balls and you know it.”

“Fair enough. I’ve kneed enough people in the balls to count as a kick.”

Harry winces. “What was the occasion?”

“Football,” Louis says without really thinking. “Mostly on accident but some guys just needed to be knocked down a few pegs.”

Harry scrunches his face and wiggles in his chair. “I’m having sympathy pains,” he says. “How long did you play for again?”

Louis has to give Harry credit for the again part - as though Louis has ever told him more about his past career than a simple passing comment. “Most of my life,” Louis says.
“But never professionally?”

Louis doesn’t want to lie but he doesn’t want to tell Harry the truth. He doesn’t want Harry to pity him - he’s not sure he could take it if Harry started looking at him differently, looking at him for the disappointment he really is. “Real life came calling,” he says instead. It’s not a lie but it’s certainly not the truth.

Harry hums and empties his glass of wine.

“What about you?”

“Football?”

Louis laughs. “No. Worst first date?”

Harry shifts awkwardly and glances at the ceiling. “Probably this one, honestly.” He’s just quick enough that he gets out of his chair and across the kitchen before Louis can come after his for payback. “Mercy,” Harry yells.

“I didn’t do anything,” Louis says with his hands up, laughter eating his words.

“You just gave a pretty gnarly description of kneeing people in the gonads,” Harry says, one hand covering his crotch as if on instinct. Louis can’t stop laughing and he knows he’ll need to catch his breath eventually. “I’m protecting myself.”

“I promise you,” Louis says after a shaky inhale, “The last thing I want to do to you is kick you in the balls.”

He holds Harry’s gaze until he feels his own ears go red and then he hides the rest of the moment in his wine glass as he takes a drink. Now is not the particular moment for his mind to do a mental scan of all the things he would like to do to Harry instead.

“What’s for dessert?” He asks once he swallows the rest of his wine, setting his empty glass next to Harry’s. It’s probably best to avoid all ball-related discussion on a first date.

Harry comes back to the table and his empty chair. “A couple options, actually.”

“Options at Restaurante de Harry?”

“What language was that?” Harry asks with wide eyes.

“A combination of a couple,” Louis says knowingly though, in actuality, he knows no other languages than his own.

“Yeah, right,” Harry says, catching him. “Anyway, options. We could go get ice cream cones or I bought stuff to make chocolate fondue. There was a sale on fondue pots on Amazon and I couldn’t resist. And then I got a fondue cookbook too. Plus, they had themed skewers on sale so I got a set of those.” He sounds reluctant of the final confession.

Louis smiles, a mental image of Harry online binge shopping in his dark glasses with a candle and a bottle of wine forming easily in his mind. “What theme are the skewers?”

Harry grins, “Fruit wearing sunglasses.”

Louis shakes his head at him. How he ended up on a date with this man is beyond him. “Let’s do fondue,” he decides. “Ice cream is so ordinary.”
“Ah, yes,” Harry says wisely, “And we can’t possibly be ordinary.”

“Guy like you?” Louis smirks, “Far beyond ordinary.” He makes Harry blush again and he quite likes his new-found power.

Harry manages to burn himself twice in the first three minutes of making the chocolate fondue so Louis makes the executive decision to reassign him to cutting up the strawberries and angel cake he bought as dippers.

“It’s for your own good,” Louis says as he whisks the chocolate into the hot cream. “As long as you don’t cut off one of your fingers.” His words coincide perfectly with Harry howling and pretending to have chopped off his thumb with a knife. “How did I know you would do that?”

Harry laughs, the dopey one where he can’t stop smiling even when he looks down to hide it. “I need to be more unpredictable,” he says. “Clearly.”

“Clearly,” Louis mimics as a splatter of chocolate hits his forearm and makes him hiss.

“Oh,” Harry clicks his tongue on the top of his mouth, “And here you thought you were better than me.”

Louis rolls his eyes and flicks his wrist quicker in the melting chocolate mixture. “Shush you.” He pretends not to notice the way Harry watches him for the next minute or so, the dopey grin still curving his dimple into his cheeks.

They take the warm fondue, skewers, strawberries and cake out to the back porch, assuming their typical positions on the two loungers.

“Wait,” Harry says, bounding back off the lounger before he’s even fully sat down.

Louis laughs as he arranges the food on the small table between the chairs. When Harry comes back he’s holding a candle and a lighter with a barely there smile on his lips. Louis watches as he positions the candle toward the back of the table with a slight hum before lighting it and sitting back in his chair. He sets the lighter on the ground carefully.

The sun has barely set but the candle still throws shadows against Harry’s jaw, somehow elongating his eyelashes and making his lips darker.

When he catches Louis studying him he smirks as if he’s missed the joke. “What?”

“You’re kind of romantic, aren’t you?” Louis says.

“Because I like candles?”

Louis smiles and shakes his head, not letting Harry off that easily. “H, we’ve sat out here plenty of nights darker this and you’ve never gotten a candle out before.”

“I can blow it out if that makes you happier,” Harry says, his voice slightly disgruntled. He reaches for the candle but Louis stops him by grabbing his wrist.

It’s not the first time he’s touched Harry like this but he feels it like a livewire in his veins as Harry meets his eyes. “I didn’t say I didn’t like it,” Louis says softly. He runs his finger over the knob of Harry’s wrist and then let’s go. Harry makes him want to be soft in ways he’s always been too hard - to turn his jokes on their head and into something more genuine. Harry makes him feel something he never has and considering it’s their first proper date, he’s a bit terrified.
“Okay,” Harry says, voice just as soft as Louis’s was. Louis wonders if he feels it - if there’s anything about him worthy enough to scare Harry too. “I am, by the way.”

“Am what?” Louis asks, feeling as though he’s missed part of the conversation.

“Romantic,” Harry says without meeting his eyes. He picks up a skewer and carefully puts a strawberry on the end. Louis reaches for a skewer as well, not wanting to put pressure on Harry like he’s watching him. Not to mention, he put twenty minutes of hard work into the fondue and he’s looking forward to eating it.

“That’s not a bad thing,” Louis says. He slips a soft piece of cake onto the spiked end of the skewer.

“No, I know,” Harry says. He focuses intently on getting the strawberry into the chocolate, swirling and then tapping the edge on the pot to catch any excess. “I love the idea of it more than anything. Candlelight and roses, proper dates and bottles of wine.” He scrunches his nose, “I’m a bit cheesy.”

Louis’s smirk catches him off guard. “Maybe,” he says, eyes caught on the way Harry puts the chocolate covered strawberry in his mouth, eating it tongue first. “But maybe that’s why I like you.”

Harry chews and shrugs, “You just like me for the dimples.”

“That and your long legs in black jeans,” Louis says fairly. “I won’t pretend they weren’t the first thing I noticed when you walked into Niall’s.”

Harry smiles. He licks his tongue over a bit of chocolate on the edge of his lip and then Louis looks away. He dips his cake in the chocolate again.

“The day you were mean to me?”

Louis’s eyes go wide, “I thought we were on a romantic date, you can’t bring stuff like that up!” He laughs over his words when he sees Harry’s shit-eating grin.

“You were, though,” Harry says, one shoulder shrugging. “I walked in and noticed you right away on your computer - imagined you were writing a super serious article about brain cancer or something.” Louis snorts but Harry goes on. “And then Niall was there so I couldn’t keep staring at you but my eyes kept going over there anyway. Your cheekbones are what did it.”

“Not my piercing blue eyes?” Louis makes his voice airy the way his sister’s do when they used to make fun of the football cheerleaders having a crush on him.

“Didn’t see those until later,” Harry says nonchalantly. “The night in front of my house when I waved at you.”

Louis groans, “We’re lucky we made it this far, aren’t we? I was a proper dick.”

“I told you I’m persistent.”

Louis chews his cake and smirks. “That you are.”

“Why did you do it?” Harry pokes a piece of cake onto his skewer. “The first day, what made you so mean?”

“Stop calling me mean,” Louis says, hitting his own skewer against Harry’s like a mini sword
fight. “I was just grumpy.”

Harry raises his eyebrows and scrunches his nose, “Yeah, okay.”

“I thought you were wildly attractive,” Louis says, honesty coming easy. “But I don’t really get involved with wildly attractive men anymore. It’s always been more work than it’s worth.” For a moment, he thinks he’s said too much, been too offensive but then Harry smiles, almost.

“Glad I made the cut then,” he says. He winks as he pops the cake in his mouth.

The strawberries and cake go quickly, the fondue barely keeping up as they lick their sticky fingers and laugh over reaching for the same pieces at the same time.

Harry tells a disgusting story of getting a straw stuck in the top of his mouth when he was four and how the skewers make him nervous because of it. Louis laughs so hard he pokes himself in the lip and it seems a bit like payback. Harry kind of smiles too as he splits the last piece of cake in two and they both drag it through the bottom of the fondue pot - the entire thing nearly wiped clean.

“That was amazing,” Louis says once they’ve truly finished. “I’ll have to compliment the chef.” Harry rolls his eyes before Louis can point out it’s the exact kind of joke Harry would make if he’d thought of it first.

“Hang on,” Harry says, “You have a bit of -,” he runs his fingers over his lips. “Chocolate.”

Louis mimics the same motion on his lips but Harry shakes his head.

“Not there.” He reaches forward, “Can I?”

“Yeah,” Louis says, leaning over the table the same time Harry does. It puts them much closer than he anticipates - Harry too if the way his breath catches is anything to go by. His touch is gentle as he thumbs the corner of Louis’s lips, that same electric spark igniting under Louis’s skin.

“Got it,” Harry says softly but doesn’t pull back, their faces barely an inch apart.

Louis wants to kiss him - he wants to kiss him more than he’s wanted anything in as long as he can remember. He wants to know if Harry’s lips are as soft as they look, if his tongue tastes like chocolate, if he’ll sigh softly back against Louis’s mouth the way he pictures it. He leans in closer, tongue unconsciously smoothing his bottom lip but then Harry is slipping away, back into his own lounger.

Louis doesn’t take his eyes off of him - so he doesn’t miss the way Harry clenches his eyes shut for a beat or the high pink dusting on his cheeks.

“Do you need to get home?” Harry says, his voice somehow hoarse in a way that Louis didn’t need to know existed. “I know it’s getting late.”

Louis catches his eye and holds it for a moment, hopes Harry can tell that Louis is onto him, that he knows Harry wanted to kiss him too. He doesn’t want their night to end but he’s not sure how to say that. How to explain that they could sit in these two loungers silently and he would be okay with that - that just to be around Harry sends his heart spiraling in ways it never, ever has.

“Or we could play a game,” Harry says, a lilt of hope in his voice. “I know that’s kind of lame but like,” he shrugs a shoulder, “Just an idea. There’s a Scrabble board inside if you want to play.”

If Louis had to guess, he’d say Harry isn’t ready for their first date to be over either. “Of course I do, babe,” Louis says finally, the name slipping out easier than he imagined it would.
If Harry notices the pet name, he doesn’t show it. For once his poker face intact as he nods and reaches for the empty fondue pot and stands. He does miss a step as he rounds the lounger and almost trips before stuttering out two more steps and catching himself. He laughs and Louis joins in, gathering the other empty plates and blowing out the candle. Whatever tension was there, dissipates like smoke with their laughter but Louis feels warmth curling in his gut. He still wants to kiss Harry. Still, still, still.

Louis pours them new glasses of wine while Harry goes to set up the game of Scrabble in the front room. He finds himself rinsing out the fondue pot and setting it on the drying rack, doing the same for the skewers and empty plate of strawberries and cake.

Harry has the board set up on the low coffee table when Louis walks in, their letter holders on either side of the table.

“Hope you don’t mind the floor,” Harry says as he sits unceremoniously and stretches his legs out in front of him. His socks are light pink with dinosaurs and Louis isn’t even shocked he notices. Harry has a way of making him sit up and pay attention to everything from his stupid-pretty face to his gaudy socks and all the bits in-between.

You are already so f*cked, Louis Tomlinson, he thinks as he sits opposite of Harry. “I’m not sure how good I’ll be at this.” He crosses his legs underneath him as Harry finishes flipping the extra tiles face down.

“Have you not played before?”

“No, I’ve played.” Louis scoots Harry’s glass of wine closer to him. “Just like, it was a while ago.” He squints one eye, “With my grandparents. In a nursing home.” He can’t help his laughter, “Where almost all people go to play Scrabble.”

“Hey,” Harry’s smile comes through his protesting whine. “It’s not an old people game.”

“It’s certainly not a young people game,” Louis says under his breath, flinching when Harry reaches across the table and flicks his wrist.

“It’s relaxing to play it every once in a while. Just have a quiet night or whatever.”

Louis tilts his head; not sure he agrees. Harry takes a sip of his wine and then starts counting out his tiles and lining them up on his holder. Louis studies the slope of his nose and the curve of his eyebrows as he does and - yeah, okay, maybe a quiet night of Scrabble isn’t the worst thing to happen.

Actually, maybe it is. It turns out Harry is wickedly good which he ridicules Louis about at every chance.

“You’re a writer,” he keeps saying. “You’re supposed to have a thesaurus stuck in your head.”

“Contrary to popular belief,” Louis tell him, “That’s absolutely not true.”

“Why do you write then?” Harry’s wine is half gone and his lips are all kinds of red. “If not for love of language and the way words come together on the page?”

Louis laughs and shakes his head, “That’s definitely not it.” He has to think for a moment, what to say before he gets it. “I love writing for the material - for football. I love being able to make people feel like they’re in the stands or on the pitch because that’s always been my favorite feeling. Using words and putting sentences together to get that feeling, or get close to that feeling.”
His lips twitch, “That’s also why thesauruses exist, H. So people like me can look up words that mean something more exciting than big, fast, and victory.”

Harry is looking at him like he’s given him the keys to something big, a certain light in his eyes that Louis can’t look away from. “You never should have stopped playing,” he says and Louis’s breath catches in his throat. “You love it so much - I don’t know why you ever stopped.”

Louis swallows to make himself inhale properly. He could tell him now - if he did it would make it all easy to understand - but he doesn’t. “Real life came calling,” Louis says just like he did earlier. “I had to listen.”

“You don’t go to matches anymore,” Harry says slowly. “I would think you’d still enjoy that part at least.”

Louis swallows and shrugs. It would be too much to sit in the stands and know he couldn’t play. It’s hard enough to watch it on a screen but to actually be there would be a different kind of torture. He lets his eyes drop back to the board between them. “If I’m not mistaken, vibey is so far from a being a word, it’s ridiculous.”

Harry takes the distraction in stride, following his gaze to the word he just put down before they started talking about writing. “Yes, it is.”

“Define it,” Louis says, the same tone of voice that Harry has used on him all night. Particularly when he put down, ‘Hiphoppy’.

“It’s slang for vibes,” Harry says. “Like the atmosphere in here is vibey. Lively, energetic. Vibey.”

Louis blinks at him, “You’re kidding.”

“You can look it up,” Harry says smugly. He tips his wine glass against his lips, eyes smiling. “I’ve beat plenty of people with vibey.” He finishes the rest of the wine and sets the glass back down. “Go on, look it up.”

Louis scrunches his nose, “I think I believe you. Unless you’re lying in which case, you are the best actor I’ve ever met.”

Harry smiles and something about it is private as he glances down and then back. “Just might be,” he says quietly. There’s a beat and then he says, “Your turn, Lou. Try your best to beat vibey, eh?”

“Oh, I will,” Louis says with a cocky flick of his head. His heart sinks when he looks at the letters he has left. He’s so fucked.

Harry wins. He wins by more points than Louis is willing to let him count up, scattering the pieces once the victory becomes more decisive than he would like.

“We’ll play football again soon,” Louis says. “That’s where my talents lie.”

“You really want me to get another bloody nose?”

“Yes, my one true wish. You got me.” Harry flicks him again in retaliation.

Louis puts the game back in the box and Harry takes their empty glasses back to the kitchen. He
feels pleasantly buzzed and warm, a certain happiness fizzling in between his bones. Harry yawns when he comes back in the room but he tries to hide it with his hand.

“Saw that,” Louis says. “What time do you have to be on set tomorrow?”

Harry scrunches his lips and pulls his eyebrows together in thought. “Think pretty normal - eight or so. But it’s a long one - we’re shooting on location during the day and then going out to a studio for some water stuff.”

Louis knows next to nothing about movies or how they’re made so he just nods along. “I better let you get to sleep, then. I’m guessing they don’t schedule nap time in there.”

Harry smiles softly, “Not usually, no.”

Louis tilts his head toward the front door, “Walk me out?”

Harry nods and follows him easily, flipping on the light in the entryway as Louis slips his shoes back on.

“It’s my turn now, right?” Louis laughs when Harry tilts his head, confused. “To plan our next date. If you’d like to go on another date, that is.”

Harry’s confusion melts into a full-on grin. “I’d really like that, yeah.”

Louis can’t help but note their second date will be more like their twentieth considering all the nights and days they’ve spent together already but he doesn’t mention. He likes the way they’re doing it now - starting over as it is. Proper romantic which may be why Harry is so smiley.

“I have a few ideas,” Louis says. “But I need to plan a bit better before I tell you them. When is your next day off?”

“Two days,” Harry says quickly. “I have three days off in a row then.”

“Excellent,” Louis says, his plan already falling together. “I’m reserving one of the days.”

“I’ll write you in my day book,” Harry says with another smile. “I had a really good time tonight,” he adds after a quiet moment. “Thank you for coming over.”

Louis shifts his weight. “Definitely my favorite first date,” he says boldly because it’s true. Louis can’t quite believe he thought he could stay away from Harry. “Thank you for allowing me time to get my head out of my ass and agree to it.”

Harry smiles, “Of course. Though I won’t pretend it wasn’t my own selfish desire to take you on a date as well.”

“Fair,” Louis says.

The quiet lingers and Louis’s fingers itch with it. It feels loaded, like a string is between them and ready to snap, both of their eyes locked on each other. Louis waits for Harry to make the first move, to close the space but it doesn’t happen.

“I’m not leaving until you kiss me,” Louis says, more bluntly than he intends. “That’s the rules now that we’re dating, right? You’re supposed to kiss me anytime you want.”

Harry smiles and his cheeks go pink. “I was kind of waiting for you to kiss me,” he says. He grins and then he reaches for Louis the same time Louis closes the distance for good.
Kissing Harry is more than Louis could have imagined - has imagined more than once. It feels warm like a summertime breeze, feels softer than his lips look, and more urgent than he ever expected from a first kiss. Louis’s hands curl around Harry’s waist tightly just to keep him from falling forward as Harry gasps against his mouth. Louis takes the chance to press his tongue against Harry’s bottom lip and then taste him for himself, the wine and chocolate hiding a taste Louis has never had - something distinctly Harry.

Louis breaks it first - not sure that Harry will. They’re both breathing heavier than they should be for a first kiss; Harry’s cheeks still pink and Louis is sure his are too. He leaves his hands on Harry’s waist for a moment, and then squeezes gently before letting go. He so badly wants to push Harry against the door frame and devour him with his mouth and hands - he wants so much all at once. But not yet. Eventually, he hopes.

“Thanks,” Louis says brightly. “I’ll leave now.”

Harry nods but doesn’t say anything, lips still parted as he runs his hand back through his hair. If he looks like that after a first kiss - Louis takes a deep breath as he walks away - he’s going to absolutely drown in Harry when it turns to anything more.

* *

Louis misses Harry.

It’s unreasonable considering it’s only been two days since he last saw him but now he’s allowed himself to start falling for Harry - he can’t exactly stop.

Harry has been busy with ‘Rogue’ the past two days - not home both times Louis stopped to tell him about their second date. He’d left a note last night, scrawled on a napkin from Niall’s that he would be by Harry’s place at six forty-five. He underlined the part that said in the morning to get his point across. It’d made him smile to imagine Harry’s face reading it - realizing how early it would be. Louis thinks it’ll be a test of how much Harry actually wants to date him - whether he’s up and ready when Louis stops by.

Louis still wakes up around five the day of their second date so can get his run in but he thinks his legs almost ache less as mentally maps his morning with Harry. He taking him paddle boarding thought Louis has never actually gone himself. It’s something he’s always wanted to do in the cove but never quite gotten around to. He showers quickly back home, a smile ebbing onto his face every time he catches sight of himself in the mirror. He’s absolutely ridiculous, he knows.

He has to dig through his drawers for a pair of black swim shorts and hopes Harry saw his note scrawled haphazardly about wearing his own for their date. He pulls on a grey t-shirt and a black baseball cap, checking his reflection in the mirror and kicking away the sinking in his stomach when he sees the edge of his scar sticking out the bottom of his shorts.

Harry will know he has the scar eventually or at least Louis plans for them to see a lot more of each other’s skin than they have yet. So whether he sees the beginning today or not doesn’t exactly matter. It’s all timing, Louis thinks as he leaves his bedroom, clicking off the light.

Louis leaves early enough to stop at the corner grocery store and pick up lunch for the both of them. He gets a couple sandwiches and a bag of Cheetos because he likes them the best and a cup of fruit since Harry seems to actually enjoy snacking on it. He puts it all in his backpack, on top of his beach towel, and heads over to Harry’s place a few minutes early. If nothing else, he’ll startle him out of bed by ringing the front bell.

Unfortunately, there’s no startling needed. Harry is sitting on his front porch when Louis turns the
“Good morning, sunshine,” Louis says as he walks up the front path. “You got my note?”

Harry yawns in lieu of an immediate answer, tucking his face into the crook of his elbow to cover it. “I did,” he says. “It’s quite early, you know.”

“Is it?” Louis scrunches his nose. “I get up at five to go on a run usually – this isn’t so bad.” He audibly groans every morning he gets out of bed but he doesn’t need to share that detail out loud.

Harry blinks and Louis lets himself stare. His face is puffy from sleep but his lips twitch into a hidden smile and his eyes have the light Louis has been thinking about for two days straight now.

“There are only a few people I would wake up this early for,” Harry says, blinking prettily again.

“Is this you telling me I’m one of them?”

“No.” Harry smiles, “This is me telling you I’m going back to bed.”

“Ha ha,” Louis deadpans as Harry stands.

Whatever else he wants to say next is lost when he sees Harry’s swim trunks or lack thereof. His dark blue swim shorts hit mid-thigh and make his legs look more endless than they usually do, the Adidas sneakers on his feet catching Louis’s attention at the end of his full body scan. For once, Harry doesn’t seem to notice Louis gaping at him, reaching around for his own backpack and slipping it on his shoulders.

“For the record, you are one of the people on that list,” he says. “The most handsome one in my opinion.”

Louis doesn’t let the butterflies in his stomach show on his face. “And you’re unbiased?”

“Definitely.” He grins, “So what are we doing? I’ve had two sleepless nights thinking about what we’re going to do.”

“Really?” Louis starts walking toward the sidewalk and Harry catches his step easily.

“Mostly thinking about you but a little bit about what you have planned too.”

Louis shakes his head and laughs lightly. Harry stops at the corner by his house and Louis does too, barely turning to ask why when Harry comes closer to press a kiss to his lips. It’s quick and sweet, unlike their first kiss but it surprises Louis just the same – a wave of heat washing over him.

“Been thinking about that too,” Harry says and then he keeps walking like nothing has happened. Louis has to remind himself to breath and then walk twice as quickly to catch back up.

“We’re going paddle boarding,” Louis tells Harry when he asks. “Stand-up paddle boarding actually.”

“No fucking way,” Harry says, a smile over his words.

“Yes fucking way,” Louis mimics back to him. “Have you been before?”

Harry shakes his head, “I haven’t but I’ve always wanted to.”

“Actually?” Louis asks, concealing the spark of pride that he came up with something Harry
would truly want to do.

Harry nods. “I’ve been kayaking before. Actually, I flipped my kayak the first time I did it and panicked so badly under water that I saw my life flash before my eyes.”

“That sounds like a nightmare.” Louis suppresses a shiver and slips his thumbs under his backpack straps as they walk.

He directs Harry down toward the water so they can pick up the boards Louis had called to rent two days prior. He’d actually called first thing the morning after he left Harry’s place – already excited for the prospect of their date. The girl on the other end of the phone was incredibly helpful in telling him about an island off to the east of the bay where most people stop for a picnic lunch.

“Pick your boards,” Doug, the guy at the front of the stand says when Louis gives his name. “And tell me your shoe sizes so I can get you water shoes.”

“Water shoes,” Harry says with a wiggle of his eyebrows when Doug goes to the back to get their correct sizes. “This is going to be serious.”

“Dead serious,” Louis says. “And probably an ab workout.”

“That’s probably good,” Harry muses. “One of the guys on set was turning thirty yesterday so we all had cake to celebrate. You know the sheet ones with like, three inches of frosting?”

Louis grins, “My favorite.”

“Felt like I was going to puke after, honestly.” Harry licks his bottom lip, “Three slices was a bad idea.”

Louis scrunches his nose. “The good thing about today is if you still feel like puking when we get out there, it’ll all be open water.”

Harry makes a gagging noise in the bottom of his throat and curls his lip. “I would never do that to the sea animals.”

“Of course you wouldn’t,” Louis says as they make their way over to the wall of paddle boards.

Harry chooses a light pink one while Louis picks out a black board with an electric yellow bottom, examining it and declaring it, “Sick,” while Harry chats with Doug about their new water shoes.

They get a quick lesson outside of the beach shack and then put all of their non-waterproof belongings in plastic bags and stuff them in their bags.

“You’ll want to head into the bay to get on the board,” Doug says. “And then curve toward the left when you get to the edge and you’ll see Paside which is the island. No one else is really out there yet so the ocean is yours.”

Louis finds himself smiling as they walk away – he likes the sound of only having to share Harry with the ocean.

“Is this a good place?” Harry asks when they’ve come to the edge of the bay, the sun only halfway up in the sky and a calming lull to the water.

“Fine with me,” Louis says. “You don’t think there are any sharks?” He laughs when Harry glowers at him. It’s not Louis’s fault that Harry took the walk over to tell him about how he grew
up thinking sharks were in the bottom of swimming pools.

He’s cut off abruptly by Harry pulling his shirt over his head to put in his backpack. He knew Harry had ink on his arms and across his chest from the shirts he’s worn and he knew, objectively, that Harry has a good body but actually seeing his deep v-lines and soft hips, the butterfly on his belly and ferns beneath it, all on display, is a different story. Louis stifles himself from making an embarrassing noise by pulling his own shirt over his head and busying himself with shoving it in his bag.

He feels it when Harry looks at him, perhaps admiring his tattoos as well, but Louis isn’t brave enough to look up. He started to get tattoos to distract from the scar – but he’s not sure it always works like that. He hopes Harry doesn’t ask but when he gets the courage to look up, he doesn’t see a question in his eyes. Just a filthy smile as he adjusts his sunglasses in his hair.

“What are you staring at?” Louis asks when he’s brave enough.

“You,” Harry says, dragging his eyes down Louis’s body in a way that makes the swim shorts Louis is wearing suddenly feel a bit too revealing.

“Stop that,” Louis says without bite. “Let’s get out there.”

Getting out on the water is far easier said than done.

They position their boards in knee deep water and then climb on the centers like Doug said, staying on their knees as they get positioned.

“Good?” Louis checks with Harry before slicing his paddle through the water and pushing off further from the shore.

“Yeah but I don’t know how I’m ever going to stand,” Harry says, his strokes with the paddle matching Louis’s. “I think I’ll just stay on my knees.”

Louis raises an unimpressed eyebrow. “Definitely not. Doug would be so disappointed in you.”

“Fuck Doug,” Harry says with a grin.

Louis rolls his eyes. “Sounds like I’ll be going first.”

His hands are shaky as he grips the sides of the board and he stops, taking a deep breath. His body has betrayed him before. After the accident – he couldn’t run as fast or for as long, he couldn’t pivot and twist in the ways he always had. He had to give up his life because his body wasn’t up for the challenge anymore.

There was a time he felt utterly helpless in his own skin, when he wasn’t sure how far he could push himself before everything crashed. He feels that same wave again as he sets one foot flat on the board and brings the other one up to meet it so he’s in a crouch. He knows how to stand up and he knows what way to balance to stay standing – he’s just learned the hard way that the way his mind works and the way his body works don’t always sync up.

“Don’t get scared now,” Harry says like Louis has said something out loud. “You were talking a big game earlier.”

“Was not,” Louis says, watching the tip of the board the way Doug had said as he starts to stand. He engages his abs to keep straight, the board wobbly under him but catching as he shifts his weight. He grins and takes a deeper breath – the restraints of nerves releasing from around his lungs.
“I’ll be honest with you,” he says, looking down at Harry. “I wasn’t sure how that was going to turn out.”

Harry smiles up at him, the sun reflecting evenly off the lenses of his sunglasses. “Very proud of you.”

“Thanks,” Louis says softly. He slips his paddle into the water and propels forward slightly before he switches to the other side. It feels like he’s walking on top of the water, like he could paddle to the end of the world without ever stopping. The morning sun is already warm on his shoulders and he knows he’ll regret the bare minimum of sunscreen he applied earlier. That will come later, though. Now he just listens to the silence of the water and breathes in the salty air, a feeling of warm content settling over him.

“You’ve got to come up here,” he tells Harry.

Harry is still firmly on his knees on the board but he’s already watching Louis when Louis glances over to him. “And if I fall?”

“The water will catch you.”

Harry tilts his head to one side and then the other. “That’s not as comforting as I imagined it would be. I think I’ll stay here.”

“Did you surf in Jamaica?” Louis asks, remembering one of his first conversations with Harry. “Last year?”

If Harry is surprised he remembers, he doesn’t show it. “Kind of. I mostly laid on the surfboard in the water. Got a nice tan, actually.”

Louis laughs and rolls his eyes though his sunglasses hide it. “You probably got up on the surfboard once or twice.”

“Got up three times, probably.” He grins, “Ate shit just as many times.”

“I think this is easier than being on a surfboard. The water is smoother.” Louis has never tried to surf before – he did wakeboard off the back of a boat one summer he was traveling with the team but that’s neither here nor there.

“You’ve surfed before?” Harry asks, catching him.

“Don’t change the subject,” Louis says quickly. “Get up here.”

“I don’t want to fall,” Harry says.

“You won’t. Get up.”

Harry flips him off with a sweet smile. “I like the view from down here.”

“Yeah? The water looks good from eye level.”

Harry laughs. “Your ankles are hot.”

“Is that a thing for you?”

“Don’t change the subject,” Harry parrots back with another laugh.
“Get up,” Louis says. “I swear it’s easier than you think.”

“I’m scared.”

Louis shakes his head, “You’re not scared. You’re stubborn.”

“That’s rude,” Harry says, his voice going higher. “I may be deathly afraid of standing up on paddleboards.”

“You may be,” Louis gives it to him, “But unless we try, you’ll never find out.” Harry fish mouths and Louis grins, knowing he’s won. As if it was even a competition. “Get up.”

Harry licks his lip and huffs out a breath of air. “We’ve gotten pretty far with me like this.”

Louis glances over his shoulder at the shore and has to agree, they are making good distance. But he’s still having to keep a lot of focus on not drifting from Harry and it’s harder than he’s making it looks – if he does say so himself.

“Just get up here. I promise it’s worth it. The view is so much better.”

“Eh,” Harry scoffs, “Views aren’t that important.”

“Get up here.”

Harry adjusts the strap on his ankle and fidgets with his backpack. “If I fall, I’m blaming you.”

“That’s fine,” Louis laughs. “Just try to stand up.” Harry takes a yoga breath and Louis is about to push him over with his paddle and purposely make him fall in. “Get up here, baby,” he says when Harry starts to do a whole deep breath sequence. Baby. Louis is not a person who calls other humans baby but it has just slipped out in the easiest way.

“Alright, alright, I’m coming,” Harry says finally and Louis thinks baby may be his version of the key to the world.

Louis doesn’t say anything else while Harry attempts to stand, watching his thighs shake as he straightens his knees before he looks away, mouth dry.

“I’m up,” Harry says suddenly. “Oh my god, I’m up.”

Louis looks over at Harry’s lit up face, sunshine pouring from his smile. “Easy, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Harry says emphatically. “That wasn’t bad at all.” He slips his paddle in the water and presses his board forward, curving away from Louis easily as he yells in excitement.

“You can’t just abandon me now,” Louis says, taking a wider slice through the water with his paddle. “After all my emotional guidance.”

Harry has the audacity to actually cackle over his shoulder. “See you on the other side, Lou,” he says a bit too gleefully, his little hips wiggling slightly.

Louis shakes his head and can’t even stay somewhere close to mad for more than a breath. Not when it’s Harry involved.

There’s not much time for talking once they’re both properly on their boards, staying near enough to be heard with raised voices but not to hold a conversation. Harry points everything out like Louis may miss it – the seagulls overhead, the fishing boat coming into the inlet from the ocean. Louis tries to absorb it all in the process – the way the blue sky melts into the water and the cool
tilt of the waves slipping over his board and his toes; The pink of Harry’s shoulders in the sun and the way his hair starts to curl under the weight of the salt from the sea. He feels weightless as they slice through the water – like a bubble in motion.

Eventually, their arms start to feel the burn of paddling and Louis can’t remember what it feels like to not be engaging his abs so directly. The island Doug had mentioned is the perfect stopping point, a blue and white striped flag signaling where they can dismount their boards in relatively shallow water. Louis’s splash hits Harry in the face when he slides off the board and he apologizes with a quick kiss to his cheek even if he can’t stop laughing.

“Did you bring a picnic?” Harry asks after they’ve pulled their boards up on the shore and Louis yanks the beach towel out of his backpack.

“I did.” The towel flutters in the breeze as he lays it out, Harry straightening the corners. “It’s all store bought because I’m not a part time chef like you, unfortunately.”

“We can’t all be multi-talented,” Harry agrees, plopping down onto one side of the towel.

Louis glares at him for a moment and then sits in the open space, dumping the food out between them.

“Sandwiches, fruit, and Cheetos,” Harry notes as he picks up each package. “A well-rounded meal, I’d say.”

“Glad we agree.” Louis grabs out a water bottle for Harry and then one for himself. His backpack will be considerably lighter on the way back which he appreciates.

The sun floods them both with warmth while they eat, Harry cross legged and Louis leaning back on one arm. It’s like the island belongs to them the same way the bay did when they were on the water – no one around but the bright blue sky and endless water; beach grass down the center of the island creating some semblance of color.

They eat their sandwiches quickly – more exhausted from paddling than they expected. Harry goes for the fruit cup next as Louis had expected but then they take turns trying to toss grapes and Cheetos, into each other’s mouths like show animals. Louis ends up laughing until his stomach hurts and his cheeks are flushed while Harry complains about being overly full because he was too good at the game.

“I’m going to swim,” Harry says eventually, standing up and curving his back in a stretch.

“Oh, now you don’t care about going in the water,” Louis says teasingly, crumpling their garbage into a plastic bag.

“My body, my choice,” Harry says primly. He drops his sunglasses on the towel. “You joining me?”

Louis takes his time scanning Harry’s body, starting at his tattooed ankles, lingering far too long on his stomach and finally meeting his smirk. “Can’t say no to you, can I?”

Harry shrugs a shoulder. “You could. It just wouldn’t be as fun.” He heads toward the water with a wink, his hips swaying far too much for it not to be intentional. Louis pinches the bridge of his nose and takes a deep breath – agreeing to date Harry was unleashing a tiger out of its cage, one with far more bark than bite and a really cute ass. Louis drops his own sunglasses and hat on the towel and takes off after Harry – he really can’t say no to him. Not anymore.

The water is a cool relief from lounging on the sand and Louis floats on his back next to Harry
“This has been lovely,” Harry says just loud enough for Louis to hear. “Just what I needed.”

“Long days at work?”

“Really long,” Harry says. “Physical, too. Like a lot of swimming and jumping over things.”

Louis’s eyebrows pull together. “Is your character a fish? Is that why you won’t tell me more about the movie?”

Harry laughs and dives onto his stomach under the water. Louis tucks his knees so he folds in half and sinks lower, his toes barely brushing the bottom when he straightens out. Harry splashes him when he pops up, his hair flat against his head and still sticking up in bits, a silly grin on his face.

Their hands bump as they tread water, floating closer together like buoys in high tide.

“Thank you for planning today,” Harry says when there is less than a foot of water between them.

“Of course,” Louis says easily. “I’ve found that you make most things fun. This has not been the exception.”

“Going to the doctor with me is not particularly fun,” Harry admits. His lips are slippery red from the water, his cheeks pink from the sun but his eyes are what keep getting Louis. The green against the darker water is something out of a storybook. “I hate shots.”

“Really?” Louis smirks, “I personally love when people jam needles into me.”

“Makes me puke,” Harry says. “It’s not pretty.”

“No, I can’t imagine it is.” His eyes roam over Harry’s face, taking in the coloring and lines like he always does. He can never get enough – wants to have each inch memorized if he can. Their hands bump as they try to stay afloat so Louis takes Harry’s hand in his, twisting their fingers together beneath the water.

“What are you thinking about?” Harry asks, his eyes traveling over Louis’s face in much the same way as Louis does to him.

“Thinking about you,” Louis says, honestly. “How glad I am to have met you. How happy today and the other night have made me.”

Harry smiles slowly. “Me too.”

“You were thinking that too?” Louis raises his eyebrows.

“No, I agree with you,” Harry says. The distance between them closes enough that Louis can feel Harry’s body heat beneath the water, their ankles slipping against each other whenever they kick.

“Then what are you thinking about?” The words come out quietly and Louis isn’t sure if Harry’s even heard him as he comes irresistibly closer, their mouths barely a whisper apart.

“Was hoping you’d kiss me.” Harry says it right against Louis’s mouth and it sends a flare of heat up his spine in the split moment before Harry’s lips are on his fully, the space between them gone altogether.

Harry legs float about around Louis’s waist and he twists his ankles behind his back, holding on as they exchange each breath, tongues drawing shapes with no names and tasting - absolutely
They end up on the beach towel again though Louis can’t get the logistics straight of how only that Harry fits perfectly between his legs and his body is a weight he didn’t realize he was missing, their wet fronts pressed without space for air. Their teeth click when their kisses grow sloppy, both of them laughing at the sound and then it turns to more of a breathless sound when Harry moves his lips down Louis’s jaw and to his neck. Louis’s skin feels hot under Harry’s lips, his hands wandering the expanse of Harry’s back and to his hips in an endless circle. Harry stops and presses his face to Louis’s neck and it fits there too, their ribs ballooning against each other as they struggle to catch their breath.

It’s a blessing they’re outside at all because Louis doesn’t think he’d be able to make himself stop if they were truly alone, if he could get Harry on his back and explore even more - he cuts off his own line of thought before it can really get started. Harry is still pressed steadily along his body and that’s having its own effects without his mind running wild.

Harry starts laughing first, a slow bubble of a sound as he slips from on top of Louis to his side, his hand falling around Louis’s waist, his face pressed against his collarbone. Louis laughs too, though he doesn’t know what’s quite so funny about the fact he’s trying to compress a boner in his swim shorts.

“What’s funny?” He asks, his fingers drawing lines on Harry’s forearm.

“You make me crazy,” Harry says against his chest. “In the very best way.”

Louis smiles, his eyes closing. If only Harry knew the havoc he has wreaked on Louis’s poor heart and mind since the day he wandered into No Name. If only he knew the walls he’s knocked down in Louis’s chest since they first spoke, the unassuming barriers he’s unlocked and destroyed. “H, you have no idea,” he says finally.

Eventually they make their way back to the boards and across the bay, arms well rested and lips chapped. Louis can’t make himself stop smiling - not even once. He walks Harry home after, their hands twisted together and hips knocking.

“Best second date,” Harry says when they’re in front of his house. “Thank you. Again.” He wraps himself around Louis, the closeness becoming something Louis knows he’ll miss like an ache when they separate.

“Of course,” he says, kissing the side of Harry’s sun warmed neck once and then again. “Could watch paint dry with you and it would be fun.”

Harry pulls back, his fingers twirling the hair at the back of Louis’s neck. “Not sure that’s something we should try.”

Louis scrunches his nose, “Maybe not. But my point stands.”

Harry’s next kiss is more of a smile against Louis’s mouth but they manage to get it right in the one after that, pulling each other even closer right on the sidewalk in front of the house with the pink door.

The next few weeks are sweet cherry popsicles and fireworks, butterflies and fizzy drinks. July falls into August and Louis can’t remember what it’s like not to fill his time with, to drown in, Harry. Dates three, four, and five pass in the following week and then they don’t really call the things they do dates anymore.
Everything is as it always was, it seems. Louis wakes up and goes on his run, still starts coffee before he showers and chugs one cup too hot just to get it in him before he starts writing. He still goes to No Name and harasses Niall, still goes to sleep at a reasonable hour. It’s just that now, all the places once filled with nothing or mundane things are now filled with Harry - and they’re allowed to be.

Louis is allowed to let his mind run to Harry when he does his cool down in the mornings, and he’s allowed to stare at Harry unabashedly when he tells a story that goes on a bit long and loses the point in the middle. He’s allowed to interrupt those same stories by kissing Harry now, too. Agreeing to date Harry, falling for Harry, means Louis is allowed to do all sorts of things he didn’t let himself before.

Date three, Louis takes Harry to the used bookstore tucked beneath the coffee shop they both love, showing him the secret entrance that’s not exactly conducive to business but makes the entire thing feel like a mystery. Louis thinks he could get lost in watching Harry between the dusty bookshelves with the day’s last golden hour shining through the square windows. The way he drags his fingers along their spines and smiles when he comes across an author he likes. How he throws glances at Louis every once in a while from across a lower shelf, eyes mischievous though Louis can’t say why.

They leave with six books between them, four belonging to Harry. They take the back roads back to Harry’s place and take up residence on the back porch as the stars begin to peek out from behind the darkening sky. They push the loungers together so they can lay together, Harry’s head on Louis’s shoulder while he reads one of the poetry books he’d found - reading out loud every so often that Louis can’t be sure if he falls in love with the poems or the way Harry’s voice dances over the words when he finds one he likes enough to share.

Louis cooks for Harry one night - perhaps date five - his best attempt at tacos and jalapeno margaritas that Harry fawns over even when his eyes water because Louis let the jalapeno seeds soak in the tequila for a bit too long. They end up in the hot tub outside of Louis’s bedroom that night, Harry borrowing a pair of swim shorts. They start out across from each other until they realize they’re both more comfortable with Harry in Louis’s lap as they watch yet another sunset, the haze of hot water making the whole thing feel like a dream.

They kiss slowly until it’s too slow and then Louis’s hands are gripping against Harry’s hips and rolling him forward against himself while Harry presses breathy moans into Louis’s mouth. It’s heady and heavy all at once, neither one of them breathing properly until Harry stutters a gasp against Louis’s mouth and stops suddenly.

“We can’t do this,” Harry says suddenly and Louis absolutely freezes. All of his blood is rushing to the center of his body but his head isn’t too empty to listen to Harry’s serious voice.

“What?” Louis asks when he catches his breath.

“It’s not sanitary,” Harry says against Louis’s neck where he had been creating something that feels like a rather aggressive bite mark.

“Not sanitary?” Louis drawls slowly, feeling two steps behind.

“For all my little you-know-whats to be in your hot tub,” Harry says as he slips out of Louis’s lap and lands right next to him, hips and thighs pressed tighter together.

“You’re what?” Louis says loudly. He’s confused and a second ago he swears he was about to make Harry fucking come and - he starts laughing like a fifteen-year-old boy when he realizes
what Harry is saying.

“Yeah,” Harry says, nodding when he thinks Louis understands. “You got it now, you get it.”

“H,” Louis says very seriously once he stops laughing, “You should know now that there are very few places that I would care about any part of you being. Including your you-know-whats.” He giggles over the last part because, honestly, Harry is ridiculous. He does get the pleasure of watching Harry’s eyelashes flutter before he kisses Louis’s cheek and settles beside him.

“Noted,” he says with another kiss to Louis’s shoulder and Louis can’t help the little laugh that bubbles out again. He’s falling for the weirdest person he’s ever met and he doesn’t much want to stop.

After that, Harry is content with his head on Louis’s shoulder and lazy kisses. It’s not until they’re pruned that Louis realizes Harry has been tracing the scar on his stomach with his fingertips. Harry doesn’t mention it even once.

They spend a couple lazy nights at Harry’s house when they can’t come up with more exciting things to do. There’s a Wednesday they go through the owner of the house’s vinyl collection and play each other their favorite tracks off falling apart albums. They play Scrabble (Louis loses again) and listen to Bruce Springsteen and then find midnight comes on quick and they end on Fleetwood Mac - Landslide sounding like some kind of heartbreaking magic on the old record player. Louis watches from the couch, the way Harry touches the back of album track listing with reverence, mouthing along to the words in a way that Louis doesn’t think he realizes.

*Can the child within my heart rise above?*

*Can I sail through the changin’ ocean tides?*

*Can I handle the seasons of my life?*

“Is this your favorite?” Louis asks when Harry closes his eyes and squeezes them tight.

Harry looks over and shakes his head. “No. I think it’s ‘Leather and Lace’ but that was a few years after this. Not on this album,” he says, holding it up.

Louis lets ‘Landslide’ end but he searches for Harry’s favorite on his phone, smiling when he finds it.

“What are you smiling about?” Harry says with a small grin, confusion growing when Louis gets up to lift the needle before the next track can begin.

Louis shakes his head and sets his phone on the coffee table as the first few strings of the song he’s searched for start to come through. “May I have this dance?” He asks with over the top candor, reaching for Harry’s hand.

They rock back and forth in the candle lit room, Harry softly singing and pressing the softest kisses to Louis’s lips every once in a while. Louis doesn’t know what date it is but he thinks it’s kind of perfect.

*“*
letting it get clearer - he finally sees it’s Harry himself. Louis slows to a jog a few hundred feet from the turn up leading to Harry’s yard just to watch him.

Harry has his easel set up facing the water and his face is wholly concentrated on the canvas in front of him. Louis isn’t close enough to see it clearly but he can imagine the pinch in Harry’s eyebrows even from here. Harry is wearing his pink jumper again, a pair of sunglasses in his hair, though the fog over the water is still too thick for the sun to be shining properly. Louis can only watch for a moment before it feels creepy but he’s barely taken two steps closer before Harry looks right up at him, a small smile on his face like he knew Louis was there all along.

“Surprise,” Louis calls when he’s within talking distance.

Harry smiles fully as he sets his paintbrush on the small table he’s pulled over from in between the loungers. “Did you get lost on your run?”

Louis takes the steps up Harry’s deck two at a time, putting particular emphasis on the board he installed into the porch almost two months ago now. “Terribly lost,” Louis says. “Would never come surprise you on purpose.”

Harry scrunches his nose at him. “You can come closer,” he says when Louis stops just beyond the easel.

Louis licks his lip and takes a subtle step closer, “I hate when people stand behind me while I write, I wasn’t sure if it was the same for artists.”

Harry actually snorts and rubs his nose with the sleeve of his sweater. “Definitely not an artist, babe. You can look if you want.”

Louis closes the distance between them but doesn’t look at the canvas first. He slides his hand around the side of Harry’s neck and tips his head back as he kisses his lips, softly. “Good morning,” he says before kissing him again and then pulling away.

Harry’s canvas is covered in blues and greens in no semblance of anything but the colors - like an ocean wave wiped away anything that had been there. There’s texture in places where he’s double coated and a certain ombre look from bottom to the top.

“Well?” Harry asks, “Think I can sell it to a gallery yet?”

Louis’s eyes wander top to bottom on the painting again. He doesn’t know anything about art - actually nothing, really - but he knows what Harry has created feels the way a receding wave looks. There’s a calm sense to it - a feeling emitted from the coloring that Louis doesn’t think most first-time painters can emulate. In his not so humble and incredibly biased opinion.

“I’d buy it,” Louis says. “I’d buy three of them and hang them in my dining room that looks out over the water. Are you doing commissions?” Harry full on blushes and Louis grins. “You think I’m kidding but I’m really not. I like this.”

Harry shakes his head and stands from his chair, stretching his back. “Come inside,” he says with a kiss to Louis’s jaw, “I’ll make you breakfast.”

Harry makes eggs and toast and slices fresh strawberries while Louis makes them both coffee with Harry’s fancy as hell automatic coffee machine. “It’s not mine,” he kind of grumbles when Louis teases him, “Came with the place, you know.”

Louis forgets, sometimes, that Harry doesn’t actually live in this house. Some parts of it seem so like him while others - like the lack of color and art on the walls - make it really seem like a rented
space. Louis wants to know what his house actually looks like - what color he’s painted his walls and what design is on his shower curtain. It’s not a question he knows how to ask.

They eat at the nook table, ankles twisted under the table though Louis definitely, definitely needs to shower as he feels the sweat from his run drying. He says as much out loud when Harry gets up to clear the table once they’re done eating. Louis finishes his coffee and takes both of their mugs to the sink.

“Shower here,” Harry says, rinsing one of the plates.

“What?” Louis runs the mugs under the faucet and sets them in the drying rack.

Harry spins and grabs Louis’s hips, the water still running behind him. “I said, shower here,” he says, then presses a kiss to Louis’s neck and breathes in behind his ear. Louis should be disgusted on his behalf but there’s a spark of arousal deep in his belly.

“I have to shower too,” Harry says easily. “Come along.” He walks out of the kitchen with cool nonchalance but Louis sees right through him considering he left the kitchen faucet running on full blast. Louis turns it off and follows Harry quickly.

He takes the stairs two at a time much the way he did outside as he follows the sound of running water to the second level. He curves into what must be the master bedroom and catalogs the balcony and white duvet, Harry’s phone on the night stand and a glass of water before he’s too tempted to stay any longer.

Harry is pulling off his shirt in the bathroom and smiles when Louis comes in. “Sharing is caring,” he says, leaning forward to kiss Louis and then putting his fingers in the hem of his shirt and pulling it off too. “Yeah?” He asks hesitantly, lips tracing over the words tattooed on his collarbones.

Louis senses no reason for the hesitation until he catches sight of himself in the mirror, the stark contrast of his scar on his stomach. Harry has seen that and he’s seen the scar on Louis’s knee but if he slips out of his shorts and boxers now, Harry will see the way they connect over his hip. Louis hasn’t shown anyone - not besides his doctor and his family. Even when he’s hooked up with people since the accident, it’s been too dark to notice or he’ll leave his shirt on to cover it. He doesn’t want to answer the inevitable questions.

When he says, “Of course,” to Harry, he realizes he’s opening himself up to the possibility of having to share his secret, of Harry staring at the part of himself he hates most. But then Harry is dragging down his own running shorts and Louis is kind of lost on what the big deal is anyway.

Harry slips into the shower first and Louis kicks off his socks in a rush to follow, the glass door closing softly behind him. Harry is under the spray, head tipped back and eyes closed, and Louis lets himself look, drinking in the anomaly of Harry’s body - wide shoulders and thin hips, thick thighs and long legs, a fucking tattoo on his thigh Louis didn’t know was even there. His dick is even something to write home about, already half-hard and pretty pink. Louis doesn’t think he’s seen an attractive dick in his lifetime but somehow Harry has it made. Louis is dragging his eyes up his body in the opposite direction when Harry opens his eyes again, a sly smile on his lips.

“Switch?” He says, skirting out of the water to let Louis under. Their bodies brush as they move and Louis kisses Harry hard, holding his face in his hands and licking between his lips. He tastes like bitter coffee and sweet strawberries and the taste all his own which is Louis’s favorite.

“You’re something else,” Louis says, as the water cascades over his head and washes away the sweat from his skin. Harry’s hands hold his hips when he kisses him again, water from the shower
suddenly threatening to drown both of them.

Harry coughs first and Louis pushes him a step back so the water is only on his back and Harry can breathe. “Good?” He asks Harry with a peck against his lips, hands running over his shoulders.

Harry nods, smiling sheepishly. They kiss again, deeper and Louis lets his hands run the expanse of Harry’s back, down to below his hips. Harry bites his bottom lip and Louis pushes his hands further, hands filling with Harry’s perfectly round ass as he drags him closer so their hips align, no electricity as intense as when their half hard cocks brush, both of them moaning against each other’s open mouths. Louis drags Harry’s hips forward again, the friction too good to ignore but then Harry is slipping between his hands onto the shower floor, knees first. Louis stutters for breath as Harry’s heavy-lidded eyes fall to his dick, his hand reaching out at the same time.

Louis’s head falls back when Harry takes him in the mouth and he reaches a hand out for a desperate grip on the wall to keep from falling, his other in Harry’s hair as this perfect, perfect boy hollows his cheeks and takes him down until his lips nearly press the coarse hair on Louis’s groin and then he pulls back, green eyes looking up and meeting Louis’s in the most seductive way.

“Fuck,” Louis splutters as Harry does it again, slow and steady. “H, fuck, baby,” he says all at once, his mouth dry and stomach burning. Harry pulls off, a string of spit keeping his lips connected to Louis’s dick. He nosed the scar on Louis’s thigh before he goes back again and it’s all too much at once.

The warm water licking Louis’s back, Harry on his knees looking like a wet dream, the hot wet suction of his mouth, the noises he keeps making each time he takes Louis deeper. Harry uses his hand and tightens his lips, his head moving at a steadier pace once he catches a rhythm. His eyes roll back when Louis pulls his hair and it’s all enough to end Louis right there but he grits his teeth and let’s Harry control the pace, lips and cheeks a gorgeous red and pink accordingly.

“I’m gonna come, H,” Louis says, the strings of heat in his stomach getting shorter and shorter, the fire collecting deep in his belly. All of the warmth in his veins is pulsing right there and he can’t take it, the pleasure easing back out towards his chest and making his breath catch. “Harry, babe,” he says again, the only warning he can manage.

Harry meets his eyes and takes him deeper, his own warning in return and Louis absolutely loses it. He comes with his fist pressed to his mouth, his teeth sinking into his own skin, the raging fire burning him inside out as his vision goes white.

He’s aware of Harry swallowing and then sucking gently, eyelashes fluttering when Louis finally gets the sense to open his eyes again, surprised he’s still standing when he feels as though he’s been taken to a different dimension altogether.

“That mouth,” he says first, his voice broken like he’s the one who just gave a blow job. Harry lets him fall from his lips as he sits back on his heels, his ribs ballooning with his breath.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Harry says hoarsely and Louis wants to have his voice recorded on tape. He kisses along Louis’s scar as he stands up - a sense of reverence that has Louis going weak. He catches Harry’s scar when he reaches the end of the pink line, tasting himself on Harry’s tongue.

“Unbelievable,” Louis says, kissing Harry again, deeper. He feels Harry against his thigh and swallows Harry’s broken groan when he intentionally presses his thigh forward against him.

“Fuck,” Harry gasps. He swallows and drops his head back when Louis does it again, eyes
fluttering. Louis thinks he could tease Harry forever but his cock is already an angry red and wet at the tip, the flush on Harry’s chest spreading from his chest up his neck. When Louis wraps his hand around him, Harry melts against him immediately, his face pressing against Louis’s neck.

“Oh, babe,” Louis says when Harry presses his hips forward fiercely. “You need this, don’t you?” He wraps one hand around Harry’s thin waist to hold him as he starts to pull at his cock in an even rhythm, squeezing at the tip and digging his thumb just under the crown in a way that makes Harry’s hips stutter. “I got you,” Louis says. “I’ve got you.”

Harry pulls away from his neck to kiss his mouth but the kisses dissolve into stuttered breaths and tiny gasps with each twist of Louis’s wrist.

“Come on, baby,” Louis whispers against his cheek. Harry gasps again, fingers digging into Louis’s back and then he’s coming, the warmth of it hitting Louis’s ribs. “There we go,” he murmurs quietly, keeping his pressure steady until Harry stops pulsing and then pulling his hand off slowly. Louis kisses Harry’s cheeks and holds him until he lifts his head and kisses him fully, Louis pulling them back under the water deftly, keeping it on their shoulders instead of their mouths this time.

They don’t talk for a moment or two, just let themselves catch their breath under the warm shower, holding onto each other like it’s the only thing that matters. At least until the water runs cold.

* * *

Harry still works late nights and disappears for a couple of days at a time with his schedule, Louis still has to work odd hours with time zone specific interviews - but they take time to find each other, to never go too long without. Harry calls him when he gets home too late and they both lay in their respective beds talking about nothing - more than once Louis falls asleep to Harry talking about his day, the funny things people said, the way the set crashed down too early. Harry falls asleep to Louis too - especially when they sit in silence on the phone, listening to each other breathe like that’s a normal thing to do.

Harry likes to read while Louis has to work late on the nights he has too much to do. It’s like being in the same space is enough even if their best contact is Louis leaning over the couch to kiss Harry’s forehead on his way to make another cup of tea or Harry giving Louis a writing break by reading something out of his book aloud. Easily, it seems, Harry fits in Louis’s life in all the places he didn’t realize someone was missing.

* * *

Niall finds out they’ve escalated their friendship to something a bit more on a Thursday afternoon.

Harry has the day off from the movie and Louis meets his deadline before lunch leaving the rest of the day free.

“We should go play football in the park,” Harry says when he calls Louis in the afternoon and though Louis hesitates - not wanting another bloody nose incident - he agrees anyway. He’s happy he does because Harry shows up in tiny black shorts and a grey t-shirt that are distracting by themselves but particularly with Harry’s Bambi legs tripping over each other as he streaks up and down the field. They play only against each other and Louis is pretty sure Harry could actually be good if he could get his feet to do what his mind wants them to.

Louis hasn’t played football with someone in a long time and though he knows it’s only for fun, he can’t keep the smile off his face or the competitive edge when Harry starts to dribble away
from him. He knows his body doesn’t work the way it once did - his stamina alone will never be the same - but he doesn’t think about that with Harry, only that he needs to catch up with him and that when he steals the ball Harry will actually make a noise like he’s offended it’s happened at all.

Louis loses his breath when he falls. His cleat gets stuck in a small pit and he trips over himself, his ankle twisting his knee as he goes to the ground. For a moment, he expects Harry to rush over and hover the way his mum did when he first wanted to start playing, he expects someone to yell at him for pushing too hard. What he doesn’t expect is for Harry to run over and steal the ball from between his limp legs before taking off down the other side of the field with a quick, “Sucker,” over his shoulder.

Louis gets up slowly at first, the ineffable fear he’ll really hurt himself for good always edging at his mind. He feels fine, he realizes quickly - just grass on his knees and a grass burnt elbow, nothing new. He takes off after Harry with a grin on his face, grinding his teeth as he tries to gain on him. Harry yelps when he realizes Louis is getting closer and kicks the ball toward the far goal with something like a squeak right when Louis gets to him. The ball soars through the goal and Harry throws his arms in the air as he spins toward Louis with wide eyes. Louis knows he’s supposed to be on the other team but it doesn’t stop him from grabbing Harry by the waist and hoisting him in the air, his smile pressed to his throat.

They can only stay coordinated for so long before they inevitably fall to the ground both of them laughing in their tangle of limbs as they smile against each other’s mouths.

“I made a goal,” Harry says rolling to his back. “Look at that character development from when we started.”

Louis kisses his cheek and then his nose and then his lips because he can’t help it. Never can. “I know, babe. I’m proud of you.”

“Even though I won the game?” Harry’s eyebrow goes up, his breathless words coming out over a smile.

“We’re obviously going to have a rematch,” Louis says flatly, hovering over Harry. “You switch kicked me down by the other goal which is a penalty.”

Harry actually cackles and Louis bites his neck. “I don’t even know what that is.”

Louis sucks on the skin he’s bit and then kisses it when Harry goes lax under him.

“Is this the part where you blow me?”

Louis’s eyebrows shoot up, his face coming out of Harry’s neck to look at him properly. “Excuse me?”

Harry smiles and scrunches his nose. “I think that’s how football works? The winning team gets a blow job from the loser?”

“On Porn Hub, perhaps,” Louis says, fingers twisting with Harry’s. “You have a bit of a fantasy you want to share? “Harry’s eyes go wide as Louis lifts his hands up over his head and pushes them back in the grass. “Hm?” He loves the way Harry’s eyes go dark and then Louis kisses him again, reveling in the sparks of heat in his stomach.

“Oi, what the fuck is this?”

Louis pulls back quickly to see Niall standing in the middle of the field, face red and eyes wide.
“We’re busy,” Harry says, but then he’s pressing his face to Louis’s neck as if he’s hiding. Louis would appreciate a hiding place about now.

“Niall,” Louis says, “What are you doing here?”

“I saw you playing footie,” he says, eyes still glued to where Louis and Harry’s hands are intertwined in the grass. “And I thought I’d come too. I need the exercise.” He licks his lip and raises his eyebrow, “I just didn’t realize how much exercise you were planning to get.”

Harry pokes his head out and twists to look at Niall, “Surprise!”

Niall smiles then. “I knew this would happen. That first day Harry walked in.”

“When Louis was a dick to me?”

Louis flicks Harry’s ear lightly even though he’s right.

“Yep. I thought, if anyone is going to get Lou to unclench it’s going to be this boy in a floral shirt.”

Louis fish mouths and Harry laughs loudly. “We’re glad to have your support,” he says as Louis moves to separate them.

“I’d give you both hugs,” Niall says, “But I don’t think I want to get too close.”

Louis was definitely contemplating giving Harry a blow job not two minutes ago so it’s probably a safe bet.

“How about you come to No Name tonight? Let’s celebrate a bit,” Niall says as he starts to back away.

“As long as you promise to not make any more comments about how you knew this was going to happen,” Louis says flatly, sitting up.

Niall makes the motion of locking his lips and throwing away the key. Louis will believe it when he sees it.

“Hey, Ni,” Harry says suddenly, sitting up. “How long were you over there? Did you see me beat Louis’s ass and score a goal?”

He yelps when Louis tackles him back to the ground and tickles his stomach and sides.

“Gross,” Niall yells as he starts to walk away. “I’m kidding, I love you both,” he says. “But gross.”

Harry is yelling for mercy and Louis is laughing so hard that neither one of them quite hears him.

They get drunk at No Name. More drunk than is probably acceptable for a Thursday night in an almost empty bar.

It starts out rather innocently when they meet Niall after dinner, the three of them sitting in Louis’s usual booth with a tray of tequila shots and a deck of cards. Harry teaches them a card game which Louis doesn’t really follow the rules of but they end up finishing the tequila shots anyway.

“You’re not working right now, are you?” Harry asks when Niall comes back with a second tray,
golden tequila, fresh limes and coarse salt.

“Are you saying I’m drunk?”

Harry shakes his head, “No but you’re about to be. Ever heard of ‘King’s Cup’?”

Harry, it seems, knows as many drinking games as a college kid and they somehow play most of them until they’re all feeling a bit loose and Louis has a hard time taking his eyes off Harry’s lips. They’re cherry pink on an average day but tequila and biting them in concentration has them leaning much more toward raspberries and Louis wants a taste. Niall gets up to go use the bathroom so Louis leans over the table to kiss Harry because he’s allowed to now. He draws Harry’s tongue into his mouth until he’s making helpless little noises and then Louis separates them, slipping back onto his side of the booth. Harry looks dazed by the time Niall comes back and Louis is exceptionally proud of himself.

“I think we’ve got this one, darling,” Louis says when Harry starts talking about the rules for ‘Go Fish’. Harry flips Louis off but something about it seems like a kitten with a bad attitude and Louis can’t stop laughing.

“Let’s do body shots,” Harry says when the game is over and he’s smacking tequila from his lips. Louis, having switched to beer, chokes a bit, vision going spotty. “Off who?”

Harry surveys the bar with his hand on his chin, sizing up the patrons. There aren’t that many of them which is probably why Niall thinks it’s okay to loudly sing along to the Rihanna song playing on the overhead speaker, nursing a shot of tequila like a cup of tea. He’s twirling around the center of the bar with his sunglasses on, looking absolutely ridiculous, but Louis isn’t going to be the one to stop him.

“You, I guess,” Harry says finally like it’s a tough decision.

“Maybe I don’t want that,” Louis says flippantly. “Ever think about that?”

Harry smirks, “I think you do.”

Louis looks away to hide his smile. Of course he does - the very idea of Harry’s tongue on him is always enough to get him going a bit too much, if he’s honest. “What do I get out of it?” He asks when he thinks he can control his facial expression.

Harry’s tongue draws over his bottom lip and Louis’s eyes follow. “You do one off me next,” he says.

Louis raises his eyebrows, smiling slowly. “Deal.”

“What’s happening over here?” Niall asks as he dances over a moment later before quickly skirting away with a mumbled, “Oh dear god.”

Louis is sitting on the edge of the table with Harry between his legs, Louis pulling the collar of his shirt down so his collarbones are exposed. Harry smiles against Louis’s chest, drawing his tongue along the lettering and sprinkling salt in the same trail. He gets the lime in Louis’s mouth with a smug grin but it only stays there for a moment.

He sets fireworks off in Louis’s chest when he draws his tongue over the salt, takes the shot and then squeezes the lime between both of their mouths, lime juice dripping down Louis’s chin and onto his neck. Harry spits the lime onto the almost empty tray and kisses Louis again, softer. “Good?”
Louis’s skin is fizzing from the drinks, his lips going soft, and his insides are all twisted up because of the boy he’s got standing between his legs. “So, so good,” he says. He presses a quick kiss to Harry’s jaw. “My turn?”

Harry hesitates before he half-smiles. “You make that sound like a threat.”

“Course it’s not,” Louis says sweetly, slipping off the table and onto the floor. He clears away the tray and empty glasses into the bin Niall had brought over.

“Do not have sex on that table,” Niall says from somewhere behind them. Louis flips him off over his shoulder. They haven’t even had sex yet and the first time they do it certainly won’t be in Niall’s bar of all places.

“Hop up,” Louis says even as Harry is does it himself.

Louis glances around the bar and finds it still mostly empty besides Niall now dancing to Taylor Swift and the bartender cleaning glasses behind the bar. There’s a table up front of people who could clearly care less about what’s happening in the back of the bar. Niall’s singing probably wards them off anyway. He knows how Harry is about people looking at him, noticing him and he doesn’t want something so simple as a body shot to be taken too far.

“Still okay?” He asks anyway. For some reason the moment is heavy as Harry meets Louis’s eyes and nods, blinking slowly. Louis kisses him just as slow and then pulls away.

He starts by licking a stripe up the side of Harry’s neck and then watching the way his nose scrunches when he sprinkles the salt over it.

“Kind of tickles” Harry says, back arching slightly.

Louis rolls his eyes as he finishes. He puts the lime in Harry’s mouth with a wicked smile and picks up the last shot. “Ready, angel?”

Harry nods, his eyelashes fluttering. Louis looks around to make sure no one is watching - not even Niall and then he starts. He licks the salt with his free hand cupping Harry’s jaw and then he sucks the tequila on a long inhale. He swallows and then connects their mouths, sucking the lime and then letting it drop so he can kiss Harry properly; Harry still holding Louis’s hips as he gasps against his mouth.

“Okay?” Louis whispers. Harry nods and Louis smiles. He kisses Harry again, dragging his bottom lip through his teeth. Harry lifts his hands to twist in Louis’s hair and things have escalated more quickly than either of them clearly anticipated.

“Take it home,” Niall says loudly as they kiss and smile against each other’s mouths. Louis flips him off. He thinks Harry might too.

“Take me home,” Harry says lowly against Louis’s mouth, the tequila and lime on his breath a deadly combination.

“Anything,” Louis says back, kissing Harry again even deeper.

For the first time, in a very long time, Louis wakes up completely disoriented. The warm weight against his body and the white light drenching the room are not part of his everyday routine. His head buzzes not so pleasantly as he opens his eyes and registers the darker head of hair on his
Harry fidgets in his sleep and then stills, one arm low across Louis’s hips and his ear over his heart. Louis blinks harder and tries to focus on the alarm clock next to his bed - it’s after seven and he has no idea when he last slept this long. He runs the tips of his fingers through Harry’s hair, careful not to wake him though they didn’t discuss if he needs to be on set today or not. Louis has the day off - or mostly - just a match to watch in the evening which is blessedly far from this moment.

He knows he needs to go on his usual run but Harry wrapped around him is a tempting distraction, his even breaths against the middle of Louis’s chest. The tequila doesn’t sit so pleasantly now that he’s waking up but last night it was like a super power.

They fell through his front door like they were learning how to walk, hands seemingly everywhere all at once. Harry had Louis back against the door as it was closing, lips devouring the curve of his jaw and down his neck.

“Wait,” Louis had said when Harry started undoing his jeans, sucking a red mark on his collarbone. He’d grabbed Harry’s wrists and smiled, “I owe you a blow job from footie.” Even now he doesn’t have to work hard to pull up the memory of Harry’s eyes darkening, the pleased smile on his red lips.

It felt like a prize for Louis as he got Harry spread out on his mattress for his congratulatory blow job. The sounds Harry made when Louis got his mouth on him and the way he keened when Louis pressed his hips back into the bed with his hands are memories Louis won’t be letting go of. Not to mention the follow-up act of Louis scooting up Harry’s body to perch on his chest, finishing himself off by coming across Harry’s face just like he’d asked.

Harry smacks his lips just then and abruptly pulls Louis’s focus, lifting his neck to watch as Harry settles back into sleep. He hadn’t meant for Harry to sleep over here but after he’d cleaned his come of Harry’s face carefully, his sated, sleepy request of, “Don’t move, Lou,” was too hard to ignore.

He’s careful as he extracts himself from Harry’s cling-on sleeping state, flinching as his feet hit the cold hardwood floors. He pulls on a pair of running shorts and a t-shirt, fishing a pair of socks from his basket of clean laundry waiting to be put away. Harry doesn’t move as Louis scoots around the room, sound asleep on the pillow Louis just vacated. Louis doesn’t leave a note as he comes back to press a fleeting kiss to Harry’s forehead before he goes downstairs for his shoes. He has to stifle a smile at leaving a sleepy Harry behind - he usually prefers to kick people out of his bed rather than to let them hang around.

As has become custom with his runs, Louis’s mind circles back to Harry once he gets warmed up. He just pictures Harry wrapped up in his sheets and if anything, it pushes him harder so he can get back sooner.

Of course, it turns out, Harry is not in the sheets when Louis comes back but on top of them wearing only a white towel around his waist, his hair half dry. He’s smirking when Louis walks into the bedroom and it’s a sight Louis wouldn’t mind getting used to.

“I figured that’s where you were,” he says, motioning at Louis’s outfit. “Either that or you’d abandoned me in the middle of the night.”

“Hardly,” Louis says with an eye roll. It masks the fact his heart is beating double time at the sight of Harry comfortable in his house, the knowledge he didn’t think twice before showering. He crosses the floor to kiss Harry with gentle lips whispering, “Good morning.”
“Good morning,” Harry echoes with a pleased smile.

“I’m going to shower,” Louis says, pulling his t-shirt off before he’s even in the bathroom. The warm water soothes the aches from his run and he could stay for much longer than he does - too distracted by the idea of Harry half naked and lounging on his bed. He doesn’t bother with a towel when he’s finished and it’s a good thing considering Harry is still laying on the bed, sans his own towel, and wearing a wicked smile.

“You might be the death of me,” Louis says as he crosses the room - never did he think death could be so sweet.

August is too hot and too sticky, the last gasp before fall when the sun plays longer in the sky and nights don’t seem to cool off. Louis’s favorite way to spend the nights is with Harry - watching the stars and talking about the big things like death and the nothings like whether cherry Starbursts are even good or wrapped up in each other - hands, fingers, tongues. Louis doesn’t feel like he can get enough of him, like he needs to stay awake longer just to watch Harry sleep and not look away in case he misses when he laughs. He doesn’t know what it’s like to be in love but he thinks he spends August coming somewhere close.

He scares himself one night near the middle of the month when he realizes what he already knows: movies can’t film forever. He has no idea how long ‘Rogue’ is shooting in Malago Cove or what Harry’s plans are after. He only knows they’ve never talked about anything past a few days ahead of the. The pieces coming together in his mind don’t settle in a panic but an itch at the bottom of Louis’s lungs.

He thinks about it all through dinner that evening - as Harry roasts a chicken with vegetables from a recipe he got from catering on set. Louis hums along in the right spots as Harry talks about his day, how they’re shooting a scene on a boat and it made him seasick twice.

“I puked everywhere,” Harry says as he shuts the oven door. “Projectiled on the baby whale that was swimming under our boat too.”

Louis blinks three times quickly and looks over at Harry. “What?”

“Oh, now you’re listening?” Harry takes off his oven mitts and runs his fingers back through his hair. “Thought I lost you there for a bit.”

Louis swallows, “Yeah, think you may have.”

Harry comes over and brushes Louis’s hair off his face, trails his thumb down Louis’s cheekbone. He doesn’t ask anything as he kisses Louis’s forehead and goes back to his story about the scene on the boat, making his way back to the refrigerator to get out the wine he’s chilled. It’s as if he knows Louis is lost, as if he doesn’t mind giving him the time to sort it out.

Louis doesn’t do a great job of sorting it all out in his mind. Instead, he blurts it out right when Harry sits down to eat - the darkened chicken and perfectly roasted vegetables dished onto their plates. Two full glasses of wine and a candle in the center of the table.

“When are you done filming?”

Harry has a chunk of red pepper halfway to his lips and he sets it down, swallowing. “So that’s where you were.”
Louis nods, no point lying about it.

“We wrap at the end of September.”

Louis tries to keep his face neutral and he thinks he does a good job because Harry chances his first bite of food, chewing slowly. The end of September. Five weeks.

“Okay,” he says, “Just wondering.” He doesn’t say that he hates he was so stubborn the first month Harry was here, that he hates the time they missed when now they barely have any time at all.

“But,” Harry sets his fork down, eyes hesitant. “I don’t have any other projects lined up right away. So I think I want to stay through October. Possibly November, depending.”

“Getting too attached to Malago Cove?” Louis says to mask the waves in his stomach. It’s longer than Five weeks but there’s still an end coming. Inevitable.

“Something like that,” Harry says without breaking eye contact.

They share a private smile - leaving the space between them full of words unsaid. The rest of dinner is quiet though Louis makes sure to compliment Harry’s cooking too many times. He’s nothing if not supportive. Harry prattles on more about shooting earlier in the day but Louis knows he’s only doing it to fill the silence. He can read Louis like an open book and Louis is just starting to figure that out.

“Should we make brownies for dessert?” Harry asks as they’re clearing the table, stilted silence lingering. He seems to be skirting around Louis, his eyes cast down like he’s the one at fault because his movie has to end. Louis should have asked earlier, he knows. He shouldn’t have let himself float knowing the crash would be so hard.

“You have a recipe?” Louis finishes his wine and adds his glass to the stack in the sink.

“Bought a box actually,” Harry says, so quietly that Louis can’t take it. He may regret taking too long to get close to Harry but he doesn’t want to regret what happens next, however long this next bit may last.

He grabs Harry’s wrist and pulls him in with a soft, “Hey.” Harry comes easily and folds to Louis in the way he always seems to, making himself smaller as his hands fall to Louis’s waist. “Thank you for dinner.” He kisses the side of Harry’s cheek and then his lips, the tension hanging between them like a weight.

“You’re welcome,” Harry says, returning the kiss with one to Louis’s chin. “Is that all you wanted to say?”

Louis blinks and widens his eyes at Harry’s small smile. “Am I not allowed to just want to hold you?”

Harry smiles fully and shakes his head. “Not when we have brownies to be making.”

Louis actually laughs as he runs his hands down Harry’s back and squeezes his ass when he kisses him again. “Cheeky.” Harry pulls back with another laugh, spinning from his arms to get the box of brownies.

Whatever tension hung so heavily seems to dissipate once they start baking - measuring the ingredients and whisking them together, telling stories about baking with their mums when they were growing up. Harry keeps stealing bites of the batter and Louis shoots him warning looks.
before kissing the batter from his lips and smearing some on his cheek. Harry squeals and makes Louis get the smear off his cheek. Louis obliges - using only his tongue. Harry says it’s much more mother cat and kitten than it should be and Louis is forced to ignore him for the next five minutes.

While the brownies are in the oven, Louis starts on the rest of dishes from dinner though he’s distracted by Harry hanging from his back, his hands under his shirt and tracing his stomach as he talks. He interrupts himself with kisses to Louis’s neck and Louis doesn’t really mind. It seems that after their almost-disagreement from earlier, Harry wants nothing more than for them to be close. Louis can’t say it’s not what he wants too. Always.

“You wanna help dry or keep hanging on my back like a monkey?” He asks once the dishes are nearly done. He can just about hear Harry’s eye roll as he disconnects and scoots to the side.

Louis leaves Harry at the sink while he gets the brownies from the oven, setting them on the counter to cool. He knocks Harry’s hip back at the sink, scooting him to the side. Louis finishes washing the dishes and then hands them off to Harry to dry. Harry elbows Louis as he takes one of the wet pots and it makes Louis splash himself though Harry swears it isn’t on purpose. Louis kind of believes him until the same exact thing happens again and the front of Louis’s shirt is drenched.

“Was that one an accident?” Louis asks Harry with raised eyebrows.

“Yes,” Harry says sweetly though the smile shaking his lips doesn’t seem to agree.

“Sure it was,” Louis says as they go back to their tasks. He’s already smiling when he flicks water at Harry’s face a minute later, the picture of innocence not working in his favor like it does for Harry. Harry blinks like a puppy sprayed with a water bottle and finally opens his eyes. “Oops,” Louis says, setting the next pan on Harry’s pile of towels.

He barely has time to move before Harry is reaching under the faucet and flicking it back at Louis’s face, a grin threatening to split his mouth in two.

“You little shit.” Louis cups his hands under the water and throws it at Harry. It barely gets his shoulder with the way he twists but he yells anyway, grabbing a towel and whipping it at Louis in self-defense.

Louis grabs a towel with a smile and they go back and forth like a game of swords, both of them trying to hit the other, the faucet still running in the background.

Maybe it’s because Louis is the oldest in his family and Harry’s the baby but he manages to get him backed into the corner of the kitchen fairly easily until Harry is pressed in a crevice and yelling for mercy.

“You giving up?” Louis asks when Harry starts waving his white towel like a flag.

“You’re playing dirty,” Harry says as Louis comes closer, his back pressing right up against the wall.

“Am I?” Louis grabs Harry’s hands in his, smiling. He tilts his head to the side, “Am I?”

“Yeah,” Harry says, voice light. “Prowling around being all sexy like - it’s not fair.”

Louis smiles and shakes his head, “Compliments will get you everywhere, my love.”

He doesn’t give Harry a chance to respond before he’s kissing him, pressing their hands up over
Harry’s shoulders as he kisses down his jaw and neck. Harry fights his hold to pull Louis closer, pressing their hips together and grinding. Louis catches his breath against Harry’s neck and then pushes his hands into the back pockets of his jeans to grind them together again, heat ricocheting from his stomach right to his groin.

“Do you-” Louis bites on Harry’s earlobe and then kisses it as Harry rolls forward again.

“What?” Harry throws his head back and it hits the wall in a way that sounds painful but Louis isn’t even sure Harry notices.

“Do you want to go to bed?” Louis asks, knowing Harry will hear all of the connotations he intends.

“Please.” Harry starts walking and pushes Louis backwards somehow directing him toward the kitchen door until he runs him into the kitchen table and the wall without disconnecting their lips.

“Okay,” Louis says, peeling himself back from Harry. “Let’s change strategy here before you ram me into any more parts of this house.”

Harry dances back toward the sink to turn off the water and then he’s running full speed ahead. “Race you,” he calls over his shoulder.

Louis catches him at the top of the stairs, tackling him around the waist in a manner that once got him thrown out of a football game. Football happens to be the furthest thing from his mind at the moment.

He gets Harry on his back on the top landing and kisses him until they really can’t breathe, hips rolling against each other and broken gasps pressed into each other’s skin. Louis trails his fingers up under Harry’s shirt and follows with his lips, kissing a trail over his inked ferns and the butterfly, pausing on his nipples when he notices the curve of Harry’s back as he passes.

“You like that?” Louis asks pointlessly as he takes one between his teeth and tugs slightly. Harry kicks a leg out and his head falls back against the carpet. Answer enough. Louis switches sides when he’s happy with his work, though he leaves his fingers in his wake, twisting the bud just enough to get Harry to keen again. It’s a sound he wants on repeat immediately.

“I thought -” Harry breaks off with a garbled moan.

“What’s that, darling?” Louis bites on his opposite nipple as he twists the first, he can’t help that he’s smiling.

“I thought we were going to bed,” Harry manages. He lifts his hips up against Louis pointedly and leaves no question about where all the blood in his body has settled. “I’m getting impatient and you’ve got me half naked on the floor.”

Louis lets his nipple pop from between his lips and meet Harry’s eyes. “Well, all you had to do is ask,” he says, rolling his own hips down this time. He smirks when Harry’s eyes go dark, both of them well past half-hard and straining against their pants.

“Please take me to bed,” Harry says docilely, fluttering his eyelashes and making his voice go high.

Louis rolls his eyes and tickles Harry’s waist by squeezing it just to make him laugh. He has no idea who has the upper hand and he can’t say he particularly minds the ambiguity. Harry scrambles away from him and rolls over to stand up - Louis doesn’t miss the opportunity to slap his ass as he follows suit.
Harry pulls off his shirt before he’s fully in his room and Louis isn’t far behind him. Harry is already on the bed wearing a knowing smile so Louis crawls up on top of him and kisses him, biting his bottom lip deftly. “What do you want?” He asks, trailing his fingertips down Harry’s sides. He knows tonight is different from all the others – or it feels that way. He wants it to be different, they’ve waited long enough.

“I like it all,” Harry says, eyes unwavering from Louis’s.

“Do you now?” Louis kisses his jaw and settles his body between Harry’s legs, his fingers still trailing aimlessly. “Bit greedy like that?”

Harry rolls his eyes, his cheeks flushing. He runs his hands up Louis’s thighs and drags his fingernails back down; Louis can feel the heat through his jeans. “Shut up.”

Louis laughs and presses forward to kiss Harry, hands coming together to work the button and zip on his jeans. “Tell me what you like best,” Louis says against his mouth. He puts his thumbs in the top of Harry’s jeans and tugs slightly. They barely budge which isn’t altogether unexpected considering how tight they are.

“I want it all,” Harry says, tilting his face to escape Louis’s mouth. “I want it all with you.”

Louis scoots down Harry’s legs further and tugs the jeans with him, his mouth hovering over Harry’s belly button. He doesn’t want to ask what Harry meant by wanting it all right now, if that is more than a sexual preference.

“Do you want me to tell you what I want?” Louis asks. He pulls Harry’s jeans over his thighs and kisses the tiger tattoo and then leans back to pull them the rest of the way off. He presses Harry’s leg in the air to get the ankle off.

“Yeah,” Harry says, delayed.

Louis pulls Harry’s second ankle free and throws the jeans to the ground. It leaves Harry in nothing but a pair of red boxers that are too small for how hard he is and Louis isn’t sure he should wear any other outfit for the rest of his life. At least around Louis, that is.

“I want you in every possible way,” Louis says. He lifts Harry’s ankle and kisses the side, drags his lips up to his knee and then bites the inside of his thigh. “I’m greedy like that,” he says with a wink. He slips down to his belly and ghosts his breath over Harry’s boxers, dragging his tongue against his length and then moving on with a kiss to the trail of soft hair disappearing into the waistline of his pants. Harry pushes his hips up but stays quiet, his lip caught between his teeth and making it even more red.

“But tonight,” Louis says, kissing up the center of Harry’s belly and then biting gently on a collarbone. “Tonight, I’d like nothing more than to fuck you.”

That gets a verbal response from Harry, a groan and then a, “Yes, please,” as he pulls Louis up close to his face and kisses him, their tongues twisting together in a dance they’ve already learned. “Please,” Harry says again, hands trailing over Louis’s back until his thumbs can hook in the back of his jeans. He presses Louis’s hips where he wants them, eyes closing at the masked friction between them.

“Alright, alright,” Louis says when he disconnects their mouths. “Don’t have to beg me.”

“Oh, but I will,” Harry says seriously, one eyebrow curving up slightly.
And – it’s just… Louis hasn’t had someone like Harry before. Not in looks or personality, certainly not in wit or clumsiness – but definitely not in bed. Harry is funny and needy all at once, he has the upper hand one moment and gives it up in the next. He’s everything in one – and Louis didn’t realize men like him existed, that Louis would be the lucky one to find Harry.

He kisses Harry again, harder, trying to put into gesture what he can’t yet say out loud. Harry smiles against his mouth and Louis thinks he may have understood him anyway.

“Do you have stuff, babe?” Louis asks with another quick kiss before slipping off the bed to get rid of his jeans.

“I may have bought one or two things the last time I was at the store.”

Louis stops with his jeans and smiles down at Harry. “Oh, did you? Bit optimistic.”

“I had a dream about you riding me in the hot tub outside your bedroom,” Harry says easily. “I needed to make myself feel like that was an attainable goal.”

For a moment, Louis feels like he’s swallowed his tongue, eyes blinking quickly. He gets it together eventually. “Definitely an attainable goal,” he says finally.

Harry smiles like the damn Cheshire cat. “Lube and condoms behind the mirror in the bathroom.”

Louis takes off for the hallway without another word, pulling open the hidden compartment behind the mirror easily. He sees the First Aid kit again and he actually laughs out loud – the memory of the first time he was in this bathroom sparking in the back of his mind. He finds the box of condoms easily but pauses over the two packages of lube – one flavored and one the simple standard. Louis grabs the latter but notes the first – he’d quite like for them to use that one eventually as well.

Harry is absolutely naked when Louis comes back, his red boxers nowhere to be found as he pulls on his dick with a sly smirk. Louis nearly trips over his feet in his haste to get to the bed. He kisses Harry’s lips and then his cheek, down his jaw and to his neck, running down the center of his body in a circuit he’s done three times already. This time he pauses at his cock, knocking Harry’s hand away from it. It’s Louis’s turn.

Harry is wet at the tip and Louis knows nothing about color matching but he’d say Harry’s lips match the crown of his cock and that’s something he’s going to hold in his heart forever. He runs his hand from tip to base, kissing the slit and getting precum on his lips. He smiles before he takes Harry in his mouth, the sound he makes going directly to Louis’s dick.

Harry is loud and unashamed, he wears his pleasure on every part of his body from the way his legs kick out to his hands in Louis’s hair to his constant and mindless babbling over sounds that Louis loves and words he doesn’t know.

When Louis has him worked up with just his mouth, he reaches for the lube by Harry’s hip, pulling off the protective seal. He flips the top and watches Harry’s eyes flutter.

“You’re going to be the death of me,” he says quietly but Harry hears him, smiling just before he opens his eyes.

“It’s been longer than you think since I’ve done this,” he says. “Even to myself.”

Louis covers his fingertips with lube and rubs them together to warm it. “I’ll go slow, H.” He slides down onto his stomach between Harry’s legs and kisses the inside of his thigh, right near the top. “I’ve got you.”
“I know,” Harry says, squirming a bit to get comfortable. “I trust you.”

Louis kisses the inside of Harry’s thigh again at a loss of what to say. It’s incredibly intimate what they’re doing - the unspoken trust between them makes it okay to laugh and joke around while they do it. Harry saying it out loud feels heavier, important. He’s handing Louis his physical well-being and Louis isn’t taking it lightly.

He’s gentle as he bends Harry’s knees so his feet are flat on the bed, spreading his legs just far enough that he has room to work. He first finger slips inside of Harry without barrier, a slight wiggle of his hips and a gasp. Louis moves around slightly before adding a second finger alongside the first. This time it pulls a louder moan from Harry and when Louis comes up on his elbows he finds Harry’s eyes squeezed shut, his lip tight under his top teeth.

“Relax, baby,” he whispers against his groin as he gets the lube again. He adds more to his first two fingers, letting the slick slide of them stretch Harry more than his movements. He mouths at Harry’s cock as he works his fingers in and out of him, smiling at the broken sounds Harry keeps making.

“Feel good?” Louis asks, sucking gently on Harry’s tip and tasting the salt in his precome.

“Really good,” Harry says before breaking off into another moan when Louis twists his fingers inside of him.

Louis closes his eyes as he moves his fingers, searching for the one spot to make Harry lose it, already imagining his reaction. He doesn’t have to wait long to find out, the brush of his fingers against Harry’s prostate making him go still, his legs shooting out in front of him and nearly hitting Louis as he groans loudly.

“There we go,” Louis murmurs into the thin skin at Harry’s hip as he strokes the same spot again.

“Really, really, good,” Harry says when Louis relents gently - he glances up to see the smile on his face.

“It’ll be better if you don’t kick me,” Louis admonishes. The words are barely out before Harry is bending and spreading his legs again - enough to kill Louis, probably. “Gorgeous as they are,” he says with a cheesy wink that manages to make Harry roll his eyes.

Louis gets down to business after that, scissoring and twisting his fingers to stretch Harry. He’s spent too long fantasizing about what it will feel like to be inside of Harry to waste time now. He mouths at his cock and then lower to his balls as he turns his wrist, a third finger slipping alongside the others. It’s a tighter fit but Harry’s body takes him in all the same, a beautiful, breathless sound falling from his lips.

“I’m ready,” Harry says after a minute more.

Louis strokes his prostate again as he kisses his belly and then goes back to tiny thrusts as he makes his way to Harry’s mouth to kiss him for the first time in too long. Harry’s face is shades of pink and his hair is wild from where his hands have been. His eyes stay locked on Louis’s until they close as they kiss, their tongues meeting somewhere in the middle.

“Ready,” Harry says again, this time right against Louis’s mouth.

“Alright, alright,” Louis says, smiling and kissing the corner of Harry’s lips. “I hear you.”

He slips his fingers out and wipes them on the bed, apologizing briefly to Harry who doesn’t
really seem to care. Harry sits up to run his hands down Louis’s back and then starts to work his boxers down though that takes far more maneuvering on Louis’s side to get them off completely.

Harry fists his hand around Louis, spreading his wetness from his tip and down. Harry curves lower to take Louis in his mouth, licking and sucking for only a moment before he sits back, smiling. “Couldn’t help myself.”

Louis sighs with exaggeration though there’s no real malice behind it. His hands feel shaky as he undoes the condom wrapper - excitement and lust just about making him spiral. Harry handles it easily, tearing the foil and rolling the condom over Louis with practiced ease.

“Really ready now,” Harry says, laying back finally but not before kissing Louis again.

“How do you want this?” Louis asks as he situates himself back between Harry’s legs, lightly stroking the tops of his thighs.

“How do you want me?” Harry asks just as coyly.

Louis rolls his eyes to humor him. “Get on your belly first,” he says, knowing it will be the most comfortable for his first time in a while. “Then we’ll see how we feel.”

Harry is quick to roll onto his stomach and lift his hips, his knees spreading as he adjusts. “Good?” He asks over his shoulder, like Louis would have an objection.

Louis runs his hands over the swell of Harry’s hips and bum, spreading him open and squeezing gently. “Perfect, actually.”

He holds his breath as he slips in slowly, eyes locked on Harry and the tension in his shoulders. Harry takes a deep breath before Louis can ask him to and takes him in even further, making a quiet sound. It’s not easy or comfortable, Louis can speak on both of their behalves, but it’s what makes it them - the easy give and take they always have. Louis grips Harry’s hips when he’s nearly buried in him and then adds a bit more lube to their mixture. The slide happens almost effortlessly after that though Louis waits for Harry to agree.

He watches as the tension melts from Harry’s shoulders first and then his hands grip the bed under him as he adjusts his hips slightly. “Good,” he says. He hangs his head down and inhales then lifts it up again. “Move, babe.”

Louis starts slow, hands braced on Harry’s hips and getting him used to the movement again. Harry moves his hips back against Louis with each thrust and it’s enough for his stomach to shake already. He drags his fingernails against Harry’s back and then over his stomach. He twists his nipples as he moves, if only for the sound it gets from Harry.

They catch a rhythm quickly for their first time, Harry directing his hips and thereby directing Louis easily. He’s something else like this, Louis thinks. His lithe muscles hold him up and his abs press him back but the softness of his hips beg Louis to squeeze, the sounds he makes less of a litany and instead, a symphony.

“You’re a symphony,” is what Louis says out loud. It gets a, “Thanks,” from Harry with a smile over his shoulder even if he has no idea what Louis is on about.

“Gonna flip,” Harry says and it takes Louis a moment to catch up before Harry is physically moving onto his back and Louis has to scoot back slightly.

“Thought you meant gymnastics,” Louis says gamely as Harry settles. He kisses the inside of his knee.
“I did spend a summer in India learning yoga,” Harry says.

Louis grabs a pillow from near Harry’s head and situates it under his hips for a better angle.

“Did you?” Louis lines up and presses inside of Harry again, easier now than before. “For a role or for fun?”

“For fun,” Harry says, covering Louis’s hand on his hip with his own as he adjusts. “I’ll show you my backbend later.”

“Looking forward to it,” Louis says.

It’s even better this way with Harry under him, his face an open canvas when his forehead wrinkles or his mouth drops open if Louis moves a particular way. Louis can’t keep his hands off of him, or his lips when he ducks low to kiss him, nipping at his bottom lip and then down his neck to his collarbones.

He feels like a livewire, the heat in his stomach reaching out to each of his fingers and toes, his eyes barely staying open whenever Harry clenches tightly around him. He holds himself up on his arms to look down at Harry, the gentle curve of his smile and the breathy sound of his moans.

“You’re beautiful,” Louis says quietly, his hand pushing back through Harry’s hair.

“I won’t break,” Harry says when Louis is back between his legs, holding his hips and thrusting in relentlessly.

“What?”

“Sometimes you act like I might break,” Harry says, cutting himself off with a low moan. “I promise I won’t. I can take it.”

Louis slows his hips and shakes his head. “Oh, angel,” he says with a smirk. “You really can’t just go saying things like that.”

Harry’s smirks Louis starts to press into him harder, barely pulling back out before pressing in, the punched-out sound Harry makes echoing in his ears. He puts one of Harry’s legs over his shoulders and shifts him lower on the bed as he works him over.

Harry keens and squirms, his hands reaching for Louis and then his own hair, his nipples and his stomach. He reaches for his cock and Louis bats him away, leaving it alone for the time being. Harry doesn’t seem to know what to do with his body, toes curling against Louis’s ear and his other leg curved around Louis’s hips. He tries to move his hips and curses when he finds Louis is holding him still. There’s no where he can go to escape the pleasure, nothing he can do to release the way it builds.

“Oh god,” he says when he realizes Louis is doing what he asked, his head falling back against the pillows.

“Yeah?” Louis bites his own lip as he drives into Harry, lifting his hips up higher to meet him. “You like this?”

Harry’s eyes roll back in his head, his hot body clenching around Louis again as a response. “This is heaven,” Harry says out loud, his fingers pulling on his nipples.

Louis let’s Harry’s leg drop but he doesn’t let him rest for long before he presses both legs up
toward Harry’s heart, curling him as he drives in, the leverage better now.

Harry yells out and then settles again, his hips free to push down on Louis now. Louis grits his teeth as his orgasm builds, the constant heat in his stomach starting to flutter to something much more serious.

“Lou, you feel so good,” Harry says, his face and chest shiny with sweat. The backs of his thighs are too but that may be from Louis pressing them back. “Heaven,” he says again.

Louis could quite get used to the comparisons to god and heaven – if he can be that for Harry, he’ll take it.

“Baby, I’m gonna come,” Louis says, the white-hot heat of his orgasm starting to gather intensely now. He drops Harry’s legs to come closer, pressing in and in until he doesn’t feel like a person at all but a ball of energy, everything focused to the center of his body, everything Harry, Harry, Harry.

“Come on,” Harry says, his voice broken, “Wanna feel it. Make me feel it.”

Louis rocks back onto his knees and pulls the condom off, pulling his hand quick and tight over his cock as he crowds over Harry’s stomach. Harry’s hands are over his hips and his ass and then Louis is coming in hot streaks over Harry’s chest and his neck, his vision going white with the pressure, his ears ringing in pleased silence. He blinks his eyes open slowly before he even settles, groans out loud when he sees Harry dragging two fingers through the come on the swallows inked on his chest. He puts his fingers in his mouth and Louis’s dick gives a feeble twitch.

“You’re something else,” he says for the second or third time since they’ve started. He kisses Harry and can taste himself on his tongue, a heady feeling.

He runs his hands through his own come as he slides down Harry’s body to rest between his knees. Harry’s cock is red and pulsing now and Louis doesn’t think it will take much to get him to come but he wants to do it right.

He kisses up Harry’s thighs reverently and then his balls, inhaling the sweat and sex coating the apex of his thighs. He uses his wet hand to tug Harry, licking a circle around his base and then putting his cock in his mouth. He presses down until Harry hits the back of his throat at the same time he presses two fingers back into Harry in search of his prostate.

He doesn’t get to it in time but the reaction is just as sweet, Harry’s hips lifting off the bed violently as he drops his mouth open in a silent scream as he comes. Louis swallows reflexively and then again, keeping his lips tight to avoid making more of a mess. He lets Harry fall from his mouth and squeezes again to milk the rest of his orgasm before he trails his lips back up Harry’s body, stopping right at his mouth.

They kiss then, both of them catching their breath against each other, sweat slick bodies resting together in places that will soon be sticky. It’s the perfect afterglow and Louis feels turned inside out, the quiet keening sounds Harry makes against his mouth a sure sign he’s feeling the same way.

Louis rolls onto his back out of the sweaty wet spot they’ve made and takes Harry with him, their ribs puffing out together.

“Can’t believe that’s what we’ve been missing out on,” Harry says first, his face pressed to Louis’s neck. Louis’s fingers trail over his arm as he laughs, pulling Harry closer. In the warmth
of Harry pressed against him, his eyelashes brushing his neck, Louis doesn’t even think about all the ways this is going to hurt him in the end.

Harry is needed less on set over the next couple of weeks as filming wraps up. Louis asks if it’s because his character dies and Harry refuses to say. Louis hasn’t ever asked if he’s an extra or some sort of lead, not sure what answer he wants more. Writing still keeps him busy but he can work from, quite literally, anywhere which he does over the rest of August and into September.

Louis’s routine still stands but he has Harry integrated in it now. On the nights they spend together, he wakes up early to run. On the off chance Harry is still sleeping in bed when he comes back, he’ll start coffee and slip back in beside him for a little bit longer. He finds one of his favorite things is to watch Harry wake up in the morning, the soft blinks followed by a small smile when he realizes Louis is staring at him. “Creep,” Harry tells him more often than not.

Most of the mornings they spend together, Harry is up before Louis is back from his run, already making coffee or cooking breakfast - his chocolate chip pancakes are Louis’s new favorite food. After, Louis goes to his office to work on his assignments and make some calls. Sometimes Harry lingers but most times he leaves to run his own errands. Others, he curls up on Louis’s couch and binge watches romantic comedies on Netflix. Louis’s perfect break is to tackle him on the sofa around lunch time and take a nap with The Notebook playing in the background. They spend the evenings cooking or going to see Niall at No Name, lounging in the jacuzi when they get back or staring up at the stars like they’ve been known to do.

Other days, any semblance of a routine kind of shoots out of the water - the days Harry is on set for odd hours or Louis’s interviews end up cancelled. Those are the days they go on adventures. They spend more time on the beach than they have earlier in the summer, sharing a beach towel on the sand behind Harry’s house, talking a chance in the water every once in a while. They hike to a secret cave buried deep in the cove and swim in the pool at the nearby waterfall. They share lazy kisses as they float around, pinkies overlapping so they don’t go too far.

They slow dance to old records and Harry buys more poetry just to read aloud. They drink red wine and kiss for hours, drowm in each other in sheets and against the couch, up against the wall and in the stall of a bathroom at No Name which really gets Niall fired up. Louis watches football matches with Harry’s head in his lap, his fingers stroking his hair as he takes notes, tightening uncomfortably when things get intense - or, at least, that’s what Harry tells him. Harry also blows him during halftime and Louis has to cheat and read someone else’s recap the night Harry rides him during a match, his body and mouth far too distracting for Louis’s feeble attention span.

Harry paints a few more canvasses and Louis loves to watch him. They spend mornings on Harry’s deck - Louis writing and Harry painting. He looks serene when he does it and Louis only stares hard enough so he’ll remember all the details when Harry’s not here. Not that they talk about that - the inevitable. It’s easier to roll happily in the quiet moments and run headfirst into the loud ones while ignoring the persistent elephant in the corner.

Loud moments are like when Harry has to go to Los Angeles for two nights for a meeting with his agent and Louis gets his first taste of what life is like without Harry. He’s waiting on his front steps when Harry gets back and barely says two words before he has Harry inside and pinned against his front door while he ravishes him, kissing and tasting every part of him twice. That’s the night they use the flavored lube and Harry actually starts crying as he comes, his body pushed over the edge and brought back by Louis’s lips. Louis’s heart has never beat as quickly as it does that night either as he flips Harry onto his back and rushes to hold him, kissing away the tears with shaking lips until Harry tells him that he left his body just then, the tears the only remnants of an out of body orgasm. Louis is so relieved he almost starts crying too.
“That’s what you do to me,” Harry says quietly, kissing Louis’s lips as Louis smudges at a tear track with his fingertips. “Make me absolutely crazy.”

Louis doesn’t tell him then but Harry does the same things to him. He occupies Louis’s thoughts all day, he’s restless until Harry is in his arms, he doesn’t think anyone is funnier than Harry and when he calls his mum he has to bite his tongue after his first ten mentions of Harry before she catches on. He doesn’t like to admit that she may already know everything he doesn’t say. Harry makes him crazy in ways he didn’t realize he ever wanted, needed. He’s the happiest he’s ever been and he’s not even trying.

*  

Through it all, their favorite place remains Harry’s porch, wrapped together or just next to each other, under the night sky. Louis doesn’t know how long it will last - the warm nights of an ending summer and his nights with Harry, their uncertain future. He doesn’t ask, only takes what he can get.

This includes one of the last nights of September when it’s too sticky to be wearing clothes and they both strip to their shorts as they lay in the lounger, Harry between Louis’s legs, his bare back pressed to Louis’s chest. They just lay there for a while, not speaking or drinking but just being. Even now, three months in - it’s one of Louis’s favorite things about being with Harry.

Harry traces over the scar on Louis’s leg absently, two fingers and then one. Louis doesn’t even think about it now that Harry does it so often. He can admit, pretty easily, he never thought he’d be okay with someone touching that part of him. Something that took everything from him - but somehow Harry doesn’t make it feel as bad.

It’s quiet when Harry asks, so quiet Louis almost doesn’t hear him. His eyes are closed and he’s starting to feel the first sensations of being able to go to sleep, Harry a warm weight pressed against his chest.

“Will you tell me?”

Louis opens his eyes at the low rumble of Harry’s voice. He has one hand on Harry’s stomach and he taps his fingers there gently, “What?”

Harry turns on his side so he can look at Louis and presses his fingers to the top of Louis’s rib cage. “Will you tell me about your scar?”

Louis inhales slowly, fingers tightening on Harry’s hip. He knows Harry will drop it if he says no but he doesn’t want to. Not anymore.

So, he tells him. Everything.

He starts at the beginning when he first started out and skips ahead to when he started to get good, when he left school to play for the England national-under 16 team all the way up to when he was on the under 20 team and still finishing university. How he traveled and won championships, how he was training for a professional team and being studied by scouts. Harry stays quiet throughout, his ear resting over Louis’s heart. Louis talks straight to the sky and stars but knows Harry hears him.

“And then I was leaving my mum’s house one night a few years ago,” he says. “Her house is kind of out there - more in the countryside I guess. I was going through a stop and a car just came barreling out from the other direction.” He stops and realizes how hard he’s breathing. The last time he told this story he was facing a lawyer and judge. Harry runs his thumb over Louis’s hip
and somehow that gives him the strength to keep going.

“My car slid off the road and flipped three times,” Louis says, his eyes looking at the sky but unseeing. Even talking about him takes him back to that moment though he blacked out at the end. He swallows and takes a deep breath. He doesn’t want to drag out the details. “My hip was shattered and my knee was in four pieces,” he says clinically. “They didn’t think they would get both put back together in a way that would actually be functional. They hoped I would be able to walk normally - they said in no uncertain terms I would never play football professionally ever again.”

Harry squeezes his hip and Louis blinks his eyes closed tight against the threat of tears. He doesn’t cry over this anymore and he isn’t going to start now. “Football was kind of everything I’d ever had.” Louis squeezes his mouth in a tight line. “So losing that was losing everything. My friends, my boyfriend at the time, my future, my purpose. There was a big pay out from the lawsuit that followed. The guy was drunk and ended up with only a bruise on his forehead from hitting the window of his own car.” Louis swallows again and tries to make his voice light. “I wanted to get as far away from all of that as possible. I wanted to start over.”

“So you came to Malago Cove,” Harry says, the first thing he’s said in almost twenty minutes.

“Came to Malago Cove,” Louis confirms. “Fell in love with writing and tried to be okay again. It’s,” he licks his bottom lip, “It’s a work in progress.”

He doesn’t want to show his cards too soon - doesn’t want to tell Harry that it doesn’t feel like that anymore. That for a couple of months now, he hasn’t had to try so hard. Not since summer began. Not since Harry wandered into No Name.

Harry’s last day on set is marked by a dinner party on a yacht in the cove, one he shyly invites Louis to only a day before.

He’s sitting on Louis’s couch as he says it, staring at Notting Hill playing on the television.

Louis is cooking tonight – lasagna – and comes up from behind him from the kitchen. “Bit of late notice?”

Harry doesn’t turn as he shrugs a shoulder. “I wasn’t sure if you wanted to come. We had a bit of a disagreement about actors before.”

Louis is more than sure that’s not the reason but he doesn’t say. He just cups Harry’s chin and pulls him back for an upside-down kiss. “Before I knew you were one,” he says. He kisses Harry again, slower. “Of course, I’ll go with you, darling.” Harry smiles right against his mouth then.

“It’s kind of a fancy thing,” Harry says the morning of the dinner when they wake up, tangled in each other in the white morning light of having overslept.

“Is it?” Louis squints an eye, “I can’t wear my trackies then?”

“You could,” Harry says quickly. “I wouldn’t mind.”

Louis rolls his eyes and ends up tackling Harry onto his back so he can kiss him. “I’ll dress up so fancy you won’t know what hit you.”

Of course Louis spends the day staring at his closet and trying to figure out what the hell to wear. Harry is at set all day so he can’t consult him either. He could ask Niall but he’s not sure that’s
such a good idea either. He has two suits – one he wore to the trial over his accident when he had to face the drunk driver in court. He’s not sure it’s the one he really wants to wear for a night with Harry. The other one is navy and barely worn, though he is curious to know whether it fits him anymore. He isn’t exactly in the footie playing shape he used to be in.

He tries it on in the middle of the afternoon before he showers and is pleased by the results. It’s definitely tighter than it used to be but his summer tanned skin goes well with the color. Not to mention it’s his only option so he’s not about to criticize himself too harshly.

It takes too long for him to get ready, making his hair swoop the way he wants it and figure out how many buttons should be done up on his shirt. He’s meeting Harry on the dock at six and he can’t believe the anxious butterflies fluttering in his stomach when he gets a cab over.

He sees Harry first, standing near the top of the dock in a black suit, his hair pushed back from his face. He looks like sin, if Louis is honest about it, the white shirt under his jacket unbuttoned to the top of his butterfly tattoo, a black scarf tied around his neck and hanging loosely, the cross necklace he always wears layered in between.

“Hello, handsome,” Louis says when he’s close enough, putting his phone in the inside pocket of his suit.

“You look hot and your ass looks amazing,” Harry says for his own greeting, reaching one hand out for Louis’s. Louis rolls his eyes but lets himself be pulled in, kissing Harry’s forehead.

“Thanks, love,” he says, squeezing his hand.

The yacht is at the end of the dock, massive and shimmering against the darkening night sky. There are lights around the edge and Louis can make out the top deck dining area with candlelit tables. He’s hit with another spark of nerves about the entire thing – wanting to make a good impression on Harry’s coworkers. His stomach settles as they start walking to the edge, Harry holding his hand tightly.

“Good evening,” the security guard at the end of the dock says as the approach. He nods them through and then stops the couple behind them to check their IDs. Louis doesn’t mention anything about it to Harry.

The first level of the boat is an immaculate room with red carpets and golden chandeliers. “Bit like the titanic,” Louis murmurs in Harry’s ear. He kisses the side of Harry’s neck when he laughs.

They make their way to the bar in the corner, skirting around men in suits and women in dresses, all of them seeming to smile at Harry or say something to him as they pass. Harry doesn’t hide here, Louis notes. His head is up and his smile is ever-present even if he cuts off conversations after the, “How are you?” bit. Louis isn’t sure what feeling curls in his stomach when all eyes are on Harry but he’s the one by his side. Perhaps pride is the right word.

Louis orders drinks at the bar – whiskey neat for himself and a tequila sunrise for Harry as Harry makes conversation with an older woman at the bar. He introduces her as Susanna when Louis turns toward them.

“This is Louis,” Harry says gesturing, “My boyfriend.”

Louis keeps his smile pleasant as he shakes her hand and compliments her dark ruby dress. Not once has he or Harry ever used the word for each other but in that moment, it fits them perfectly. He wonders if it’s something they need to discuss.

“So these are your colleagues?” Louis asks once the conversation with Susanna has tapered off
and she leaves for a refill of wine.

Harry takes a careful sip of his drink and nods. “It’s everyone from like cast and crew to food services. Susanna ran one of the cameras actually,” he says.

“A bit fancier than my coworkers.” Louis knocks his hip against Harry’s with a small smile.

“Do you have coworkers?”

“I imagine I do,” Louis muses. “Not that I’ve met them. I lead a pretty solitary life, you know.”

“Apart from me.” Harry’s lips twitch into a smile.

“Apart from you,” Louis agrees easily. “And Niall. I’d regret not mentioning Niall as well.”

Harry smiles over the edge of his glass. “Well, of course.”

“You’re my favorite,” Louis says, perhaps more seriously than he should.

“You too,” Harry says back just as seriously, their eyes not breaking contact.

It’s barely a breath of a moment before they’re being interrupted by someone else Harry works with - this time another one of the actors named Kevin who is intimidatingly attractive and polite. Louis doesn’t even get to feel the blip of possessiveness toward Harry because smooth as anything, Harry introduces Louis as his boyfriend again. Definitely something they’re going to need to talk about, then.

“Louis,” Kevin says emphatically as though he’s connecting an invisible puzzle. “It’s good to put a face to a name.”

Louis smiles back without anything to add because he’s never heard of Kevin before - Harry doesn’t typically like to talk about work when they’re together. The same doesn’t seem to stand when he’s at work since he’s talking about Louis which only serves to make Louis wonder what kinds of things Harry has said about him.

After Kevin, it’s a revolving door of people approaching them and Louis can’t help the flare of pride at how polite and charming Harry is. He’s different than when Louis has him alone, perhaps more guarded, but he chats easily with everyone who approaches, never tensing or giving off any indication he’s not perfectly happy to speak with them.

“Do you want to go upstairs and find our seats?” Harry asks when their conversation with one of the chefs from the catering department fades.

“Sure,” Louis says. He finishes his whiskey and deposits Harry’s empty glass at the bar before leading them to the stairs where the rest of the guests are slowly filtering. Louis holds his hand behind himself in the crowd and bites down on a smile when Harry’s fingers twist with his. Louis is out of his depth in a room filled with people who just made a movie but Harry looks to him as who he wants hold onto. It shouldn’t make his stomach flutter in the way it does.

They come to a standstill at the bottom of the stairs as people slowly make their way up to the top deck, the women holding their dresses high as they navigate in their heels. Louis leans back toward Harry slightly, turning his head to speak directly in his ear.

“So, boyfriends?” He says quietly, careful of how close everyone is. He was going to wait until after dinner to bring it up but his curiosity could not be curbed.
He feels Harry tense and a glance back at him proves his face is flushing but his eyes are
unwavering. “Yeah,” he says just as quietly back. Harry clears his throat, “I should have asked
before. I just - it felt natural.”

Louis’s lips twitch in his smirk as he tries not to skin. “For the record,” he whispers against
Harry’s ear, “I don’t mind it one bit.” He drags his lips ever so gently under the curve of Harry’s
ear and then they’re next up to take the stairs, their hands never coming unclasped.

The top deck is set up as fancy as the bottom deck would suggest, circular tables draped in white
with red roses and white lace for accents, a chocolate fountain in the back corner and suited
waiters edging in every corner.

Harry takes the lead to pull Louis to a corner table that’s empty of people though sure to be filled
up rather quickly. “I want to be able to see the water,” Harry says with a smile.

“You and your views,” Louis says like it’s not one of his favorite things about Harry.

“Harry, a photo?”

Louis glances to an older gentleman with a fancy camera strapped to his chest and big eye glasses.
“Oh yeah,” Louis says, deftly stepping to the side. It’s best that Harry broke the news he was an
actor when he did - otherwise Louis may just think he was a particularly well-liked member of the
crew.

Harry doesn’t smile in the picture but still manages to look friendly, the corners of his lips turning
up just slightly. Louis may be staring but they just decided they’re boyfriends, he’s pretty sure he’s
allowed. More than.

The shutter goes off three times quickly on the camera and then he pulls it down from his eye just
slightly. “One together?” He asks before Harry can move, gesturing toward Louis.

Harry nods, “Sure, yeah.”

Before Louis can even move, Harry steps in close to him so they’re pressing together, leaning into
him as he wraps one arm low on Louis’s waist. Louis lets his arm fall naturally around Harry’s
hip, pulling him even closer. The photo is taken in an instant and then the photographer disappears
to his next subjects but Harry stays close by Louis, a quiet moment they can share.

“Let’s sit,” Harry says when they finally move apart.

They end up sitting with the director and Harry’s co-star which seems like a big deal to Louis but
definitely not to Harry. Harry is the picture of ease during dinner - filet mignon and roasted
potatoes - talking easily to everyone at the table and not even flinching when Louis puts his hand
on his thigh under the table during the main course.

He traces the inside seam of Harry’s trousers aimlessly as he listens to Harry and the director
discuss a shot in the studio where they used pyrotechnics, the way they had changed midway
through to get a better perspective. Louis is lost - he’ll be the first to admit - but there’s is
something magnetic in the way Harry talks about it, the passion hidden in his words. He loves
what he does, Louis knows now without a doubt. He loves the craft and the technical side. Louis
thinks back to the times when he thought Harry wasn’t very happy in his job, too exhausted by it,
and he realizes he was reading him wrong. Harry is in love with what he does.

So perhaps Louis is in love with Harry because he can’t stop smiling at him throughout the night.
He’s talented and witty and kind; he makes the entire table laugh too many times and he kisses
Louis during the toast from the producer. He shines like a fucking star on the top deck of that
yacht and Louis is overwhelmed with the fact Harry belongs to him - with him.

At the end of the night when all these people leave, he is the one taking Harry home. He can’t be sure if it’s then that it hits him or if he’s known all along but he can’t, won’t, let Harry go quietly at the end of this, whenever the end is. He has no idea how it will work, if it possibly could, but Louis knows he’s going to fight for Harry, for a future with both of them in it. They’re eating chocolate mousse when Harry glances over at him, the ghost of a smirk on his lips from something someone has said and all Louis can think is *I am in love with you Harry Twist.*

The most surprising event of the night or perhaps the weirdest is at the end of the dinner when the boat docks back where they started. It’s dark and the edges of the dark are lit with small lanterns like a wedding aisle, Louis thinks. There’s a slow procession of people getting off at the one main exit so Louis and Harry opt for another glass of wine at the top of the boat.

They sit at an abandoned table nearest the edge, already cleared of dirty plates leaving only a flickering candle behind. The bartender clears up his space and some of the wait staff are slowly circling the empty tables as they make their leave. Louis doesn’t mind easing the stress of waiting in a pack to exit when he can sit quietly with his boy.

“You really love this stuff, don’t you?” He asks after his first sip of wine. It’s delicious, the movie industry catering budget definitely didn’t skimp.

“I do,” Harry confirms. He takes a drink from his glass and then smirks. “Did something lead you to believe I didn’t?”

Louis purses his lips, thinking. What comes to mind first is one of the very first sunset conversations they ever had. “You said your favorite place was Jamaica because no one really cared what you were doing there.” He rubs his lips together, “And you mentioned not feeling like you knew yourself anymore.”

Harry is twisting his rings around his fingers in his lap and Louis grabs a hand in his, bringing it to his own lap. He doesn’t want Harry to feel like he’s being critical when all he wants is to know more.

“I guess I thought that played into your job.”

Harry studies where their hands are clasped for a moment before he answers. “Not the job.” He clears his throat. “I love acting. There’s nothing like getting a character you don’t understand and diving in until you do. Until you understand every nuance of who they are and you want to tell their story, make the audience understand their story. It’s not the glamour or the premieres or whatever… It’s the story. I love that.”

There it is again, Louis thinks. The light in Harry’s eyes when he talks about this stuff, the small smile threatening his words and his eyebrows pulling together as he tries to explain it the best he can.

“But it’s the industry I don’t like,” Harry says slowly, planning his words. “I don't think they always focus on the story or the character or the art of a shot but of who the actor or actress is, where their secrets lie.”

Louis nods. “Who are they?”

Harry licks his bottom lip. “Media, management, general public.”
There’s something not being said, Louis is completely sure. He stays quiet hoping to edge it out without trying.

“Can we talk more about this at home?” Harry asks. “I do have more to say but I start getting nervous people will overhear.”

“Sure,” Louis says, finishing his drink as Harry drains his. He leans in close to Harry so no one will overhear him either. He can smell Harry’s cologne and the vanilla of his body wash and it’s intoxicating. “I want to take this suit off of you with my teeth, and use that thing around your neck to tie you to the bed, and that just can’t be done here.” Harry’s inhale of breath is sharp and Louis kisses his lips softly, already smirking. He stands and offers Harry his hand, “Come along, love.”

Getting off the boat is easy since they’ve waited and they walk side by side down the lit dock, talking quietly, their hips knocking against each other every once in a while as he’s come to expect when walking with Harry. What Louis doesn’t expect is the piercing sound that cuts between them when they're halfway back to land, the, “Oh my god, Harry,” that makes him miss a step.

He sees a group of girls with camera phones before he even processes what’s happening and then he sees Harry's wide eyes, his slow glance to Louis and then back to the group. He squeezes Louis’s hand as the girls get more hysterical the closer he gets. There are two security guards at the end of the dock keeping the girls off to one side but they still have their phones lifted as they try to take photos.

“So you want to go get us a cab?” Harry asks lowly.

Louis wants to but he’s not sure he can just leave Harry. Not when there’s a group of people yelling for him at the end of the dock, screaming his name when they don’t even know him. There’s no way to avoid them unless they jump in the water and Louis doesn't trust his swimming skills on a good day let alone when his heart is suddenly thundering in his chest. One of the girls’ camera’s flash goes off and Louis jumps, the light sending flashing dots in his eyes.

“What do they want?” He asks Harry, eyes searching his face to see if he’s okay.

“Pictures probably,” Harry says, lips pressed together tight. “Just go get a car and I’ll be right behind you.”

Louis physically stops walking and the momentum makes Harry stutter step and then stop too.

“Babe, I’m not leaving you.”

Harry shakes his head, “Please, go. Just -” he glances toward the small crowd and then to Louis. “It will go faster if it’s just me.”

Louis doesn’t like it but they disconnect at the edge of the dock and Louis keeps walking while Harry stops with a quiet, “Hi, how are you?” sending the group into another tailspin of screaming.

Louis watches over his shoulder to make sure the security is there for Harry and helping him before he jogs to the valet and asks for a cab headed back to Malago Cove. He keeps stealing glances toward Harry and his heart aches - he doesn't know how those girls all know him, why they scream when they see him, how they found him. He’s mine, he thinks over and over. He’s mine to love and to protect and they look like they’re about to tear him to pieces. A yellow cab pulls in front of him on the curb as Harry finally pulls away from the group, one of the men from the dock walking with him to Louis.

Louis’s jaw tenses as he locks eyes with Harry but he can’t hold his gaze for long before his eyes
are running him up and down, trying to make sure he’s okay. He can still hear the group calling after him like a group of vultures and it’s scaring him, how much they want Harry without even knowing him.

Louis opens the door to the cab as Harry shakes the security guy’s hand and thanks him quickly, slipping into the car ahead of Louis. Louis gets in after and shuts the door, Harry already reciting his address for where to head next.

Louis grabs Harry’s hand in his after the car starts to drive, his heart beating double time in his chest. He rubs Harry’s pulse point gently when he feels it thundering as quickly as it is. This time he knows there is something missing in the list of things Harry has told him about himself.

They go quietly into Harry’s house, Louis paying for the cab while Harry unlocks the front door. Louis trails after him into the foyer his heart finally slowing as his mind starts racing.

“I think you might be more of a famous actor than you led me to believe,” Louis says as the door shuts. It seems to be the first thing that makes sense in his mind - the memory fresh of the girls yelling for Harry, clamoring for him.

Harry meets Louis’s eyes when he nods, swallowing. “I do have a bit of a following.”

“Right, yeah, I can see that.” Louis undoes the top two buttons on his shirt.

“Is that okay?” Harry asks slowly, his hands twisting around each other.

Louis pauses with the second button halfway loose on his shirt. “Of course it’s okay,” he says. “What? Did you think I would be mad?”

Harry shrugs. “It’s something I didn’t tell you.” He rubs his lips together, “I could see why you would be upset.”

Louis’s laugh sounds a bit frantic even as the pieces in his mind start to slide to the right places. “I’m not upset, H.” Louis drops his hands to his side and tries for a smile. “How could I be mad that you’re better and more successful at your job than you told me? I’m proud of you.” Once he says it out loud he realizes just how true it is. “I’m so proud of you, love. You’re passionate about your job and you’re recognized for it. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

There’s not. Now that he’s said that part out loud too, it makes sense. It caught him off guard - the girls and the pictures - but it’s not a bad thing. It doesn’t change anything between them or make him feel anything less toward Harry. If anything, there’s a new curve of protectiveness Louis feels now that he knows people want Harry in a fanatic way.

“I should have told you,” Harry says shaking his head and running his hands back through his hair. “I should have been honest from the very beginning and not tried to hide anything.” He almost sounds like he’s talking to himself, voice edging on panic.

“That’s not something you could tell me,” Louis says, voice calm. “You can’t just announce you’re a successful actor and have actual, real life fans to someone in a casual conversation. Not without sounding like a complete dick.”

For the first time since the dock, Harry’s lips lift into an almost smile. It’s short lived. “I could have told you my real name.”

Louis swallows because he thinks he might have known this was coming all along. He takes a
step toward Harry but Harry matches with a step backwards. “You could have, yeah.”

Harry blinks quickly and opens his mouth before closing it. “You know?” He finally manages.

Louis shrugs, “I had an idea. I looked up Harry Twist the night we first met because I thought you might be a rock star.” He smirks, “But the only Harry Twist I found was a balloon modeler out of Suffolk. He’s about fifty.”

Harry shakes his head and presses his palms to his eyes. “You knew I lied and you’re still here.”

“Didn’t fall for your name, love.” Louis lifts a shoulder and then let’s it drop.

Harry’s hand goes to his heart and he shakes his head like he still isn’t processing. “I lied and you’re still here.”

Louis swallows and glances at the ground before looking up. “I am.”

Harry’s next inhale is choked and Louis can see his eyes are wet the split second before he brushes his fingertips under them and sniffs.

“Are you going to tell me your name?” Louis asks quietly. He knows Harry is Harry - it’s what all those girls yelled but he has no clue about his surname.

Harry takes a deep breath, “Styles.”


Harry swallows, his eyes a mossy green in the haze of the entry way light. “If you still want to.”

Louis doesn’t respond to that just closes the space so he can kiss Harry, one hand under his jaw as he presses their lips together, deepening it slightly when Harry sighs into his mouth. Louis pulls back and kisses him once more.

“Of course I do. I didn’t fall for you because of your name,” he whispers, repeating what he said earlier. “Everything else about you is what got me.” He presses his hand to Harry's heart and kisses the corner of his lips softly.

“Oh my god,” Harry says, choked. “Oh my god.”

Louis wipes a stray tear from Harry’s cheek with his thumb, kissing where it would have slipped against his skin. “Is that a good oh my god?” He asks, thumbing a tear on the opposite side of Harry’s face.

“I can’t believe I found you,” he says instead and before Louis can even begin to respond, Harry is kissing him like he’s been drowning and needs air, like Louis’s lips are his final salvation.

Too soon, always too soon, Harry pulls back and Louis chases his lips a moment more, tasting again. Louis’s hands drop to his hips but Harry wraps their hands together and shakes his head, stepping back.

“I want to tell you why I lied.” The words come out stuttered as Louis kisses along his throat, nipping at the sensitive skin.
“Okay,” he whispers reaching to pull Harry in.

“No, like I want to tell you right now.”

Louis stills and stands back up, Harry grabbing his hands again. Most of the blood in his body has relocated pretty centrally but it starts to make its way back to his brain as he catches his breath.

“You want to tell me right now?”

Harry nods. He drops Louis’s hand to brush his fingers through the front of Louis’s hair. “Then we can continue, if you still want to.”

Louis blinks slowly and rolls his lips together. “Alright,” he says, “The floor is yours.”

“Right.” Harry takes his hands back to himself and clasps them together. “Right.”

Louis watches him steadily, waiting. He doesn’t think Harry ever tried to be malicious but he realizes he should have asked why when Harry told him he hadn’t been truthful. Absently, he wonders how worried he should be that he took Harry’s revised truth as an absolute without asking questions.

“When I started acting, I was pretty young. My first movie role was at seventeen,” Harry starts slowly. Louis nods, encouraging. “And I got really wrapped up in the things that being in a movie allows you to have.”

Louis nods again. “Okay.”

Harry rolls his lips together. “I took advantage of the lifestyle - the like, parties and stuff. And I gave a lot of pieces of myself to people who I thought actually liked me.” He smiles and takes a deep breath in. “Most of the people who I considered my friends didn’t actually like me because of me,” he says on the exhale. “They fell for me for my name,” he says with a tilt of his head toward Louis, “To use your words.”

“Assholes,” Louis says easily. It’s a tale as old as time - people taking advantage when someone they know gets some money under them. He got his own taste when he won his lawsuit but not like Harry - for some reason now it only seems cruel that anyone would do that to him. A kid who didn’t know any better and probably wanted to share his success.

“Yeah,” Harry says quietly. “I was a bit of a media darling for a couple years at the start, tabloid fodder is probably more accurate.” He winces and Louis hates it. He doesn’t want Harry to have to feel like this and he hates that he already has. “It got to the point where I didn’t feel like I had control over my life anymore. Saying my name was suddenly a curse I couldn’t get over. And then I got cast in this film, in ‘Rogue’. I asked my manager to have my rental a pretty good distance from set so I couldn’t be found.”

“And then you walked into No Name,” Louis fills in the next blank for him.

Harry smiles, and it’s still small. “Yes. And I lied about my name. I didn’t want to ruin something before I even started. To blow my cover, I guess.”

“So you became Harry Twist.”

Harry nods and swallows. “You have to know I didn’t expect to lie for so long. I thought I would throw it around a few times and no one would really care. I didn’t expect to make friends.”

Louis smirks, “We really threw a wrench in the plan, didn’t we?”
“Niall,” Harry says. “I didn’t expect to become friends with Niall.” He swallows and glances away. “As for you,” he looks back at Louis, gaze unwavering. “I never even saw you coming. If I didn’t expect to make friends, I sure as hell didn’t expect to fall in love.”

There it is. The word Louis has flirted with but never said out loud so directly and now Harry is standing right in front of him and saying it, looking like a nervous wreck in the silence that follows. Louis’s heart feels like a trapped butterfly in his chest, swelling with something he doesn’t know how to identify.


Louis closes his eyes and shakes his head. Earlier, Harry said he didn’t know how Louis found him but he doesn’t think that’s right. It’s Harry who found Louis - who turned him inside out and made him feel like this - made him compare his heart to a fucking butterfly.

“He’s Harry,” Louis says seriously, “If you don’t let me kiss you in the next three seconds, I might explode.”

He doesn’t really wait for Harry to respond as he closes the distance between them. There’s more talking to be done, always more talking, but Louis isn’t interested in that right now. Not when Harry - this boy who loves him and he loves, who is sharing all the parts of him he tried to hide away - is standing right in front of him waiting to be held. Talking can wait.

They take off each other’s clothes in the entry, Louis kissing down Harry’s chest as he undoes the buttons on his shirt, sucking a mark under his jaw when he unites the bandana around his neck. He does want to tie Harry to the bed with it but perhaps not tonight. Harry kisses Louis’s scar as he takes off his trousers for him, getting on his knees to kiss where it follows the line of his hip and thigh, finally ending on his knee - the way he always does.

He pulls Harry back up to stand as he steps out of his pants, his hands roaming Harry’s broad back and the softness of his hips, pulling on his bottom lip with his teeth just to hear the sounds he makes. He walks Harry backwards to the couch, too impatient to get him upstairs. Harry falls back and pulls Louis on top of him, their lips never parting even as they try to catch their breath.

“Do you have anything?” Harry asks, his hands settled on Louis’s ass he kisses up and down the side of his neck.

Louis closes his eyes and focuses only on the sensation of Harry’s soft lips and warm tongue before he registers that he’s been asked a question. He opens his eyes again and lifts his head. “Where would I be hiding it, baby?” He kisses Harry’s nose. “You’ve got me down to my pants.”

Harry smiles and Louis has to kiss him again. “I’ll run upstairs,” he says, slipping out from under Louis.

Louis sits up and pulls off his boxers before Harry is bounding back having already pulled off his trousers somewhere between the stairs and the couch.

“What do you want?” Louis asks as Harry pushes his own boxers to the ground, tossing Louis the lube and condom almost simultaneously. Trying to do too much at once has him tripping over the left leg hole of his pants and he’s laughing as he falls to the couch, righting himself in Louis’s lap. Louis laughs at his helpless flailing, catching Harry around the hips finally as he settles. He could be called Hickory Smoke and Louis would still be head over heels and gone twice over for him. He thinks he’ll say that when he doesn’t have a naked Harry Styles all but writhing in his lap.

“What do you want, darling?” He asks again even as his hands are directing Harry’s hips to roll
against his, the wetness from Harry's cock dragging against his stomach.

“What do you think I want?” Harry asks with a sly smirk as he grabs the lube from next to Louis's hip.

He opens himself up slowly in Louis’s lap while Louis holds his hips and runs his fingernails over his belly, twisting his nipples and kissing the stamps of tattoos on his chest and side, on his arm. He’s patient even when his cock is filling just by Harry rubbing his ass against him as he leans into his own fingers. Louis likes to open Harry up himself but he loves the erotic heat of watching Harry do it, how he can make himself whine, what he does to make his own eyes roll back.

Finally, Harry grips Louis’s shoulders, his chest and neck already red from exertion. “I’m ready,” he says, kissing Louis again.

Louis puts a dollop of lube on his fingers before reaching around to press inside Harry. He knows Harry is well equipped to get himself prepped but Louis also knows that he can reach where Harry can’t and that when he turns his fingers to the side it will make Harry melt right against him, biting Louis’s ear lobe to stifle his whine and that is just something he can’t deny either of them.

He twists his fingers and pushes Harry down on his hand until Harry can’t take it and all but cuts Louis’s eye with the foil condom wrapper as he tears it open. Louis catches his breath against Harry’s forehead and scratches at his hair as Harry rolls the condom on for him, sweat streaking his body.

He sinks onto Louis's dick with his lip caught between his teeth and his eyes closed and Louis can’t remember ever seeing someone so beautiful. Harry is so open and trusting when they’re like this, vulnerable and responsive too. Louis runs his hands over the curve of Harry’s hips until he settles and then smiles when Harry nods and finally gasps, kissing Louis’s mouth.

Harry uses the back of the couch as leverage as he rolls his hips, lifting himself and falling, pressing his forehead to Louis’s and letting their sweat and spit roll together so they don’t know where one begins and the other ends. Louis curls his toes against the carpet as he fucks up into Harry to meet each grind, white hot pleasure shooting out of every nerve ending where they’re pressed together.

“You're so good, darling,” Louis babbles, kissing across Harry’s collarbones, biting at the soft skin. “So good for me.”

Harry whines and drops his head back and Louis takes advantage of his exposed neck, biting and licking there as well.

“I’m not gonna last,” Harry says suddenly, tipping forward.

“Yeah?” Louis reaches one hand up to tug on Harry’s hair, in absolute adoration of the way it makes him keen. “You wanna come, baby?”

Harry’s eyelashes shake when he nods, reaching for his dick between them. Louis lets go of his hair to knock his hand out of the way.

“Let me,” he says, squeezing Harry at the base and then pulling his hand up to twist slightly, using the near constant stream of precome to ease the slide. “Like that?” Louis asks, biting Harry's nipple between his teeth. They’re so close he swears he can feel Harry’s heartbeat under his lips. He also knows he’s a complete sap when it comes to Harry and he can’t quite help it.

“Good, good.” Harry says, abs tensing. “You always know what to do,” he says, cutting off with a moan. “Know me so well. Know my body.”
“I do,” Louis says, hand moving more quickly between them. He can feel his orgasm building in the bottom of his belly but this is for Harry right now. “You’re mine, sweetheart,” he says right before Harry kisses him. “Only mine.”

“Only,” Harry chokes out before he’s coming, his body vibrating in Louis’s lap as he streaks against both of their stomachs. Louis keeps his hand steady to bring him through it, one hand holding his hip to keep him up.

“There it is,” Louis says softly when Harry slumps against him, breath ragged against his neck. He licks a dab of come off his thumb and then holds Harry’s hips to roll him down again. Harry gets sensitive but Louis knows he likes this part too, his fingers grabbing for Louis’s shoulder as he gasps quietly against Louis’s throat.

“Come on, Lou,” Harry rasps. His body tightens even more on the next roll and Louis feels it like a kick in the stomach, the fire all in his veins gathering at once in his stomach, making his eyes close as he thrusts his hips up, up, up. “Only yours,” Harry repeats Louis’s words against Louis’s neck and Louis is too lost to say if it was inevitable or that is the final trigger as he comes, his body going completely tight and then releasing as Harry rolls his hips against his, mouthing just under his ear.

They stay connected for a moment, both breathing hard, sticky and gross. Harry lifts his hips slightly and Louis helps him so he can pull out, Harry making a soft sound as he does. He settles Harry back on his thighs and wraps his arms around him. He doesn't care how messy they are, he doesn't want to let Harry go.

* 

There’s only so long they can actually stay pressed together before it edges on disgusting but they push the boundaries. Once Louis starts to come down from the sex induced haze he realizes the questions lingering under the cover of all of their conversations tonight. Days earlier he thought the end was inevitable, the pain would be something he had to live with but not now. Now that they’ve laid everything out, he doesn’t want it to end, he doesn’t want Harry to have to leave. He kisses Harry’s warm shoulder and closes his eyes - he can’t even pretend he knows how they would ever make it work. The weight falls in his stomach like a rock.

“Do you want to swim?” Harry breaks the silence with the question.

Louis leans back slightly so he can see Harry properly. “In the ocean?”

“In the ocean,” Harry confirms. “Just you, me, and the stars. Proper romantic like.”

Harry is cheesy as all hell but Louis just smiles and says, “Let’s go.”

He has to borrow swim shorts from Harry, a pair that is far shorter than he’s used to and hugs his ass more than he prefers but which Harry quite enjoys - as he gets a bit handsy on their walk down to the beach.

Harry is far more confident as they wade into the water while Louis tries not to think about everything he can’t see in the dark, all the things that could be lurking under the surface.

“Would you calm down, babe?” Harry asks once they make it past the initial waves and into the flat water. “I can feel your tension from over here.”

“That sounds fake,” Louis says, careful to keep his toes from touching the bottom. “But whatever.” The moonlight is just enough for him to see when Harry flips him off.
They float around for a bit in the quiet, kicking and rolling through the water. Harry was right - there is something romantic about the empty water and the moonlight. It makes him feel like he can do or say anything - It’s the nights they spend on the lounger but amplified, like everything will echo into nothing if they let it.

Louis finally braves straightening his feet and letting his toes sink into the sand. The water still hits him at the chest and Harry floats over, wrapping his legs loosely around Louis’s waist. When Louis kisses him, he tastes like salt but it doesn’t stop him from deepening the kiss. He holds onto one of Harry’s ankles underwater, tracing the circle of his bone with his thumb.

“Lou,” Harry says after a while. “Can I tell you something?” He’s floating on his back with his legs still loosely wrapped around Louis while Louis moves up and down in the water, leaning back and straightening with the tide.

“Yes,” he says. He wonders what more there is to say tonight, as if they haven’t said enough.

“Remember what I said about giving pieces of myself away?”

Louis nods before remembering Harry can’t see him with the way he’s floating. “I do.”

“I’ve been on a search on how to get them back. Or like, fill in those spots with new pieces. To find myself again or who I am now. That’s why I started doing the cooking stuff and the painting.”

Louis hums, his hand running up Harry’s calf and then back to his ankle on repeat. His skin feels even smoother than normal in the ocean water.

“I think you’re one of those pieces,” Harry says and then he’s kicking out of Louis’s grip to stand straight, coming so close their bellies touch and toes overlap on the soft bottom of the cove.

“What?” Louis wants to follow but he can’t. Not unless Harry is telling him that he’s a hobby the way cooking and painting are hobbies.

Harry licks his lips and looks up at the sky before meeting Louis’s eyes again. “I was looking for pieces to fill in everything I gave away,” he says slowly. “I thought I’d find them in spending time alone and trying to learn new things. I never thought I would find it in another person.”

“In me?”

“You.” Harry draws his thumb over Louis’s cheekbone and down to his jaw. “I’ve spent so long being caged into corners with labels and stories I didn’t ever want anyone to know that I felt like I had to go hide. But you make me feel like I don’t have to hide from them because I have you. You make me so much stronger than I thought another person could.”

“Harry,” Louis breathes his name, at a loss for anything else to do.

“You make me feel like I’m standing on the edge of the ocean and there’s nothing that can get in my way. You, Louis Tomlinson, make me feel infinite.”

Louis’s hands reach blindly for Harry, landing on his hips as he stutters through the beginning of words he can’t get out. “Oh my god,” is what he lands on. “You can’t just go saying stuff like that,” Louis says, shaking his head.

Harry smiles, his eyes curving up with it. “Why not?”
“You’ll give me a heart attack in the middle of the ocean and have to drag my ass back to shore is why,” Louis says indignantly, smiling over his words. “And when you say stuff like you make me feel lame to follow up with the small fact that I’m in love with you too since I haven’t told you yet. But, yeah, let me hop on board with what you said and steal some of that too. Infinite? You got it, baby. Edge of the ocean? Here we are.” Harry starts laughing and Louis does too - amazed by how ridiculous the entire night has become to do more than let it fill him up and overflow.

He kisses Harry then and pulls him close so there is no space for water between them, the stars as their only audience. Every single part of Louis’s brain that doesn’t ever shut up goes silence just then. He doesn’t know where this will go, what happens when they get out of the water, what happens when Harry’s next job comes. All he knows is that he can’t stop kissing Harry Styles.

Morning comes and Louis feels exhausted. Physically and emotionally, he’s drained not to mention itchy from the salty ocean that he and Harry barely showered off once they made their way back to Harry’s house. Now they’re wrapped together in bed, a cocoon of blankets and body heat keeping them warm against the increasingly cool mornings.

Harry is curled up in Louis’s arms, drooling against his chest and snoring softly. It’s hopelessly endearing. Louis watches him for a few more moments before he slips out of bed. For once, running isn’t the first thing on his mind but making Harry breakfast and bringing it to him in bed is.

He wears Harry’s pink jumper as he whips together a batch of pancakes and starts a pot of coffee. He cuts up some strawberries and makes whipped cream with the recipe Harry has bookmarked in one of his cookbooks. He feels properly domestic about it all as he half-prays he’s quiet enough for Harry to stay sleeping so he can surprise him.

He piles pancakes, strawberries, and whipped cream on a plate, grabs two mugs of coffee and two forks before heading back up the stairs. Harry is awake when he comes into the room but only barely; just reaching for his phone on the nightstand. He sets it back down when he sees Louis, a sleepy smile taking over his face.

“Good morning,” he whispers, voice ragged. His hair is all pushed up on one side but he looks some kind of pretty like this when he wakes up, Louis tells him so almost every day.

“I wanted to bring you breakfast in bed,” Louis says, carefully bringing the plate toward the bed. “To celebrate your first day off from work.” Harry scoots to the far side so Louis can sit and he takes the forks from the crook of Louis’s arm and the mugs too. “Unfortunately, I could only carry one plate so you’ll have to share.” He takes his mug from Harry’s hands as he settles against the pillows and kisses him softly. “Good morning.”

It’s the best morning they’ve had in a while, lazily sharing bites of pancakes and finishing their coffee and then exchanging hazy kisses that taste like strawberries and whip cream, hands and lips wandering as the sun heats up outside.

“I need to go home to write today,” Louis says as Harry bites a mark on his neck. “I have a deadline.” Harry hums but doesn’t pull away, licking over the spot. Louis pushes him back until he rolls over onto his back and then he kisses him soundly. “But then I’ll come back,” he says.

“I’ll make you dinner,” Harry says, kissing Louis’s lips once and then twice quickly. “I have a recipe for alfredo chicken pizza I want to try.”

Louis groans against Harry’s mouth. “You’re making me hungry already.”
Harry rolls his eyes and then kisses Louis’s nose, chin and eyelids. “We just ate breakfast. If you’re nice, I’ll make cookies for dessert.”

“Yeah?” Louis raises his eyebrows. He runs his hands over Harry’s back to his ass, pulling his hips in closer. “I can be a good boy.”

“Alright,” Harry says loudly, jumping off the bed. “Time to go before I don’t let you.”

Louis smirks from the bed and has to put a palm against the front of his boxers to get some slight relief. Harry’s right – if they get started, they won’t stop and Louis does have a deadline to meet.

“Kicking me out of bed,” Louis says as he throws his legs over the edge and stands up. “I see how it is.” He pecks Harry’s lips and then dances out of the way when Harry tries to slap his ass.

“Where are you going?” Harry calls after him as he goes into the bathroom.

“Need to shower,” Louis calls. “If you want to get naked and wet with me, please join.”

He cackles at the speed with which Harry arrives in the bathroom, nearly braining himself on the edge of the door in his haste.

“Someone is desperate,” Louis coos and then squawks when Harry jumps on his back and bites the side of his neck. Everything about it is kind of everything he never knew he wanted.

Louis can’t focus once he’s back home two hours later, fingers absently dancing over the keys on his laptop. He isn’t writing anything that makes sense and his eyes keep fluttering out the window to the water, replaying last night when he and Harry were weightless in the center of it all, tethered only to each other and the secrets they wanted to tell.

Working on a deadline is Louis’s eventual motivation to get it together and he starts typing in earnest as he consults his notes and re-watches game tape. Even once his fingers are moving quickly over the keys, he keeps coming back to Harry - always lingering at the edge of his mind.

He needs to tell Harry that he wants to try for something past a summer in Malago Cove. The words they said the night before, the way they act, is bigger than a summer romance, demands bigger gestures of dedication than simply counting down to the end. He needs to lay his cards out and, god, he hopes Harry shows the same ones.

He doesn’t know how it will work - if Harry agrees. Louis isn’t tied down to anywhere in particular - not Doncaster, certainly not Malago Cove. He’s saving his money to build a home but he doesn’t know where that is yet. He can work from nearly anywhere and though he doesn’t want to follow Harry around to movie sets, he wants to be somewhere nearby. He wants to be home base for Harry, he thinks. That thought rockets out of left field and he actually stops writing for a moment to process. Harry makes him think about a future he didn't think he had before - a chance at overwhelming happiness. He needs to tell him that too.

Fuck deadlines.

Louis makes it an hour longer before he submits the draft with a note of “definitely needs some work!” so his editor will know it’s shit before she starts.

He’s a few hours early for dinner and Harry might think he’s a lovesick fool for showing back up so soon but Louis can’t be bothered to care. He may well be a lovesick fool but at least he can help with dinner. Learning to cook a pizza is on his bucket list - as of two minutes ago.
Louis walks with his eyes down, teeth biting on his lip to hide his smile. He knows Harry will give him shit for coming back so soon and he keeps laughing imagining it.

Love. Sick. Fool.

There’s a group of people in the street as he turns onto Harry’s street and he only realizes once it’s too late that they’re actually in front of Harry’s house. It’s middle-aged men if Louis had to guess and they’re holding cameras - some have two strapped around their chests like weapons. He slows his gait, eyes narrowing as he tries to figure out if he knows them, recognizes them from the party last night.

They don’t see him until he’s at the edge of the sidewalk, their eyes all fixed on front door. At least until one of them says, “That’s Louis Tomlinson,” and they all turn at once, cameras being lifted in unison.

There’s a flash and Louis jumps, another that makes him blink rapidly, nearly losing his footing. There’s shouting too but he doesn’t listen to that, trying to make his way to Harry's front door like a pink beacon against the chaos. The photographers don’t want to let him and he’s ducking around them like a video game, blocking his face. He needs to get to Harry - it’s all he can think as he keeps stumbling up the front walk.

Like a beaconed spirit, Harry opens his front door right then, perhaps hearing all of the yelling.

“Look who it is,” one of the photographers yells over the rest, “Mr. Styles.”

Louis’s stomach curls at the tone of his voice as he bats away one of the photographers. The guy falls into the grass but Louis hardly pauses since he’s back on his feet in a heartbeat, camera clicking away like a swarm of bees.

Louis starts to actually hear the shouted questions as he walks up the front steps, questions ranging from, “Are you sleeping together?” to “How did you meet?” to “Does Harry bottom or top?” Louis just about turns around to clock the guy who asks the last one but Harry grabs his wrist and pulls him violently into the house without a word, slamming the front door.

Louis’s heart is pounding, stomach pulsing and he thinks he might be sick. He tries to catch his breath and then Harry speaks.

“What the fuck did you do?” His voice is menacing and Louis looks up right away, shocked.

“What?”

“I trusted you,” Harry says as the photographer start ringing the front bell. Harry turns the deadbolt on the door, his hands shaking.

“Again, what?” Louis’s heartbeat slows but it feels like an omen instead of a relief.

“Did you go home and Google me and see how much it pays to leak my location?” Harry takes a step toward him and Louis matches with a step back, confusion seeping in as he shakes his head.

“What the fuck-” he starts, and then it clicks. “You think I called them? You think I fucking Googled you?”

“How else would they find me?” Harry hisses and Louis has never seen the look on his face or heard his voice like this, the vein in his neck pulsing. “You told them. I trusted you and you told them.”
Louis’s confusion turns to fury before he can even blink. “How the fuck would I do that Harry? 1-800-Paparazzi?”

“I told you I loved you,” Harry yells, incredulous now. His hands pull at his hair. “I told you things I hadn’t told anyone and you sold me out.”

“I didn’t, I swear.” Louis feels the situation gathering steam if he doesn’t diffuse it quickly. He tries to grab for Harry but Harry won’t let him, pushing past him toward the kitchen. “I wouldn’t.” Louis follows after him, all but running to keep up, the doorbell still ringing incessantly in the background.

“Do you know what the media has done to me?” Harry whirls around to face him and his eyes are wet. “My family?” He shakes his head and presses his fists to his eyes. “I never took you for a coward and a traitor,” he spits as he pulls open the back door. “Get out of my house.”


“Get the fuck out,” Harry says, jaw tense. “Go down the beach and they won’t see you.” A tear rolls over the edge of his eye and down his cheek and Louis doesn’t think he’s ever been so mad or hurt in his entire life. “Or go out the front and spill your guts. I bet they’d love to hear what I’m like in bed.”

“Harry,” Louis’s voice breaks, “You can’t be serious right now.” He sounds like he’s pleading but he doesn’t know what to do. He doesn’t know the man in front of him right now but his heart is crumbling as he waits for his Harry to come back.

This demented version of Harry just flexes his jaw, eyes cold and it takes everything out of Louis at once. “I don’t know what the fuck is going on,” he whispers, voice fierce even though his throat is raw, “But you do not get to treat me like this.”

Harry wipes a tear and looks away. Louis wants to shake him but feels numb as he walks out the door, passed the loungers they’ve spent nearly every night on, over the board he fixed in the deck and onto the path leading down onto the beach. When Harry slams the door and flings that lock too, he feels like he might throw up.

He starts running along the beach when he hits the sand, so scared to turn around and find out he’s being chased. He goes up the back entrance of his house, his hands shaking as he unlocks the door and slips inside, closing it securely behind him. It’s only after the lock clicks that he realizes there are tears on his cheeks.

He loses track of time after that, pacing around the house with nothing to do. He sits on the couch and replays the conversation but even that makes it seem worse, the way Harry looked and the way he sounded, the vulgar things the photographers had said - absolute strangers asking invasive questions and recording reactions.

He presses his palms hard to his eyes until he sees stars and then he remembers what Harry said about putting his name in Google. As if the thought had crossed his mind. Louis had done it once in the beginning but never again. Hearing Harry’s full name never made him want to research him - considering he could always get the truth from Harry himself. Until now.

He’s still numb as he walks into his office, tapping a random key on his keyboard to wake his computer as he sits in his chair. He types in Google with heavy fingers and considers stopping before he puts in Harry’s name. There’s something vindictive lingering under his chest so he types in Harry Styles without thinking too hard, pressing Enter and then sitting back.
It feels like slow motion as the results pop up - a row of pictures at the very top of Harry. He had hair to his shoulders Louis notices in the first one of him in a red suit with flowers on it; the next picture has his shorter hair under a beanie, and then there’s a younger Harry looking wasted and being led to a car by his wrist against a dark background in the third photo. Louis can’t even click ‘More Images’, already feeling sick from the first few. It feels like an invasion of privacy that all this information is reachable - Harry’s age and height and hometown listed in a sidebar to the right.

Louis nearly clicks out if the page but then he sees his face looking back at him. In the section under ‘Headlines’ he sees the picture of him and Harry from the night before on the boat linked to multiple stories. He’s identified by name in one story and called a ‘mystery brunette’ in the next headline and ‘Styles’ Next Score’ in another. He clicks on the first one, heart sinking. Harry must not have known they published the pictures, that people tracked him by the photos and found him accurately enough. He thought it was Louis.

Louis can’t actually read the article and clicks back to the search, eyes tearing again He wipes it away hastily, swallowing hard. There’s a list of Harry's nominations for Oscars and his acting credits, a fan page dedicated to him three search results down, an article about him chasing older men and another linking him to three models in the same headline. Louis feels sick. There's five-hundred-and-eighty-seven more pages of results of things about Harry but Louis can’t click on any further. He exits the page and sinks back into his chair.

He closes his eyes and presses his fingers to the bridge of his nose. He thought he knew Harry - and this, coupled with events of the afternoon, is a blatant reminder he only known part of him. The part that mattered, he defends his own argument to himself. Whether he knew Harry had an Oscar or that Harry cut his hair for charity doesn't matter because he knew all the small bits you only find out by getting too close - the freckle under his ear, the way he smiles when he’s tired.

It doesn’t mean a fucking thing, though, he realizes slowly as he stares at his computer screen. Harry still thought Louis sold him out and Louis feels with a sinking confidence that it was Harry who didn't know him at all.

*

Louis wakes up on his couch with a hangover.

Sometime after he put Harry’s name through an internet search, he found a bottle of whiskey in the kitchen and started drinking straight from the bottle. Just enough to take the edge off and evidently enough for him to fall asleep sitting up on the couch.

He goes for his normal run in hopes to sweat away the remaining alcohol and clear his head. He thinks it works but the dark cloud settling over him doesn’t dissipate. He checks his phone half-heartedly and sees four missed calls from his mom and the group text with his sisters has nearly maxed out. He’s sure they’ve all seen the picture too - probably didn’t realize he meant Harry Styles when he told them about his Harry. There are no messages from Harry though and, at the moment, that’s all Louis actually cares about.

He does have a disappointed message from his editor in his email inbox when he bothers to check - she’s only disappointed with his writing though, not his life choices. He spends the rest of the morning editing and re-hash the worst paragraphs of his piece before re-submitting. It takes his mind off waiting for Harry to apologize at least.

He thinks that’s what he’s doing at least - waiting for Harry. Harry is the one who treated him like dirt on his shoe, who yelled at him and called him names. He should be the one to come crawling back to his front door.
The day drags on and there’s silence leaking from the walls of the house making Louis go stir crazy.

“Fuck it,” he actually says out loud as he grabs his keys from the hook by the door. He doesn’t want to wait for Harry anymore, he wants to find him. He has some yelling he could manage right now or he could go for a good explanation as to what the fuck yesterday was supposed to be. He’s not sure what he should expect when he shows up on Harry’s doorstep but he feels like an exposed nerve and he can’t wait around to find out what’s going to hurt him next.

The street is blessedly empty in front of Harry’s house - which only calms Louis slightly. He could have easily gotten into a fist fight if the same photographers had been out there again. Regardless of how Harry makes him feel in the moment, he doesn’t deserve the questions and bombardment of yesterday.

Louis takes a deep breath when he rings the bell and then he waits. His vision blurs on the pink door because he stares so hard as he waits but there’s no movement or sound inside. He walks around the back of the house, determined, but the door is locked and shut there as well.

He presses his nose to the window but doesn’t see any signs of Harry - no coffee cup on the table or cookbook on the counter. He goes back to the front with a new determination as he sits on the front step. He’ll wait until Harry comes back if that’s what he has to do. He won’t move until he sees him again.

It must be nearly an hour before a black SUV pulls in front of the house. Louis’s hope curls and he stands, dusting the back of his pants. He doesn’t know what he’s going to say first but he has quite a few ideas running rampant in his mind - until a small woman with a blonde bun on top of her head climbs out of the driver’s seat of the SUV. She wears a black suit and a serious expression as she rounds the corner toward Louis.

“Mr. Styles?”

The name is like a visceral hit and Louis winces slightly. “No, sorry,” he says. “Can I help you?”

The woman glances at something on her phone and then back at him. “Mr. Styles said the property would be vacated by this afternoon. If you’re still packing your bags, I can come back later.”

Lou’s swallows, spikes lodging in his throat. “Vacated?”

The woman looks at him like he’s not speaking English. “Let me start over,” she says. “I’m Mary Kate and this is my house. I rented it to Mr. Styles for the summer. He called to say he was leaving and the house would be empty by this afternoon.”

Louis blinks but it doesn’t help his brain process. “He’s gone?”

“I guess that’s what I’m asking you,” Mary Kate says, slightly impatient. “Is he gone?”

It feels like a terrible and cruel joke and Louis wants to laugh until Harry comes popping out of the bushes. “I think he is, yeah,” he finally manages, throat swelling like he might cry instead. “I must have got the dates confused,” he lies but he doesn’t think she can tell, already heading or the front door, key in hand.

Louis wants to follow her and run through the house - he wants to be sure Harry isn’t hiding and that he really did leave. That he packed his cookbooks and first aid kit and left without saying goodbye but not before stomping Louis’s heart into the sandy ground. He turns to leave, pausing
at the bottom of the steps.

“One more thing,” he says, voice stronger than he feels. “Did he change the dates he was leaving? Or was this always the one?”

Mary-Kate pauses with the key in the door, and turns to him. “Funnily enough he had called to extend his stay through Christmas last week. But this morning he was at the airport and said there had been an emergency, he couldn’t stay.”

Louis doesn’t fall to the ground like he wants to, he doesn’t cry either. He thanks her and walks away toward home, his lungs caving in and his heart beating irregularly. He walks away and pretends that everything Mary Kate has just told him doesn’t cut him to pieces.

* *

Los Angeles International looms like a fortress as Louis checks and rechecks his backpack, confirming he has his passport and credit cards.

“Did you pack socks?” Niall asks from the driver’s seat, one hand on the wheel the other hanging out the window.

“Yes,” Louis says without looking up.

“Socks you can wear with those fancy black shoes?”

“Trick question.” Louis glances up at him with a smirk, “I don’t wear socks with those.”

Niall scrunches his nose. “You’ve got your tux?”

Louis actually pauses and Niall actually giggles. “My mum took care of the rental and it will be at my hotel,” he says anyway, so at least he won’t have to panic about it once he’s in a plane over the Atlantic Ocean.

“And you’re ready to see Harry Styles again?”

Four weeks has done little to dull the sting of his name though Louis doesn’t visibly wince anymore. “He’s the guest of honor so it doesn’t really matter whether I’m ready to see him or not,” he says drily.

Niall slows the car in the drop off lane of the departure terminal. “Are you sure you want to go?”

“I have to go, Ni.” Louis zips his backpack up one last time. “My mum is organizing the entire thing, it looks pretty bad if her son can’t even show up.”

Niall hums in agreement. “It’s not your fault he cut off all of his hair and donated it to her favorite charity before you’d even met.”

“No, it’s not,” Louis says quietly opening the car door. Two months ago, it would have seemed like fate to get the invitation to the Princess Locket Gala and see Harry was named the guest of honor. It would have been funny to make Harry show him pictures of getting his hair chopped off - fun to see the pictures of when he had long hair. The opposite had happened, of course. Louis saw the pictures on Google and read an article mentioning his mum’s charity as the benefactor of the big cut. Getting the invitation to the gala via a phone call from his mum who whispered Harry’s name like a secret felt like the universe was playing one massive joke and Louis is the sole target.
“Kick him in the balls for me,” Niall says aggressively, though Louis knows Niall follows Harry on all of his social media accounts and probably misses him as much as Louis does. Maybe not as much as Louis does. He’s not sure that’s even possible.

Louis tries to fall asleep once the plane is airborne but he can’t quite hack it. He’s going to see Harry for the first time after one month of absolute silence and he’s not sure if he’s ready for that.

He’s been miserable for four complete weeks but that’s not something he wants Harry to know. He’s carried his sadness right around on his sleeve - dark circles under his eyes and lethargy seeping into his writing. He hasn’t slept well and each day drags on slower than the last to the point where he has stopped keeping track of dates altogether. Except, of course, the date of the Princess Locket Gala.

“You don’t have to come,” His mum had said once the words Harry Styles left her mouth. Louis didn’t tell her how or why things crumbled with Harry but she, along with the rest of the world, saw the video of them in the front yard with the vicious photographers. That had been published the night after Harry left town. Louis saw a still frame but couldn’t bring himself to press play. He already knew what he would see.

“When I’ll come,” Louis said even as he closed his eyes and rubbed two fingers along the tension headache between his eyes.

At least he’d been able to disappear once the video was posted. No one was going to fly photographers to him and no one called for an interview or asked him to expose Harry’s secrets. He did find someone pretending to be him on Twitter a week after Harry left and that was...odd. He’d never even been on Twitter until that day when he was trying to make his own account and found someone already had his name. They had a lot of pictures of Harry on the fake account so at least their mind was in the right place.

Harry, on the other hand, wasn’t able to hide at all once the video was published. Louis watched it play out in pictures on his computer screen - from baggage claim at Heathrow to a relentless series of shots of Harry coming and leaving his house with a hat on or a hood pulled over his head. He never stopped for cameras and barely looked up but when he did Louis saw the exhaustion there in his eyes, and in the darkness underneath them.

At first, Louis took sick satisfaction in it - that Harry was struggling like he was. Then he spiraled into a deep-set sadness over Harry having to face the vultures who tore him apart trying to do it again - and to face it all alone. Eventually, Louis went numb. He stopped looking at pictures of Harry voluntarily and went back to the way things were before Harry happened upon his simple life - his steady routine, his mundane existence. Harry had felt like his turning page - like he was starting a new chapter after rutting through the same one for three years on repeat. After the way things ended, Louis feels like he’s back on page one with nowhere to go. He tries not to let the sadness of that realization eat him whole.

He’s not over it - may never be over it - but he knows that he has to suck it up for his mum, for the charity and ball she’s chaired since he was a kid. Pretending he’s not breaking apart when he faces Harry again will be one of the hardest things he’s ever done, he already knows. And he knows that's what will happen - the breaking. He knows he won’t be able to breezily say hello and keep walking when confronted with Harry at the gala. Harry imprinted on every inch of his life, pressed himself into all the cracks and crevasses that were never filled before. It’s not something that can be ripped away and healed in a month. He’d be lying to himself if he thought it would.

*
Louis spends his first couple of days back in the UK at home in Doncaster with his family - eating his mum’s home cooking and playing with the girls, catching up on their lives. He hasn’t come home much since the accident but they always remind him how easy it is when he does - no guilt or lingering questions just unconditional love.

“So, Harry Styles,” his sister Lottie says his second night home when they’re up too late watching trash television. Louis has an excuse considering the gala is the next day and he’s too nervous to function or even attempt to sleep. Lottie just makes a habit out of watching trash television.

“We’re not doing this,” Louis says, throwing a pillow from the couch across the room at her.

“We’re not doing anything,” she says impatiently, chucking the pillow right back.

“What about Harry, then?”

“I thought you’d like to know that I thought I was in love with him when I was seventeen.”

Louis groans and covers his face. “No, I don’t want to know that.”

Lottie laughs. “I thought it was funny that you were dating,” she says. “He broke my heart, you know. He started dating some pop star and I thought the world was ending.”

“You were seventeen?” Louis asks.

“Yes,” she says, glancing away to hide her smile.

“I’m twenty-six and when he broke my heart it felt like the world was ending for me too.” She doesn’t say anything else after that and Louis isn’t sure there is much to add anyway.

Less than twenty-four hours later, Louis is walking into the grand ballroom of the Savoy in London with his heart in his throat, and his stomach in knots. He smiles graciously at everyone he sees and shakes hands with all the right people but he’s just waiting for the moment when he sees Harry. He knows it’s inevitable but he hates the waiting, he wants it to be over before it even begins.

It happens at dinner coincidently. In between taking a drink from his water glass and reaching for his fork, Louis sees Harry at a table across the room in a suit printed with green, gold, and purple flowers, his hair swept back from his face. It’s still him, Louis can see it from this far - the pink of his lips and cut of his jaw. It feels like the world has fallen away and been put back together wrong but Harry looks just the same as he did the last time Louis saw him, a world away from here. He’s not sure if that makes it hurt more or less only that his heart feels too heavy in his chest and he’s suddenly lost his appetite.

Louis spends most of the rest of the evening after dinner skirting the edges of the ballroom, being his mum’s right-hand man when she needs him, which takes his mind off of keeping an eye on where Harry goes every minute of the night. He doesn't want to watch him, to not be able to look away but there’s something about being this close again that makes it so he can’t. He misses him with a persistent ache and that seems to underline and override every other feeling he has.

He makes his way out to one of the balconies surrounding the ballroom eventually - the only empty one he comes across. It’s dark out except for lanterns along the railing edges and it’s peaceful, the noise of crowd from inside swelling out in gentle waves. He needs the fresh air to clear his head and he needs to calm the spinning wheels of his brain.
The moon lingers out over the edge of the property and Louis swallows hard against the threat of emotion in his throat. The moon and the stars had a front row seat to the way he and Harry first began and followed them all the way here to watch it end. That's what this must be, Louis thinks. The very end, the last thread. Never again will he have an excuse to be in the same room as Harry Styles. When he leaves the gala, the book will be forever closed. It hits like a punch to the bottom of his lungs to realize - the way the strings of fate twist together by happenstance but pull apart with the same frivolity. He hasn't made his peace with it but someday he'll have to. Someday he'll remember what it's like to live a life without Harry and he'll pretend to fall in love with it. He hopes it doesn't hurt as badly as just the mere thought does.

It’s only when he turns to go back inside that everything freezes all at once - his beating heart, the knot in his throat, the vibrations of his hand. Everything freezes and then shatters as Louis sees Harry Styles standing in the doorway, his hands on the lapels of his jacket. For a moment, Louis doesn’t think he’s real. A figment of his overly emotional imagination. Time feels distorted, Louis’s lips are numb, his tongue heavy. Harry looks just as surprised to find Louis as he steps out onto the balcony fully, his hands slipping into the pockets of his printed trousers. He looks beautiful and Louis feels it like an ache.

“Harry,” Louis says first, the name curling against his tongue in a way that is familiar in a way that only hurts. “How are you?”

Harry closes his eyes and looks just beyond Louis when he opens them. It takes a beat longer for him to look back at Louis and meet his eyes, his jaw flexing. “I’m doing well,” he says and, god, Louis hopes he’s lying. “You?”

The lie doesn’t come as easily to Louis. “Okay,” he says, “I’m okay.”

The silence is awkward and Louis thinks it’s the first time it’s ever felt this way between them. It’s wholly wrong and fully uncomfortable.

“Congratulations on the guest of honor spot,” Louis says, trying to treat this conversation like all the others over the evening. It’s harder when he knows that Harry has a scar under his chin and his smile is naturally crooked, that he sleeps on his left side and likes to hold Louis’s hand during scary movies.

“Thank you,” Harry says but he doesn’t offer anything more.

Louis can’t think of a thing to say next. He wants so badly to be breezy and brush Harry off but that will never be in the cards for him when it comes to the man in front of him. It never was. Harry knocked his defenses down the day he walked into his life and Louis hasn’t figured out how to build them back up yet. He’ll get there, eventually. Not yet, though - not now. Not with Harry right in front of him as a stark memory of everything they had, his cold words a perfect reminder of all they have left.

“I need to go,” Louis says finally, a lump thick in his throat. He’s not strong enough for this. He hoped he could be but now he knows he’s not.

Harry nods and drops his gaze to the ground as Louis brushes past him, tears trying to force their way out but Louis will not let them. Not anymore.

“I know you didn’t call the photographers.”

Louis stops at the edge of the balcony leading inside and takes a deep breath. He really can’t do this.
“Louis,” Harry says, “I know it wasn’t you.”

His name on Harry’s lips used to be the sweetest sound but now it hurts, it stings. He doesn’t let it show as he straightens his back and turns to face Harry again. If they need to jump through one final hoop to let everything burn to pieces, he’ll do it. Maybe this will give him the closure he hasn’t craved but knows he needs.

“After,” Harry swallows and rolls his lips together before starting again. “After I left that day,” he says slowly, “I flew straight to London. My manager met me at the airport and said the picture of us posted online was what made the paps come. They recognized you from the accident and just followed the trail to the cove.”

Louis knew that much already - he’d figured it out with a thirty-second Google search, something Harry didn’t bother with.

“Will you say something?” Harry asks, voice cracking. Louis takes sick pleasure in the sound.

“What should I say?” He asks, his voice coming out stronger than he expects. “That I was so mad at you, I thought I hated you? I thought I’d never hated someone as much as I hated you for what you said and what you did to me. Is that what you want to hear?”

“I didn’t hate you,” Harry says, voice thick. “I thought I did but once I understood,” he lifts one shoulder, “I could never hate you.”

Louis runs his hands back through his hair, confused as to how this is supposed to be helping them get over this all when Harry insists on dragging them back through it instead. “Okay?” He says finally. “You called me a traitor and burned everything we had before you disappeared without a trace but you don’t hate me? What exactly do you want to get out of this Harry?”

Harry shakes his head, “I don’t want to get anything out of this, Louis. I’m just trying to explain myself.”

“You’re not doing a good job at it,” Louis says bluntly. “Last I saw you, you were treating me like shit and running away. If you just want to tell me you forgave yourself a day later and moved on while I’ve been miserable for the last month, please just get on with it.”

Harry shakes his head again and presses his fists to his eyes. When he drops his hands, Louis sees his eyes are shining. “I was embarrassed by what I did,” he says. “For how I jumped to conclusions. I didn’t know how to apologize to you and fix it.” He takes a deep breath and exhales shakily. “And then I stopped wanting to fix it and I just wanted to forget it.”

Every word is like salt on a wound and Louis really can’t take it. He holds his hand up for Harry to stop in case there is more coming. “You can save it,” he says. “I’m not interested in having you hurt me all over again.”

“I wanted to protect you,” Harry says loudly when Louis starts to turn away. It’s enough to get him to stop again, to turn back.

“What?” He hears it in his voice then. He doesn’t sound curious, he sounds defeated.

“When I got home, the attention was worse than it had been in months. There were paps in my neighborhood and hiding under my car and following me in grocery stores. I didn’t want to go after you because I didn’t want you to get wrapped up in this. It’s as messy and invasive as it was that day at my house. I’m like a pariah to everyone I care about. I ruin things just by being myself. And even if I run away for the summer to pretend it’s not happening, it’s never going to go away completely.” He hardens his eyes when he looks at Louis, lifts his chin, “You don’t deserve that.”
Louis shakes his head, “You have to be kidding.” Harry doesn’t get to decide what he does and doesn’t deserve - that’s not up to him. Louis has spent twenty-six years making his own decisions; one of his favorites has been giving Harry a chance. Or, it used to be one of his favorites. Lately it’s felt like the worst.

“I’m not kidding. I couldn’t even protect myself, how would I ever be able to protect you?” Harry licks his lip and looks down at his feet. “They’re vicious Louis, and I’m not worth that.” What starts as impassioned slows to a quiet confession and Louis’s heart curves at the edges.

Louis takes a step closer to Harry, unsure what else to do. He knew Harry had been hurting - the pictures had been enough to prove that much - but he hadn’t exactly realized what headspace Harry had wandered off to while they’d been apart. “What happened to being stronger together?” Louis asks, swallowing hard. He should leave and he knows it. He shouldn’t be walking himself into vulnerability and waiting for Harry to shut him down. “Being infinite?”

“A fantasy,” Harry says, emotionless compared to a second earlier. “I was caught up in the moment without thinking about it.”

Louis thinks about turning and leaving for good. The old Louis would have - the Louis who didn’t know it was possible to be soft in a world trying so hard to make him hard. The Louis who didn’t get to know Harry, to fall in love with Harry. He’s not the old Louis - not anymore. He lifts his chin and meets Harry’s eyes. “You sound like you’ve been rehearsing that line for a while,” Louis says with an edge to his words. Harry looks away and Louis knows he’s caught him. The Harry he fell in love with is still hiding somewhere inside the person standing in front of him.

“You know what I was doing that day?” He takes a deep breath. He said he would fight for a future with Harry and he thought that fight had been finished the day Harry left him. Standing here, the closest he’s been to Harry in a month, he doesn’t feel like that fight is over. “I was coming over that day to tell you I wanted to try this for the long run; try us for the long run. To tell you even though we never talked about the future but I wanted one with you. That’s why I was there. Not to trick you or hurt you.” He smiles, “I came to tell you that even though you were Harry Styles you were only ever just Harry to me and you always would be - Harry who snores and drinks cold coffee, smokes my cigarette when he’s drunk, hogs the covers, and somehow manages to taste like strawberries.”

Harry flexes his jaw but still refuses to meet Louis’s eyes. He’s not giving up, though. Not yet.

“I wanted to tell you all of that and then I was bombarded with all of those photographers and you yelling at me as soon as I show up at your house. I was so scared of all those guys, scared for myself and for you.” Harry winces at the words or the memories, Louis can’t be sure. “All I could think was that I had to get to you and everything would be okay. We’d fix this. Then you told me I betrayed you when I wouldn’t even dream of it. I wanted to give you my heart for good and you kicked me out without hesitation.”

When Harry finally meets his eyes, Louis can see that a few of the tears are threatening to slip. Though he came here to talk to Harry, to iron out their grievances, he never meant to hurt him. He didn’t want to hurt Harry the way Harry had hurt him but he thinks he may be doing it anyway.

“I was pissed, Harry.” Louis softens his voice slightly. “I went home and looked you up on Google after what you said and I was even more pissed because you thought I would sell you out like that. I felt like you didn’t know me at all.” He runs his hands through his hair and scratches at his scalp. He would never betray someone the way Harry had been betrayed before, even now it hurts to know that’s what Harry thought. “And then I realized how scared you must have been,
that those people found you - how maybe you lashed out at me because I was closest. But I didn’t
know. I didn’t know if I saw the real you that day or if you were scared.”

Harry shakes his head and tries not to laugh. “I was terrified. I trusted you with everything and I
thought you had thrown it back at me. The reason I was in Malago Cove in the first place was
because of them. They dragged my name around and stomped on anything I even liked about
myself. They used to say I -”

Louis holds up a hand, “It’s all on Google. I saw what they did. I left a lot of anonymous
comments on a lot of articles in the past month. Got in a Twitter fight with a jounro actually.”

“Did you?”

Louis’ lips twitch, he can’t help it. “Possibly.” He hadn’t done it intentionally but when he saw an
article disparaging how serious Harry took the filming ‘Rogue’ while he was romancing an ex-
football player, he couldn’t just sit quietly. That's the day he made his first Twitter account.

Harry looks away and Louis sees him hiding a smile. When he looks back, he’s serious. “I know I
overreacted. I’ve hated myself every day for what I said to you, Lou.” He rubs his hands over his
face, his eyes red. “But that day was a reminder of everything we would stand to lose in the real
world. Malago Cove was ours and they managed to rip that to shreds. I knew they would do it
again if they could. They’d track down your family and write terrible things about you. They’d
take every piece of us and transform us to unrecognizable pawns. They’d try to turn us on each
other.” His lips are shaking when he says, “I couldn’t let that happen to you, to us.”

“And if I told you that it doesn’t matter?” Louis says, his voice heavy. He clears his
throat. “Grimy photographers and invasive journalists bother me but not enough to run away from
you? That I have spent thirty-four days thinking about you and the way you made me remember
my life is worth living? If I told you I have spent thirty-four near sleepless nights hoping you’re
safe and happy? That I haven’t stopped being in love with you for every moment you were gone
including the ones I hated you?”

He doesn’t realize he’s moving closer and closer to Harry until his voice is already at a whisper,
weary of any prying eyes from inside the ballroom.

“They don’t scare me, Harry.” Louis says, voice suddenly steady. “Not having you in my life is
far worse.”

Harry holds his eyes and Louis doesn’t dare look away.

“When I saw you inside earlier, it was the first time I felt like I could breathe properly since I left,”
Harry says. He inhales and it’s shaky. Louis stays perfectly still. “I wanted to tell you that I miss
everything about you. You let me be Harry in a world that only knows me as Harry Styles. You
made me feel important for things that weren’t in my movies or related to my worth. You made
me whole again.”

Louis tries not to gape. This was never what he expected when he thought of seeing Harry
again. He knew it would be painful, he expected misery but he never thought Harry would make
him feel like he’s falling all over again the way he does right now, like trusting him was never a
mistake, like they could possibly have a chance together even in a world vying to tear them up.

“Baby,” Louis breathes, “If you want to do this, please let us try. Don’t let them scare you into
unhappiness. Not when what we have is once in a lifetime, maybe even longer than that. Nothing,
no one, has ever made me feel the way you do when we’re together. You think I don’t deserve
that? I don’t deserve to feel as happy as I do with you?”
Harry’s eyebrows pull together, “That’s not what I said.”

“It is,” Louis says softly, “In a way, it is. And so, I’m telling you, no. I don’t believe in many things but I believe in you and in what we have. We can’t let that go, babe. Not without even trying. I know you’re scared but you don’t have to be in this alone. Let me be on your team.”

Harry licks his lips and rubs his hands at his eyes. “Stop it,” he says. “You’re making me cry.”

Louis fills his lungs with the night air and lets it go slowly. “What do you say, darling? Is this worth it? Can we try?”

Harry’s lips squish together when he nods, one stray tear slipping down his cheek. “Please,” he says.

Louis closes the space between them and pulls Harry close, their bodies fitting together in a way it seems they were made to. “You have to know how much I love you, Harry Styles,” he whispers against his ear.

Harry pulls his head back first to kiss Louis, sidestepping out of the view of the ballroom as he does. “I gave you a chance to get out,” he whispers. Louis wipes his tears away with his thumbs. “That was it.”

“I’m not taking it,” Louis says before kissing Harry again.

“I know,” Harry says. “And there’s not going to be another one, okay? Now you’re stuck with me, this is it.”

Louis smiles as he kisses him. “I’m not letting you go, sweetheart. So don’t even try it.” This time when he kisses Harry it feels a lot like coming home.

EPILOGUE

One Year Later

The skidding of the wheels against the tarmac is what wakes Louis up, blinking as he lifts his head and glances around the rest of the cabin. He tugs on the back of his shirt where it’s sticking to his sunburnt shoulders uncomfortably, and straightens his legs out to stretch them slightly. Even in first class, a six-hour plane ride isn’t that comfortable. He did sleep most of it so he can’t complain. He really can’t complain considering he’s been in Jamaica for the last two weeks. Whatever.

He glances over at Harry, still sleeping and tucked up against the window, probably drooling if Louis has to guess. His hand is still on Louis’s knee like before they went to sleep though his grip has loosened considerably. His skin is as tanned as Louis’s, vague tan lines from his sunglasses on the side of his face and deeper red around his ears because he forgot to wear any kind of sunblock the day they laid in the sun as long as they could take it.

It had been pretty perfect, Louis thinks. Their villa opening onto the beach, their bedroom with windows overlooking the water. Louis isn’t going to forget what it felt like to make Harry come while the sun started to rise over the edge of the horizon, the oranges and reds casting in their bedroom and against their sweat slick bodies, Harry’s back curving obscenely. Louis shifts in his seat at the mere memory - he’s not sure he’s supposed to be getting so hot fantasizing about his own boyfriend. Not that he would change it for the world.

It had all been Harry’s idea - to flee to Jamaica. They could because they still don’t have any roots
between them - just renting houses in places close to where Harry needs to be which means they’ve been in London the last eight months while Harry shot his latest project, ”Gold Kiss”. They rented a flat off in a lonely corner with space for Louis to write and for Harry to keep up his painting habit but close enough to set for Harry to get back and forth easily.

Louis had continued writing as he always had at first - watching games on his computer and doing phone interviews. It was Harry who pushed him toward going to a match in person and it took nearly three months before he actually did it. Walking in wasn’t as hard as he imagined but finding his way to the media booth was more than disorienting. Once the match actually started, the roar of the crowd and energy on the field had him hooked. There was nostalgia there, a nagging itch in his stomach to be the one on the field, but he settled into it eventually. Fell in love all over again with the sport, with writing about it, with bringing that feeling to the page. The next morning at breakfast, he’d told Harry about it over coffee and blueberry muffins Harry made, and he tried to ignore Harry’s smug smile, the way his eyes seemed to be beaming.

It was almost perfect until it really wasn’t. Until the paparazzi started swarming in like flies, less vicious than in the States but enough to make Louis cautious and Harry annoyed. They grew weary quickly but the last straw was when Harry nearly tripped while getting into the car after a wrap party. Louis hadn’t been there as he’d been covering a match the same night but he got a call almost immediately, saw the pictures not too soon after. Harry was waiting when he came into the house, he had a bag packed at the bottom of the stairs and kissed Louis before he could say a single word. “Let’s get lost,” he’d whispered against Louis’s mouth, “Let’s go to Jamaica.” Louis was helpless to say anything but yes.

“Are we here?”

Louis pulls from his thoughts at Harry’s sleep raspy voice. He smiles as Harry wipes his hand over his mouth and yawns.

“No,” Louis says quietly, “We’ve actually landed on the moon. We’re taking you home.”

Harry rolls his eyes and then he leans over to kiss Louis not bothering to see if anyone is watching. “I hate you.”

“Love you, darling,” Louis says with a sly smile, running his thumb over Harry’s eyebrow.

It’s still early as they walk through the airport but it doesn’t stop people from taking photos - only a couple that Louis can spot though Harry is much better. He has Spidey Senses that Louis definitely lacks. In Jamaica, some people would ask Harry for photos while others would just swoop behind signs and in between shelves to get their shot. Not knowing when they’re being photographed and then seeing pictures of them eating dinner together will never not be the creepiest thing Louis has ever had happen to him. Though, to be fair, there was one boy, who was about twelve, who came up to ask Louis for a picture in Heathrow just before they left for their holiday. Louis tried not to be completely shocked as they took a selfie and the kid, Alfie, said Louis had coached him in a kid’s camp when he was five and had made him want to play football more seriously. He’d not sure he managed the not-shocked thing as Harry laughed so hard he nearly burst a blood vessel once Alfie had left them. "You look like the petrified cat from Harry Potter," he’d giggled.

This morning, there’s just one stray professional photographer at baggage claim, clearly waiting for someone who has actually called him but he snaps pictures of Harry and Louis when he sees them. Louis positions them so their backs are to him while they wait for their luggage and he keeps Harry’s side profile out of view - not that Harry has ever asked him to do it but Louis feels better when he does, like he has some semblance of control.
There are a few more photographers positioned outside the side door as they make their way to the car, flashing lights making them keep their heads down. All they'll get to see is Harry and Louis holding hands as they get inside their waiting car, destination unknown for the time being. What they won't see is that Harry scoots in the middle seat so he can be closer to Louis and that Louis holds his hand in his lap as Harry falls back asleep with his face pressed to Louis’s neck. This is what they've learned - in the year or so since they've decided to try this out for real. People can take pictures in public if they want and write nasty stories about rumors they've never heard, they can take things neither Harry or Louis give them willingly, but they can't take the moments they keep just for them, the quiet ones like this and the soft ones no one else will ever see. Those are theirs and theirs alone.

End Notes

Thank you for reading! Tumblr

(If you're interested, the song that inspired Harry and Louis's arc is the same song that inspired the title: Turning Page by Sleeping At Last)

Prompt: Footballer!Louis, Actor!Harry. They meet at some fancy charity gala and immediately hit it off. queue some wacky shenanigans as they try to hide their relationship at first, but literally everyone knows and when they make it official and come out and whatnot, everyone just finds them to be an adorable couple.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!