“Good,” Julia says, clearly pleased to have them both uncomfortable and unable to look at each other. “Now, I only have one more question before you can go. What are you planning to do when this experiment ruins your friendship?”

“We said we’d stay friends no matter what,” Harry says smoothly, his chin lifting in defense.

“That was our one thing going into it,” Louis agrees. “Stay friends no matter what.”

Julia raises a perfectly manicured brow, “That’s all fine and good. But I hope you realize your emotions aren’t going to realize this is an experiment in the end. If one of you falls for the other and finds out those feelings are not reciprocated, you’re not going to be able to laugh it off as a social experiment. I’m not saying you shouldn’t do this, I’m just hoping you’ve considered all of the possible outcomes.”

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AU: Two best friends try to date each other for forty days. It's supposed to be fun until emotions make it complicated.

Notes

Hello, hello, here we go again! A couple of notes: The idea for this story was largely inspired by the real life social experiment called 40 Days of Dating from a couple of years ago. Definitely check it out - but just know this story isn't quite like that one. Also, the title
credit for this goes to James Bay and the one song that kept me going through this: "Wild Love". Each chapter has a song to go with it - links at the top of each one if you're curious. Thanks to Rachel for the killer moodboard to accompany this - looks sick! Okay, that's it! Please enjoy :)
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

"You and Me" - You+Me

"You and me were always with each other,
Before we knew the other was ever there.
You and me, we belong together,
Just like a breath needs the air."

* 

It starts snowing as Louis reaches the end of his rope. The world outside looks like a shaken snow globe with the black velvet sky opening over the tops of the buildings. It’s like the street lights are spotlights and the snowflakes are dancers as they fall. Louis traces the path of one snowflake with his eyes until it gets lost in the masses. He’s pretty sure this is the first time he’s ever been staring out the window at the exact moment snow has started to fall.

That, somehow, feels important.

More important than the InDesign file open on his computer, at least. He’s been working on the same layout since he left work; moving the assets around, watching as the designs melt and squirm under his critical eye. It’s much easier to watch the snow fall instead, his television a muted hum in the background, a blue light flickering against his bookshelf.

He checks the time and sighs; it’s already past nine and his productivity famously starts lagging after seven. Not that he should have been working on this design anyway - not when he already spent the entire afternoon on it. He drags his eyes from the window as his stomach rumbles with the low reminder he didn’t eat dinner before sitting down at his desk tonight. He casts a sidelong glance at his kitchen - it’s not like he has something great to cook for himself anyway. He saves his work and puts the computer to sleep before standing up and leaving it behind.

Living in New York for four and a half years hasn’t made snow flurries enticing by any stretch. Growing up in Seattle meant more rainy weather than anything else so he’s gotten used to the frozen version of the same by now. It’s not all that exciting anymore. He pulls on his heavy black coat and a pair of gloves he keeps near the door, checks to make sure he has his keys and his wallet, and then he heads out in search of dinner. Dinner and a drink, he silently amends.

The sidewalks aren’t too treacherous; Not yet, at least. Louis shoves his gloved hands in his pockets and heads toward the side streets, not in the mood for tourists standing in the middle of the sidewalk and staring up at the sky like they haven’t seen snow before.

For what it’s worth, Manhattan has emptied out significantly since the holidays ended a week ago - ringing in the New Year is always the final celebration for a city packed too tightly to be functional.

His feet lead him on a familiar path toward his favorite bar. He spots the famous sign as he gets close; the “M” in Max’s brighter than the other three letters. Though he likes their burgers and drinks best, he has a soft spot for Max’s for another reason: it’s the bar where he first met his best
friends - before he had any idea at all they would become his friends.

It was New Year’s Eve - the five month anniversary of his move to New York and a disappointing night all around. He’d ended up at Max’s at closing time, somehow removed from the group he’d gone out with, and trying to escape from his midnight kiss who was a bit too clingy. Outside the bar it was bitterly cold - too cold to even snow as the weathermen had gleefully shouted earlier in the morning. Louis’s threadbare black sweater was doing nothing for warmth as he let the door of Max’s close behind him; his skin already prickled in goose bumps.

Another guy stepped out the doors only a moment later and was seemingly worse off in a short sleeve shirt. Louis remembers, even now, eyeing him warily as competition for a cab with only a second to spare for just how pretty he was; long and lean with curved cheekbones and a sharp jaw, hair long enough to brush the tops of his shoulders.

Almost simultaneously, he and the stranger both spotted a cab lingering further up the street and they both started toward it. With a glance at each other, they laughed lightly. “Would you mind sharing?” The stranger asked when neither of them slowed their steps. “Not many cabs come down this way.”

Louis wasn’t in a charitable mood - he was cold and pretty much wanted to be left alone - but when he finally locked eyes with the guy, Louis noticed his lips were starting to go a little blue and he wouldn’t have been able to stand himself if he said no. “Sure, man,” he said.

The cab driver was quiet as they both slid in the backseat, but the passenger already inside was a little more vocal. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Louis doesn’t like to admit the way he jumped at the surprise voice, the way he’d flung his body back toward the stranger from outside the cab like he was some sort of protection from the new stranger.

“We thought this was empty,” the first guy said from behind Louis. Gentle hands pushed him upright and Louis wasn’t too tipsy to realize he’d been in the guy’s lap like a scared cat.

Through the filtered light of the street lamp, Louis could barely see the new stranger but he still looked like an angel; dark hair and long eyelashes, pouty lips, and a perfect jaw. “Mind if we share?” Louis ventured, using the words that had worked on him only a second ago.

Dark and Handsome - aka Stranger Number Two - eyed them both warily and then shrugged. “Yeah, fine. I’m going to get breakfast, though.”

The rest, as they all like to say, was history. Sitting in a diner in Brooklyn at three a.m. until the regular morning crowd came for breakfast around eight, they spilled secrets and talked about absolutely nothing as they drank coffee and ate pancakes, the sun rising out over the city without them noticing.

Max’s still sits the same as it did that night - subtle and low key, tucked between a sandwich shop and a salon. The neon light flickers OPEN as Louis walks in, the warmth of the pub enveloping him immediately. He pulls off his gloves as he nods at the bartender - Taylor, the weekday guy. A quick survey shows most of the booths empty, a few stray couples and lonely drinkers scattered around. Louis starts toward their usual table in the far corner when he stops, a laugh almost forming.

It’s a bizarre strand of deja vu to see Harry Styles already sitting at their usual table, reading a
book of all things to do in a bar. He has short hair now and a warm brown sweater instead of a short sleeve shirt like the first night four years ago. He looks older of course, sharper in ways only New York City can make you.

Louis smirks as he yanks his usual chair out from under the table, abrupt and loud - enough to make Harry jolt as he looks up. Louis laughs at his reaction until he sees a blankness in Harry’s eyes and then he clears his throat. “Hold on. I’ll get a drink.”

He orders at the bar - a beer and a cheeseburger with sweet potato fries - and then finds his way back. He leaves his jacket on the chair at Zayn’s usual spot and sits down, placing his beer on a coaster. The coasters at Max’s are all retro albums, which is part of the draw of the regular crowd. Louis gets Tom Petty tonight. “Fancy seeing you here,” he starts, noticing the water glass next to Harry’s book.

“Felt like a drink,” Harry says, closing the book and scooting it to the side.

“Of water?” Louis gives his glass a pointed glance as he takes a drink from his beer.

Harry smirks, “This could be straight vodka, you know.”

Louis smiles, “I do know. It’s not.”

Harry sighs and scratches the side of his neck. “I had a change of plans.” Louis stays quiet which is how he asks for more. “Had a date,” he adds. Louis’s eyebrows flicker up but he still doesn’t talk. “Got stood up,” Harry says it like its defeat to say out loud. He pushes his lips out and widens his eyes comically. “Like I said, change of plans.”

Louis scrunches his nose, “Well, shit.”

“Yeah. Shit.” Harry drops his hand from his neck and taps his fingers on the table. “It was supposed to be our second date too, which almost makes it worse.”

“On the scale of being stood up,” Louis agrees.

Harry sighs. “And why are you here alone on a Wednesday?”

“Not quite as exciting as you. I didn’t eat dinner and ran myself into the ground on a project.”

Harry’s lips twitch, “So the usual?”

“Fuck off,” Louis says, rolling his eyes. As if Harry hasn’t done the same thing just as many times. “You know how it is when you get going.”

“I do,” Harry says, chancing a smile.

Louis just looks at him for a second, the disappointed curve to his lips despite his attempt to hide it. “Shall we get a bit drunk? Will that make you feel better?”

Harry smirks and this time it almost reaches his eyes, “Do you even have to ask?”

They start slow until Louis has finished eating his dinner and then they keep up a steady pace, whiskey on ice for Louis and tequila with a lime for Harry.

“Who is it that stood you up? Do I know them?” Louis asks as he finishes his first drink and pushes his empty plate away.

“His name is Ryan,” Harry says, squeezing the lime over his second tequila and then dropping it
“His name is Ryan,” Harry says, squeezing the lime over his second tequila and then dropping it in. “He works for the Giants.”

“An athlete?” Louis raises his eyebrows. He’s seen enough to know an athlete has never been Harry’s type - in men or women.

Harry shakes his head, “He’s in Marketing.”

Louis hums; that makes more sense. “And you thought the first date was fine?”

“I thought so. We went to dinner and he invited me back to his place for a drink. We had a lot to talk about and he seemed to think I was funny.” He rubs his face with his hands and then lays both palm down on the table. “How in the world am I supposed to find my soulmate if someone, who I think is perfectly interested in me, can’t even manage to come to a second date or send a text explaining why?”

“He didn’t even text?” Louis shakes his head. Sending a cancellation text an hour before a date he’s dreading is his favorite method of operation. “He could be hurt or stuck in the subway with no service,” he says, a tilt of optimism Harry hasn’t picked a certifiable dick to try and date.

“Or he’s a complete douche who can post on his Instagram story about going out with his friends but forget to tell me he’s not coming to dinner.” Harry smiles with his lips pressed together.

“What an ass,” Louis says. He flicks his hand as if to brush the matter away completely and Harry smiles, a real one, as he takes another drink of tequila.

They talk a bit about work after that - how Louis has three deadlines staring him down and Harry has to present a proposal he’s been working on next week. Harry mentions one of the magazines he represents might need graphic work for their spring issue and says he’s already dropped Louis’s firm because, of course he has. They tend to run in different professional circles - Louis in graphic design and Harry as the creative mind behind editorials - but those circles overlap every once in awhile. Mostly, it’s the party scene, the same galas and launches, sometimes when Louis is hired by one of Harry’s editors.

“How funny would it be if Zayn walked in right now?” Harry says after his second tequila, cheeks and lips red from the alcohol.

“It would be like fate,” Louis says seriously. He takes his phone from the pocket of his jeans and takes two tries to open their group text before he sends, \textit{where you at big z?}

Harry’s phone buzzes across the table with Louis’s message and then they both wait, eyes on their phones. The text comes a moment later not from Zayn but from the fourth member of the group text: Niall.

“Ugh,” Harry says loudly as he enlarges the picture Niall has sent at the same time Louis does.

It’s not particularly graphic except it’s Zayn clearly laying on Niall’s bed with only a pair of sweats on, rustled sheets surrounding him. “Gross,” Louis whines as he sends a series of eye rolling emojis. His message coincides with Harry’s message of the green puking emoji and caution signs.

“They’re a lot less fun now that they’re sleeping together,” Harry says, locking his phone and putting it face down on the table.

“We should have known it was inevitable,” Louis comments, swirling the whiskey in his glass. “Wasn’t Zayn the one who found him in the first place?”
Harry laughs, “Zayn is the one who pounded on his door at two in the morning thinking it was your door. And then insisted Niall let him sleep on his couch even though they’d never met.”

“Which was actually a lot better considering I was hooking up with - fuck, what was his name?”

“Dylan?” Harry raises his eyebrows, “The annoying editorial assistant from Cosmo?”

Louis snaps his fingers, “That’s him.”

“Any guy who writes about how women need to please men ‘in the kitchen and the bedroom’, he uses air quotes and a higher voice to quote the title of the article, “is a piece of shit.”

Louis laughs loudly but agrees wholeheartedly. He was never in a relationship with Dylan; it was more like a two weekend rendezvous never to be repeated. “Meanwhile Niall and Zayn were falling in love next door.”

“Only to ignore the feeling for the next year,” Harry points out.

Louis clicks his tongue, “That was the angsty part of their story arc, babe. All stories have it.”

Harry rolls his eyes and drains the rest of his tequila. “Meanwhile my story hasn’t even started.”

“You can’t know that,” Louis says, licking his bottom lip. “Your soulmate could be sitting right here in Max’s.” They both glance around at the bar that has become strikingly empty apart from the two them; one woman older than their mothers is asleep in the booth in the corner with a glass of water on the table in front of her.

“I certainly hope not,” Harry says when they spot her.

Louis nods, “Well, maybe it’s Taylor.” They both glance at the bartender and find him scratching the sides of his hips with his eyes closed for seemingly no reason and shake their heads simultaneously.

“What about you, Lou?” Harry asks while Louis finishes his drink. “Do you ever think about when your story will start?”

Louis shakes his head. “It’s all apart of my story. The hookups and breakups and random kissing of strangers.” He shrugs, “It’s all build up to the climax which will be finding the person I’m meant to be with.”

Harry rests his chin on his palm, “What’s the difference between your story and mine?”

“You think your story starts when you find The One. You’re waiting for a romance. I’m in the middle of my coming-of-age novel where the peak will be me falling in love with someone. The rest is the sequel.”

Harry scrunches his nose, “I’m too drunk for this conversation.”

“As am I,” Louis admits, realizing he can’t repeat what he just said - mostly because he’s already forgotten it.

“Let’s take a walk,” Harry says, setting his credit card on the edge of the table. “I want to sober up before I go to bed.”

Louis twists his wallet out of his pocket to get his own credit card, agreeing with Harry. They’re not twenty-three anymore and bouncing back from two whiskeys certainly won’t happen in time
for an eight a.m. meeting but perhaps a walk can lessen the blow.

They pay and then bundle up, Harry in one of those jackets with faux fur around the hood that, seemingly, everyone in New York City has. “You don’t have gloves?” Louis asks as they step outside, the snow having formed a nice blanket while they were inside.

Harry shakes his head and shoves his hands in his pockets. “Was hoping for a cute boy to notice and hold my hand tonight.”

Louis shakes his head with narrowed eyes, “You minx.” Harry laughs as they start off toward the park.

The snow has mostly stopped, only a few stray flakes now. Their breath puffs out like gentle clouds, their boots crunching over the first layer of snow. It’s late enough the city is almost quiet, much of the snow untouched as they create the first path. By tomorrow morning, it will be pushed and shoveled out of the way, an inconvenience for a busy city. Tonight, it’s kind of beautiful.

Central Park is empty when they arrive on the edge. Louis used to do this more when he first moved to the city, when insomnia and anxiety kept him from sleeping. He’d wander around and wonder what the fuck he was doing here. Wonder why he moved from Seattle to New York without knowing a thing about life or about himself. He still wonders from time to time but now he’s got people like Harry, for one, who have the same questions.

They walk in silence with nothing but scuffing feet and the odd sniffle cutting through the air. The cold seems to be sobering them both quickly or, for Louis at least. “What are you thinking about?” Louis asks when he glances at Harry to find his face far more serious than a midnight walk calls for.

The look on his face melts away when he catches Louis looking. He smirks. “You don’t want to know.”

Louis smiles, “Um, no. Now I really want to know.”

“What if we dated each other?” He doesn’t hesitate or add any disclaimer to the question just puts it right there like he’s serious.

Louis bursts out laughing, too loud in the quiet park, too boisterous for the hour. He only stops when he realizes Harry hasn’t joined him. Instead, Harry is studying his face with quiet eyes, lips pressed together. Louis stops walking. “Wait, you’re serious?”

Harry pauses alongside him. “Is it that hilarious to think about?”

“Kind of.” At least he’s honest, he thinks. “What even brought that question on?”

He watches as Harry’s gaze drops to the ground before he looks up. “I don’t know. I guess since we were talking about how neither one of us can find anyone. We’ve got bad dating luck or whatever.”

“So you thought the solution would be for us to date each other?”

Harry shrugs and starts walking again. “I didn’t think it would make you laugh, that’s for sure.”

Louis thinks about all of the compromising positions he’s seen Harry in throughout their friendship. A couple of them immediately bring a smile to his face: Harry locked out of his apartment with one handcuff attached to his wrist after a hookup gone wrong and Harry with food poisoning throwing up on the sidewalk.
“We know too much about each other,” is where he lands. “We’ve seen too much.”

“Wouldn’t that make us ideal candidates?” Harry asks and, hand over his heart, Louis thinks he may be serious.

“You’re not serious, H. Like, you cannot be.” There are so many reasons they can’t date, too many for Louis to list in the inebriated state he’s in, but enough that he knows, even right now, this is not an option.

“I mean, you can definitely laugh this off as a joke but I’m being serious.”

Louis blinks twice, eyes fixed on Harry’s face, waiting for him to look over. When he does, Louis finds his eyes are heavy but clear, his cheeks pink but mostly from the cold now. “You’re drunk.”

“Possibly,” he allows, with half a smile. “I also don’t think it’s a bad idea.”

Louis stops again and looks at Harry. He truly looks at him: the scar edging under his chin from before Louis knew him and the freckle on his lip Louis drunkenly (and loudly) pointed out that first night at the diner. This is a person he’s seen at his very best, worst, and every other possible condition sprinkled in between.

“We just know too much,” Louis repeats when the pause has turned to lingering quiet. He knows he must have better arguments but they aren’t coming to mind. This feels like this is an ambush; one he never saw coming. “There’s no mystery or excitement in a relationship where you already know everything about a person.”

Harry barely smiles and nods. “That’s you, isn’t it Lou? Always in it for the mystery and the excitement. I’m the one in it for the romance.”

Louis narrows his eyes as Harry’s words settle, “Should I be offended by that? I feel like I should be offended.”

Harry laughs and shrugs, “I don’t know. Should you?” He starts walking again, the snowflakes getting larger as they make their way out of the park. “I’m pretty mysterious like that.”

“Shut up,” Louis says, rolling his eyes. “You’re an idiot.”

Harry smiles, “Yeah, yeah. I’ve heard.”

They part ways a few blocks from their apartments just as the snow starts to fall significantly harder, the wind whistling through the quiet streets as they start walking in opposite directions, trudging toward home.

* *

Louis would like to say he wakes up Thursday morning with a hangover and no recollection of Central Park but it doesn’t quite happen. Instead, he’s met with a pounding headache and Harry’s face pressed to the very front of his mind, his lips forming around the words, what if we dated each other?, over and over again.

It’s a strange thing, being asked out by his best friend - something that, prior to last night, has definitely never happened. It’s also ridiculous, is the thing. They can’t possibly date each other. They just… can’t. Harry is his best friend and that’s the end of the sentence. He wants he world for him, would do anything at the drop of hat for him but certainly cannot do this.

He nearly laughs as he sits up in bed with a head rush. Harry must have been more drunk than he
thought. He throws his legs over the edge and stands up, rubs his eyes and decides this will be the last he’s going to think of it.

* 

Despite his insistence to forget it, the thought lingers in Louis’s mind the rest of the week, poking up every once in awhile when he least expects it; demanding his attention in lazy moments of the morning and late at night when he tries to go to sleep.

Dating Harry. Dating his best friend. It’s nowhere on his to do list and yet the thought won’t go away altogether. It sticks around like a bad cartoon, waving a red flag every once in awhile to get his attention, reminding him of the possibility.

He’s still thinking about it on Sunday when he goes to meet up with Niall, Zayn, and Harry for brunch, curious if it’s on Harry’s mind, too.

Meeting for monthly brunch is A Thing for their group of four, the same way it is for the housewives of every major city in the world and the closest thing to a tradition they can manage. Toasty’s is their favorite place - a carb based brunch Niall loves with the heavily loaded Bloody Mary’s Zayn likes and bottomless mimosas with two carafes of juice - one orange, Louis’s favorite, and one pomegranate, Harry’s choice.

This Sunday, they show up in various states of health. Louis is early to get their customary table while Niall and Zayn show up with death-defying hangovers and Harry gets there right on time looking like a disheveled rock star as he is ought to do.

They order their usual array of dishes to eat family style, Zayn starts draining Bloody Mary’s to cure his hangover, while Louis and Harry sip mimosas; light on the juice. They catch up on each other’s weeks as they wait for their food - Harry’s quick trip to Boston where it snowed, Louis’s night out on Thursday with his team of designers, Niall’s boring life as an accountant, Zayn’s slightly more exciting week as a writer doing a piece on the porn industry.

“And what the hell happened to you two last night?” Louis asks when they exhaust the porn conversation. “You look like death.”

It’s an ode to the hangover that neither Niall or Zayn fight him on it as they start storytelling in tandem. Louis leans back in his chair and watches in quiet awe when they start to bicker about whether they were drinking cranberry or raspberry vodka sodas while Harry chews on a piece of cantaloupe and stares at them like they’re animals in a zoo.

It’s around then that the memory of Central Park peeks out in Louis’s mind again and pushes its way to the front and right out of his mouth. “In other news,” Louis says during the next lull, unsure of where his interruption has come in the argument, “Harry asked me out on Wednesday.”


Louis smiles, pleased at the reaction as he takes a sip from his mimosa. “Was that confidential?”

“I hate you,” Harry says conversationally, in the way he’s said it so many times before.

“I’ve been thinking about it,” Louis says, ignoring Zayn and Niall’s curious gazes, “And I think I might be into it.” He’s not sure he’s thought it through fully but he’s had a few idle ideas rolling around the past few days.

Harry rolls his eyes and pours himself another drink, mixing pomegranate and orange juice with
the champagne. “The offer isn’t even on the table anymore. We were drunk.”

“Are we seriously being denied of context of this conversation?” Niall asks with a glance between them.

“I had an even better idea than just dating, though,” Louis says, eyes on Harry. Niall makes an affronted noise at being ignored but Louis can’t really focus on his needs at the moment.

Harry stares at him blankly, blinking twice. “What is it?”

“So we date, right? But it’s not normal dating.”

“I’m not a normal mom, I’m a cool mom?” Harry asks, one eyebrow curving up.

“What?” Louis pauses and pulls back slightly.

“It’s from Mean Girls,” Zayn chimes in and Harry lifts his glass in cheers, Louis presses on.

“Whatever. What if we make it like, a social experiment?”

“Should I say no now or wait for you to finish explaining your bad idea?”

Louis doesn’t even pause, gaining momentum as he speaks. “We could make a whole thing out of it. Like, what happens when two best friends try to date each other. It’s a human interest story.”

Harry shakes his head and picks up his fork. “I don’t like it.”

“What’s not to like? It’s fun.”

“Dating your best friend for a human interest story sounds dangerous, not fun,” Harry says.

“Feeling a bit offended right now,” Zayn says with Niall humming along with him.

“Not you guys,” Harry says with a wave of his hand. “You were actually interested in each other.”

“Are you saying you’re not interested in me?” Louis asks.

“Uh, other way around I’m pretty sure,” Harry says, rolling his eyes. “I asked you out and you who brushed me off like I was out of my mind.”

“We were drunk,” Louis says loudly, perhaps too loud by the way pairs of eyes from neighboring tables draw to them. “We were drunk,” he repeats quieter. “You said it two seconds ago.”

Harry doesn’t seem to have an answer for that, stabbing a roasted potato with his fork and lifting it to his open mouth.

“It would be fun,” Louis repeats his earlier sentiment. “And we could even pitch it to a few places when we finish, see if it’ll take off as an actual story.”

“That,” Harry cuts in, pointing his fork at Louis, “Is where you’re losing me. I’m not going to be someone’s experiment to go viral. We’re not pitching our story to the general public.”

Louis rolls his eyes, “That’s not the only reason to do it. It’s still interesting from our perspective too, you know. It’s like what you were saying, we both have terrible histories of dating, neither one of us is that excited about dating, we get along already,” he ticks the reasons off on his fingers as he comes up with them, “It’s a recipe for success, honestly.”
Harry swallows and shakes his head. “It’s not.” He says it like it’s the end of the conversation and
the sharp edge in his voice keeps Louis from pushing any harder.

“Anyway,” Louis says, recognizing Harry’s dismissal. “Anyone going to the new exhibit at the
MET next weekend? The architecture one?”

Niall and Zayn wear matching looks of disbelief, a piece of bacon suspended halfway to Niall’s
mouth. “You’re really just going to change the subject like that?” Zayn asks, clearly speaking for
both of them. “After proposing to fucking date each other right in front of us?”

Harry chews thoughtfully on another piece of potato, dead set on ignoring Zayn. “I’m not sure if I
want to go,” he says, “The review I read said it’s kind of flat as far as actual unique designs and it
could be a suburb anywhere.”

Louis nods, “Interesting. And not what I would expect from the new curator.”

“What the fuck is even happening?” Zayn whispers to Niall though they all can hear him. Niall
just rolls his eyes and shrugs, clueless.

There’s a quiet beat where they all chew in silence and then Niall bites a bullet and says he’d like
to attend the exhibit if anyone else feels like it. Seamlessly, they fall back into their normal
conversations, Louis and Harry’s sidebar a fading thought.

* *

“I’m outside, let me up.”

“Yes, Harry, great to see you too.”

“Louis. I’m freezing my ass off.”

Louis laughs at that and presses the buzzer to unlock the front door to the lobby of his building.
He kicks a shoe in the gap of his door to keep it open and goes back to the couch, pressing play
on “The Crown”. He’s had one hell of a Monday and can’t even find the energy to be curious
about why Harry has shown up in his lobby without prior warning.

“Leaving the door propped open is dangerous,” Harry calls out a moment later to announce his
arrival.

“I don’t do it all the time,” Louis says, pausing the show again. He hadn’t expected Harry to get
up here that quickly. He must be in a hurry. “I knew you were the one coming.”

“Whatever,” Harry says, walking into the main room and eyeing Louis’s spot on the couch, “We
can discuss your safety later.”

Louis laughs as he studies Harry’s outfit. Running shoes and socks up to his calves, leggings with
shorts over the top, oversized sweatshirt with the strings tied together at the top, two earbuds
hanging out of the collar, a dark blue beanie over his hair, flushed cheeks. “Did you run here?”

“No,” Harry says. “Not here specifically. I was running like, around. Thinking.”

“Is the thinking what brought you here? Oh no,” Louis says when Harry nods.

“This dating thing,” Harry says, hands on his hips. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m not thinking anything,” Louis says with a shrug. “As of yesterday morning, when you told
me we weren’t doing it, I officially stopped thinking about it.”

Harry sighs and plops down in the armchair closest to where he’s standing. He rubs his hands over his face and then rests his chin on his fists. “What was your idea? How was it going to work?”

Louis pulls one leg up under him on the couch. “Truly, H. I hadn’t thought that far. My idea was making it into a social experiment. That was like, my big contribution.”

Harry rolls his eyes, “Of course it was. What were you thinking, though? Like dating for ten days? Longer?”

“Ten days?” Louis raises his eyebrows, “I’ve seen that movie. I’d be trying to date you not lose you.”

Harry shakes his head in confusion, “What are you talking about?”

“How To Lose A Guy In Ten Days, obviously.” Louis gasps, “Don’t tell me I’ve seen a romcom you haven’t?”

“Can you be serious for one minute?” Harry asks, leaning back in the chair with a sigh.

“I’m being serious. We’ll watch that on one of our ten dates.”

Harry levels his gaze. “Louis.”


“Would we have to start on the first of the month? Like waiting until February? I don’t want to do that.”

Louis rubs at his forehead, already stressed out by Harry’s questions about this hypothetical proposition. He’s still not sure they should even be considering it at all. “It’s not that serious, H.”

“No, it is.” Harry sits up and it reminds Louis of those games where you hit the clown and it keeps jumping up again. He tries not to laugh.

“I get it,” Louis says. “I’ll be serious.”


“Forty?” Louis’s eyes go wide. “That’s quite the jump from ten.” He doesn’t even know where he was forty days ago, what month that was. November?

“It’s realistic,” Harry says. “You can’t make a realistic decision about a relationship before at least a month.” He shrugs, “And I like forty better than a month.”

Louis clasps his hands in his lap, still in disbelief this is a conversation they’re having, like this is something they’re actually going to do. “Fine, forty.”

Harry presses his fists to his eyes and then drops them. “Wait, are we doing this? Are we really doing this?”

Louis meets his eyes. It’s the same rush of feeling as the night he told Harry no, the same memories tramping through his mind. He takes a deep breath and tries to consider it fully. Maybe it would be fun to try - just to see what happens. He makes the decision as he nods. “We’re doing this.”
Harry looks surprised and then manages to neutralize his face. “Okay. Forty days. Us. Dating.” Louis thinks of another question to keep from letting his mind run wild. “Then what happens?” Harry bites his bottom lip and shrugs. “I guess we decide if it’s working or if we break up?” He uses finger quotes around “break up” which Louis appreciates.

“We stay friends no matter what?”


Harry laughs and it bursts like confetti. “And I wore my best running clothes. I’m also sweaty.” His laugh falters to a smile, “If we do this, we have to do it right. Proper dates.”

“Forty days of proper dates?” Louis’s eyes bug out of his head. He’s had a few raises but not enough to facilitate forty proper dates with his best friend.

“No,” Harry says, frowning. “We can’t do that. We both work too much for that.” Louis laughs, “Therein lies one of our, admittedly many, relationship flaws. How about three nights a week? We have to see each other every day but we go on real dates three times each week?”

“That’s fine.” Harry licks his bottom lip, “What about seeing a couples therapist?”

“A what now?”

“Couples therapist,” Harry says. “Someone who can keep us honest about what we’re feeling. If we’re going to do this, we can’t just hang out for forty days. We need to progress our relationship like if we were strangers dating.”

Louis covers his eyes with his hands, pressing hard enough to see stars. Harry has clearly put some thought into this but the words “feelings” and “progress” have Louis going through a hot flash. “Do you know a couples therapist?” He asks once he finally drops his hands and focuses in again.

“I see a therapist regularly—”

“You do?”

“Yes,” Harry says like it’s public knowledge. “It’s cathartic. She has other therapists in her practice. We could enroll with one of them.”

Louis tries to imagine him and Harry laying on a couch and discussing their feelings with a stranger - the way he envisions all therapy sessions go - and laughs. Harry shoots him a look. “Fine. I’ll do therapy with you.”

“Compromise,” Harry says with a smile. “We’re doing so well already.”

“We should go on a weekend trip,” Louis says, trying to contribute and prove he’s serious. “Near the end of the forty days. I feel like that’s a big test for new couples.”

Harry takes a deep breath and Louis wonders if his ideas are giving Harry hot flashes in the same way Harry’s ideas are getting to him. And not in a sexy way. “Okay, yeah. One trip. And we
can’t see anyone else.”

“How do you think we manage that? Walk around with blindfolds on?

Harry shakes his head and flips Louis off. “I mean romantically. No dating or hooking up with
anyone else.”

For some reason, that rule is what gets Louis the most. Exclusivity. He’s never not been faithful
but relationships have a way of making him feel claustrophobic. Maybe another one of those flaws
and reasons he’s currently alone. He nods. “Agreed. Exclusive for forty days. Three dates a week,
one trip, couples therapy, and a partridge in a pear tree.

“Should we sign a contract or something?”

Louis is the one to roll his eyes this time. “No, I think we’ll manage this on our own.”

“So, we’re ready, then,” Harry says, standing up from his chair and clapping his hands together.
“Glad I stopped by.”

Louis laughs, “Me too. Here I thought I had a relaxing Monday night planned.”

Harry grimaces, “Sorry?”

Louis shakes his head, “No this is good. Or, it will be.”

“Right.” Harry nods. “We’ll see.”

The moment hangs between them, the honesty of it. They’re about to take their friendship
somewhere it’s never been and neither one of them actually knows what the outcome will be.

Louis stands as well when Harry takes a step toward the door. “You figure out if we can get in
with the therapist and then we’ll decide when to start.”

Harry swallows, “Okay.” He takes another couple of steps and pauses. “Lou, I’m nervous.”

He doesn’t have to say anything else for Louis to hear what’s unspoken. He’s nervous about
everything they’re going to risk. Louis nods. “Me too. But, we stay friends no matter what, yeah?”

Harry takes a deep breath and then nods. “Friends no matter what.”

*

The first hitch in the plan comes the very next day when Harry’s idea with the couple’s therapist
gets rejected - by actual therapists. “They, uh, don’t think it’s a good idea,” he says when he calls
Louis after being turned away by a second professional.

“That seems like a bad sign,” Louis muses, spinning on the stool in his office to look out the
window rather than focus on his current design.

“Just a bit,” Harry says, his voice muffled by the wind as he walks back to his office.

“Did they give any specific reasons?” He doesn’t want to read too far into it but he’s curious if
people think they’re insane for trying to do this.

“Not really. Although the first woman I called did legitimately laugh at me.”

Louis scrunches his nose and swings his stool back around to face the computer. “Do you have
“Always,” Harry says, the wind tunnel dying like he’s made it back inside. “There are always more therapists to call. I’m just making sure I should. It seems like there are a lot of red flags and we haven’t even done anything.”

Louis presses his lips together and considers calling the whole thing off. At this point, it’s still easy to laugh away as a joke. Except he’s never been a quitter. “Call a couple more,” he says. “Someone out there has to agree we’re not completely nuts.”

Harry laughs drily. “Yeah, we’ll see.”

Two days later, Louis gets a text from Harry, “We’re on,” with the link to a practice in Tribeca for one Julia Dawes. Louis may or may not get another hot flash.

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**WEDNESDAY ~ Day 1**

Louis wakes up on the morning of day one with butterflies in his stomach and nearly twelve hours to go before he’s supposed to meet Harry for their very first date: dinner at The Fat Radish. He does his best to ignore the butterflies but they don’t go quietly. While it’s mostly innocent excitement, a few of them have teeth.

At the office, he loses the morning to his designs which is where his mind should be but then his concentration flutters as his thoughts wander to Harry. He has every reason to believe Harry is just as nervous as him but he’s too scared to text him to check, scared to freak him out.

In the afternoon, Louis finds himself designing an emotional dump of his nerves into a graphic of math equations and question marks in all colors of the rainbow. He animates an equation “You + Me x 40”, adds italic text beneath: *ready for it?* and finds it’s actually rather charming. He likes the way the design moves across the screen, the way the text stands out against the equations.

He debates deleting the whole thing altogether but pulls up a new email instead, dropping the file and typing in the first part of Harry’s email address before it auto-completes. He presses send just as his phone starts ringing with some sort of design emergency from the third floor.

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The rest of the day moves quicker than Louis anticipates and suddenly he’s late and running out front of the building to get a cab, mind frazzled and tie askew as he tries to remember the address of the restaurant.

He checks his email when the cab gets caught in traffic and smiles when he sees a note from Harry in response to his afternoon email. It’s something quick but it settles every butterfly in his stomach all at once: *no one else I’d rather do this with.*

Harry is already seated at The Fat Radish when Louis walks in with just one minute to spare. He barely has to pause at the hostess desk before he spots him, halfway down the row of seating along the wall, a table for two with Louis’s empty spot waiting. It’s a small restaurant with white brick walls and distressed wood floors.

Louis takes a breath as he walks to Harry. He watches the way he takes a sip from his water glass and then straightens the silverware on his side like maybe he’s fighting butterflies too. Louis nearly rolls his eyes at the two of them. They’ve shared countless meals - in big groups and alone like this - and never given it a second thought.
Harry looks put together in his usual way; his sweater rolled at his forearms and a few rings on his fingers. His hair is swept to the back and side like he might have put some effort in to wrangling it. He still looks like Harry but slightly elevated to impress. Right then Louis realizes he’s seen a lot of versions of Harry but never this one.

Not for the first time, Louis considers telling Harry they should forget this whole dating thing and just get a beer. Except Harry chooses that moment to look up and meet his eyes with a cautious smile and Louis swallows his words. What do they possibly have to lose?

*  

Everything. The answer to Louis’s rhetorical question before he sat down is: they have absolutely everything to lose. Once they exchange quick hellos and order drinks from a pushy waiter - the house special, jalapeno margaritas - conversation comes to an absolute standstill. For the first time in four years, Louis can’t think of anything to say to Harry and the silence lingers between them like a physical force.

It’s only when Louis is considering yelling, “April Fool’s,” and running away that Harry cuts through his thoughts by reading them. “Is it me or is this awkward as hell?”

Louis laughs and it feels like catching his breath for the first time all day. “It’s awkward as fuck, actually.”

Harry’s lip twitch as he tries not to smile. “Same difference.”

“I can’t think of anything to say,” Louis says, going for complete honesty. “And you know that doesn’t happen to me.”

Harry laughs this time, his shoulders relaxing slightly as he does. “I brought you something to kick off our forty days,” he says. “It’s probably really stupid but it’ll give us something to talk about.”

“I’m sure it’s not stupid,” Louis says as Harry reaches under the table and pulls out a white paper bag topped with black tissue paper. “I didn’t realize we were doing gifts, though.”

Harry shakes his head, “It’s not a formal gift. And, to be honest, I only got it after you sent me that email today.”

“My poor excuse of a greeting card?” he asks with a smile as Harry sets the bag on the table between them.

“I thought it was really sweet,” Harry says. “Don’t go ruining it now.”

Louis laughs as the word sweet melts over him. He doesn’t let his smile falter, reaching for the bag and tugging out the tissue paper.

“It’s like a care package for dating,” Harry says, a bit shy as Louis unpacks the contents. There’s an energy bar, a reusable water bottle, a bottle of wine, painkillers, some candy, and a few tubes of chapstick.

“This totally beats my card,” Louis says as he puts the package back together carefully. “So thank you for one-upping me on our first date.”

Harry rolls his eyes but doesn’t get a chance to fight back before the waiter comes back with their drinks. They order a random assortment of small plates for their meal mostly agreeing on everything except when Harry chooses goat cheese for a salad and Louis nearly vomits.
They taste their margaritas once the waiter leaves and while Louis immediately likes it, he notices Harry’s eyes are watering and he’s fanning his mouth with his hand. “Too much jalapeno,” he says, grabbing for his glass of water.

Louis raises his eyebrows and steals Harry’s margarita to try for himself. “You’re such a cry baby,” he says when he swallows. It takes the same as his. Never one to be outdone, Harry takes the glass back and takes a continuous sip without breaking eye contact, his left hand flipping Louis off. Seemingly, the tension between them has dissipated in an instant.

“What do people talk about on first dates?” Louis asks after their food has been delivered to the table, hardly enough room for all the plates to sit comfortably.

“What do you mean, ‘What do people talk about?’” Harry asks, a bit incredulous with a forkful of salad halfway to his mouth. “You’ve been on a first date before.”

Louis chews a stuffed mushroom thoughtfully as he tries to remember his last first date. “Not in a long time. I usually meet people when I’m at a club or in like, groups. And then we just kind of hang out. We usually don’t date.” He motions between him and Harry as if to illustrate the difference.

Harry swallows and starts to dish out some of the sautéed vegetables onto his plate. “Okay but you have to get to know them somehow even if it isn’t sitting like this at dinner. Maybe you never realized you were on a first date.”

Louis rubs his lips together, still coming up blank as to what they talk about. “I guess we would just chat and learn about each other. Are you some kind of first date expert?”

Harry nods, “Unfortunately. You know I go on a lot of dates. Actually, I go on a lot of dates numbered one through five but not so much luck in landing anything past six.”

“What date is it where you’re supposed to get laid?” Louis asks and then laughs when Harry stares at him with dead eyes. “Sorry, is that not appropriate first date discussion?”

“Not usually. Although this isn’t really a standard first date. I’ve witnessed you throwing up on my boots before,” Harry says, a smirk slipping against his lips.

Louis quite nearly chokes as he swallows and barely recovers before he splutters. “That was accidental. And I bought you new boots.”

Harry smiles, “I know. I’m just saying, we’re not exactly the normal case, here.”

“What’s the biggest taboo for first dates?” Louis smacks his lips, “Let’s discuss it.”

“ Asking when you’re going to get laid, first of all.”

Louis nods, “Got that one down. What’s next?”

Harry rolls his eyes but something about it is more fond than upset. “I think a red flag is when someone discusses why their last relationship ended or drones on about why all their relationships have gone down in flames.”

“Or moan about their exes,” Louis adds with a nod. He smiles slowly, “So, Harry, tell me why you’re single.”

“Therapy is tomorrow, Lou.”
“We’re getting a head start.”

Harry sighs, “You already know my dating history. Like, all of it.”

It’s a fair statement. They’ve discussed their failings in romance at length and Louis knows Harry’s longest relationships have been matters of months - save for the two year relationship in college with the guy none of them ever met but who broke Harry’s heart with such stunning fortitude, Harry moved all the way to New York afterward.

Louis presses his lips together, “Fair enough. What’s your reasoning for being single, though? Like, outsider perspective, why are you not with the person of your dreams right now?”

Harry tears off some pita bread with his teeth and chews dramatically. “I see why people don’t talk about this on first dates. What a buzzkill.”

Louis smiles, “I aim to please.”

“I guess I haven’t figured out if the problem is me or with the people I choose to date.” He rolls his lips like he’s considering his next thought. “The fact I don’t like dating is the other thing. It’s so much work to get to know someone and then have everything bust a few weeks later. I would prefer just getting to the long term relationship bit.”

“But?” Louis nudges, knowing the next part already.

Harry narrows his eyes at Louis. “If I feel like people are getting too close to me, I’ll usually be the one to end things.”

“Fear of commitment,” Louis says like he has a psychology degree.

Harry huffs a laugh, “I don’t want to get my heart broken.”

“But you want to be in love?”

Harry smirks, “I never said I was perfect, did I?”

Louis tries to smile as he chews, waiting to swallow before he talks. “Don’t give yourself a hard time about it.”

“Easier said than done.”

There’s a pause while the waiter clears some of their empty plates and brings them fresh margaritas - though this time Harry asks for a standard rather than jalapeno. “I can’t believe you didn’t like it,” Louis muses as Harry accepts the glass from the waiter. “You love hot sauce.”

“Not with tequila. It’s a lot going on.”

Louis smiles, “I forget you like sipping on straight tequila.”

“Says the man who drinks whiskey on the rocks like it’s water.”

“Touché.” Louis can’t even pretend to be offended. It became his signature drink in college and is always his first order on a night out.

“It’s your turn, you know.” Harry laughs when Louis looks confused. “You have to tell me why you think you’re single. Tit for tat.”

Louis pulls a face, “I hate that saying. Tit for tat. It gives me the shivers.”
Harry raises his eyebrows, “You’re not getting out of this.”

Louis’s hands go up, admitting defeat. “Yeah, yeah. I’m single because I haven’t found anyone to put up with me.” He smiles as Harry’s eyebrows pull together. “What? That’s true. I’m a lot to handle.” He shrugs because it’s something he’s aware of.

“I don’t feel like insulting yourself is the answer to the question.”

“I’m not insulting myself,” Louis says, shaking his head. “I’m self aware. I have trouble committing to one thing because it freaks me out and there’s yet to be someone who see that and still convinces me to stay. Most people see the freak out and run the other way.”

“You’re can’t commit and I’m scared to commit?” Harry grins, “This is going to go swimmingly.”

Louis can’t help but to laugh. How fitting to find out they’re polar opposites in the dating world on their first date with each other. Barring a miracle, he isn’t sure either of them are going to be capable of much change in the next forty days.

When the bill comes Louis insists on paying and actually flicks Harry’s wrist to make him let go of the leather billfold after the waiter sets it on the table. “We’re on a date,” Louis says when Harry squeaks at being flicked and pulls his hand back to inspect it. “I’m paying.”

“You also just flicked me like this is first grade,” Harry says, holding his wrist up as proof.

Louis grins, “Did you know dating me would be this fun or are you surprised?” Harry rolls his eyes and doesn’t answer.

They walk to the subway together afterwards, hands shoved in their coat pockets, maneuvering around the wayward piles of snow that have yet to melt. “So that went well,” Louis observes. He feels like they need to but a lid on the night, give themselves points for making it through day one.

“Wait for tomorrow,” Harry says, “When we get psychoanalyzed.”

“Wow, the anticipation might kill me.”

“I don’t think it will be too bad,” Harry says thoughtfully as they descend the stairs into the subway station. It’s not too busy given the hour in the middle of the week and they both find seats on the train heading westbound, the tracks squeaking every once in awhile as they twist under the city. They get off at the same stop and walk the rest of the way, their apartments spread only a few blocks a part.

“So I’ll meet you at Julia’s office tomorrow afternoon?” Harry asks as they approach his building first.

“Yeah, text me the address again so I don’t get lost,” Louis says with a smile.

“Sure.” He pauses as they stop at the front walkway. “Thank you for tonight, Lou. It was a lot of fun.”

Louis swallows and nods, unsure of what to say. This is all unchartered territory and as much as they want to make fun of it, they are dating. There seems to be a blurred line with their self deprecation but it’s still real. The reminder makes Louis’s stomach flutter oddly. “I had a good time too, H,” he says. “This is going to be fun.”

Harry stays quiet, eyes tracing Louis’s face. “Fun,” he finally repeats with a nod. “I’ll see you
tomorrow?"

“At three sharp,” Louis confirms as Harry walks away. Louis watches Harry go in the lobby and press the call button for the elevator before he turns to start his short walk the rest of the way home. He takes a deep breath and lets the cold air fill his lungs. Not for the first time, he wonders what they’ve gotten themselves into.

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THURSDAY ~ Day 2

“Would you say you’re attracted to each other?”

Whatever air is left in Julia Dawe’s office zips backward through the door at her question. Louis shifts slightly on the couch and Harry stays perfectly still; the eighteen-inch gap between them suddenly doesn’t feel like enough. Julia, therapist extraordinaire and the only one who decided to take a chance on them, looks on patiently, unmoved by their squirm-ability.

Louis doesn’t dare look at Harry instead focusing just over Julia’s shoulder. They’ve only been in their first therapy session for ten minutes so far and the questions have been relatively simple up to now. Julia said she wanted to orient herself to the experiment and their history but suddenly she’s asking them to spill something they’ve never even admitted to each other.

“Harry,” Julia says, focusing in on him first. “Do you find Louis attractive?”

Harry clears his throat and then answers. “I do.”

The two words make Louis jolt like they’ve been yelled in his ear but he resolutely stares at the wall. He can’t believe they volunteered to do this to themselves.

“And Louis,” Julia turns her ice blue eyes to him, a soft smile. “Do you find Harry to be attractive?”

Objectively speaking, Louis thought Harry was certifiably pretty the first night he saw him outside of Max’s. Since then, it’s always been one of Harry’s traits - pretty - that Louis hasn’t thought much about. It’s not as though he’s the only one who thinks it - Harry being pretty isn’t the world’s greatest discovery.

Attractive, though. Louis blinks a couple times to buy some time. Attractive means Louis is attracted to Harry, drawn in by the prettiness and everything else to go with it: his personality, sense of humor, emotional vulnerability. All the things easy to admire on paper and harder to admit out loud. He swallows. “Yes. I do.”

Julia nods then stays quiet in the terrible way therapists do when they want to draw another answer out of you. Louis doesn’t necessarily have a regular therapist like Harry but that doesn’t mean he hasn’t tried (and failed) to get through a session before. Regardless of her silence, he doesn’t have anything more to offer to the conversation right now. All he can think about is whether he and Harry have already damaged their friendship just by admitting their attracted to each other.

Before he can think himself into having a full on panic attack, Julia smiles again. “That’s good considering you’ve decided to date.”

The air that had so severely left the room a moment ago filters back slowly as they both laugh lightly. Louis chances a glance at Harry as he moves around and finds his cheeks slightly pink but otherwise intact.
“If you’re such good friends, and attracted to each other,” Julia asks, “Then why haven’t you dated before now?”

Louis thinks this is going to be another lapse where the silence lingers but Harry volunteers to speak this time. “I think we moved so quickly from strangers to becoming friends,” he says, “We kind of passed the possibility of dating without realizing it could have been an option.”

Louis nods, “I agree with that. After the first night we met, we were such fast friends, it didn’t cross my mind.”

Julia blinks. “Did it ever cross your mind Harry?”

Louis is pretty sure Harry just answered that question but as Harry clears his throat, he realizes he may be mistaken.

“I can’t remember.”

Louis tries his best to keep his eyebrows from shooting up his face. Harry saying he can’t remember if he ever wanted to date Louis feels like a statement begging for a follow-up question but Julia must not agree.

“I see,” she says. “From what I understand, you landed here because you both have hit dead-ends when it comes to dating. Louis, looking at Harry, why do you think he has been unsuccessful dating?”

Louis smiles, “We actually talked about this last night. H thinks he’s scared of commitment and it makes him jittery when it comes to that stage in a relationship. The part where someone could get hurt’

Julia doesn’t match his smile. “I didn’t ask why Harry thinks he’s single. I asked why you think Harry is single.”

Louis raises his eyebrows and glances at Harry. “I don’t know,” he says, drawing his eye back to Julia. “Seems like it’s bad luck or something.”

“Louis,” Julia says, not unkindly but definitely not sweetly, “I need you to be completely honest in this exercise. A real couple trying to make things work has to be willing to show hidden parts of themselves regardless of how unpretty those parts may be.”

Louis licks his bottom lip and looks at Harry again. This time Harry is looking at him and shrugs as if to say, go ahead. “I think he picks the wrong people to date sometimes,” Louis says. “I feel like he deserves more than most of his past partners have offered.” He finds himself talking to Julia’s shoes and recognizes it as fear of having to see the look on Harry’s face. “I think he should be more careful about who he chooses to date.”

Julia nods and makes a note while Louis focuses on not moving, hardly breathing. He doesn’t think he’s said anything malicious but he hates the first time he’s saying these things out loud in front of Harry it’s to a stranger.

“And Harry, why do you think Louis has been unsuccessful with dating?”

Harry barely pauses before he’s speaking and Louis tries not to be offended. “He says he’s a lot to handle but I think he makes himself that way. He likes the chase but tends to fidget when he finds someone who actually likes him.”
Louis blinks into the silence, mind spinning. He’s not sure if he’s supposed to defend himself or congratulate Harry on hitting the nail directly on the head. It’s always easier to say he’s unable to commit than admit that he’s not sure he wants to. He likes when things are light and fun but rarely sticks around for the dark and heavy.

“Good,” Julia says, clearly pleased to have them both uncomfortable and unable to look at each other. “Now, I only have one more question before you can go. What are you planning to do when this experiment ruins your friendship?”

“We said we’d stay friends no matter what,” Harry says smoothly, his chin lifting in defense.

“That was our one thing going into it,” Louis agrees. “Stay friends no matter what.”

Julia raises a perfectly manicured brow, “That’s all fine and good. But I hope you realize your emotions aren’t going to realize this is an experiment in the end. If one of you falls for the other and finds out those feelings are not reciprocated, you’re not going to be able to laugh it off as a social experiment. I’m not saying you shouldn’t do this, I’m just hoping you’ve considered all of the possible outcomes.”

* *

“Not the most cheery forty-five minutes,” Harry muses once they’ve told Julia goodbye and made their way out to the front of the office.

“I feel thoroughly psychoanalyzed though,” Louis allows, zipping up his jacket. He was worried it would be awkward once they were out in the hallway but Harry seems determined not to make it that way, so Louis plans to join him.

“Very thorough,” Harry agrees. “I feel like I need to go home and journal the shit out of my feelings.”

Louis laughs, rolling his eyes. He doesn’t journal but he can definitely feel his deep rooted insecurities about relationships brushing up under his lungs.

“I meant to ask you,” Harry says as they walk down the front steps to get a taxi. This far out from Manhattan, they’ll share a cab back and split the cost. Trying to save money in New York is a habit they haven’t learned to break.

“Ask me what?” Louis uses one hand to hail a cab and glances over his shoulder at him.

“Are we going to schedule our three official dates in advance each week?” he asks. “I’m just a little worried we’ll run out of time and end up putting them off if we get busy or something, you know?”

Louis squints at him, “This is supposed to be fun and spontaneous, not a meticulous chore we have to write down in our planners.”

Harry raises his eyebrows, “I just know we both get busy so I’m trying to make sure we work out enough time to see each other.”

A cab pulls over to them and gets honked at by three other swerving cars before stopping in front of them. Louis slips in the backseat first with Harry hot on his heels to follow. “Do you do that with everyone you date? Plan out each date a week in advance? We don’t need an itinerary to get through this, H.”

“Uh, news flash, Lou, I am new to this.” Harry sounds a little huffy as he closes the door. “We
just went to couples therapy as a second date. Clearly this isn’t ordinary. Unless you usually drop by therapy with your conquests?"

“Don’t use the word conquest,” Louis says sharply but Harry talks over him to give the driver the address of his apartment. “And today wasn’t even a date, by the way,” he says as the cab pulls into traffic. “We have to see each other every day but the dates are supposed to be more intentional and planned, something we both enjoy doing together.”

“So you agree the dates need an itinerary, then?” Harry asks, a smirk pulling at his lips.

Louis turns to Harry, nearly about to tell him he’s giving him a headache when he sees his stupid smirk. “How about we can plan out two days in advance, okay?” he says, “Otherwise this is all going to seem like an obligation and I don’t want it to be something I have to think about, yeah? That’s not how actual relationships work.”

Harry narrows his eyes but Louis holds his stare, unmoving. Harry likes plans and Louis can appreciate that but not each day for forty days. They hold their staring contest until the cab driver slams the brakes and they both jolt forward with startled laughter.

“Fine, two days in advance,” Harry says. There’s one pause then, “So what are we doing tomorrow?”

Louis shakes his head slowly, “I’m gonna flick you again.”

Harry narrows his eyes as he tries not to smirk, “You wouldn’t.”
FRIDAY – Day 3

Louis is standing outside of the theater in Midtown when he sees Harry getting out of a cab further down the sidewalk. He crosses his arms as Harry gets closer to him. “The show doesn’t start until eight,” he says, nudging his chin toward the marquee over head. “Aren’t we a bit early?”

“I don’t even get a, ‘hello’?” Harry asks, his lips twitching into a grin.

“Hello,” Louis says, “Why did you tell me to get here two hours early?”

Harry laughs, “There’s a sandwich place a few blocks away and I’ve been thinking about their BLT’s all day.”

Louis raises an eyebrow, “Is seeing this play just a guise for you to get a sandwich?”

“No,” Harry says sweetly. “Making you meet me two hours early sure is, though.”

Louis sighs, “I’d make fun of you if I wasn’t so hungry.”

“How did I know you’d say that?” Harry asks, laughing as they start down the block toward the sandwich place.

The play they see after their sandwiches is something Harry had heard about - an off broadway rendition of Wicked set in the modern age. Louis is sure the original version is the best but he enjoys the visuals of the new show and the way Harry’s eyes light up as he watches.

During intermission Harry gets them each a glass of wine as they chat about the lead actresses and Louis is struck by how easy it all is; how much it feels like every other time they’ve hung out together. He’s so startled by the realization he nearly says something but then bites his tongue. The thing is, if this is considered dating, they’ve pretty much been in a relationship for four years already.

Afterward, they walk to a little bar across the street and order drinks at a tall table in the center of
the room. They talk mostly about the week - how Louis’s sisters are mad he missed their dance recital and how Harry is planning to clean his kitchen over the weekend - and it's still perfectly ordinary.

Louis casts a sidelong glance at the other couples around them but finds most are sitting the same as he and Harry, sharing quiet conversations. They’ve got that part right, then. It seems the missing part is the one you can’t see or touch: the feeling of being more than just friends. Louis starts to get lost in wondering how to up the stakes and make this feel like something more than any other night.

He doesn’t realize his thoughts have made him stop listening to Harry until he trails off in the middle of a sentence and looks away. “I’m sorry,” Louis says, focusing back in and immediately feeling guilty.

“It’s fine,” Harry says, yawning. “I was kind of talking just to keep myself awake, honestly.” He gives Louis a wry smile and the heaviness in his stomach lifts slightly.

“Can I walk you home, then?” Louis asks.

“Sure,” he says as he gets out cash to pay for their drinks and leaves it on the table.

The walk home doesn’t help Louis focus any more. All he can think about is if he should hold Harry’s hand or if it would be bizarre. They’ve held hand before, of course - though usually they’ve been spectacularly drunk. They’ve never held hands just to feel the warmth of the other person against their skin and Louis isn’t sure if they should start tonight or not.

“Hello?”

Louis blinks and focuses on Harry’s face and then broader to their surroundings as he realizes they’ve arrived at Harry’s apartment. “Yeah?” He asks, feeling the same guilt from the bar again.

“Where do you keep going?” Harry asks. There’s an edge to his voice but he doesn’t seem angry. More confused than anything.

“I’m right here,” Louis says though he knows what Harry means.

“You know what I mean,” Harry says, calling him on it. “This is the second time tonight you’ve disappeared right in front of me.”

Louis licks his lip and goes for honesty. “Is this just like glorified hanging out? What we’re doing?” Getting dinner, seeing a show, and then going for a drink is something they’ve done together before; many times before. “We said we’re dating but nothing feels different,” he says. All he can think about is how he wants more. He wants fireworks and vibrations in the earth, floating on champagne bubbles - all of the things that come with dating someone new.

“We’re only three days in,” Harry says. “This isn’t some sort of machine where you decide how things are supposed to go, you know. Weren’t you the one who told me to chill out yesterday?”

“Not in those words,” Louis says.

“But you know what I mean.” Harry smiles, “Of all things to stress about, this isn’t one of them.”

“I know,” Louis says, shaking his head to clear it. “I just get stuck in my own head, you know?”

Harry smirks. “See you tomorrow still?”
“Yeah, of course,” he says.

“Night, Lou,” Harry calls as he leaves him standing on the sidewalk.

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SATURDAY ~ Day 4

Saturday passes Louis in a rush with pending deadlines and too many things to do despite it technically being the weekend. He goes into the office for a few hours but a few turns into a few more and suddenly the day has been tugged out from beneath him.

Harry doesn’t even cross his mind until he’s leaving for the day, locking the lobby door and pulling on his gloves. He calls Harry as he walks, already mentally making his grocery list for the next stop on his way home. Harry answers on the second ring, a smile in his voice. “You forgot about me, didn’t you?”

“What?” Louis swerves around a paused tourist group on the sidewalk. “Forgot about what?”

Harry laughs. “That you were supposed to see me today. You got so busy with work you forgot about me and now you’re calling to make last minute plans.”

Louis pauses at a crosswalk, his eyebrows drawn together in confusion. He glances around just to make sure Harry isn’t stalking him. “How did you know that?”

“Lucky guess,” he says. “And I’m leaving my office in ten minutes and was planning to call you on my walk home because I’m in the same boat.”

Louis laughs as the signal changes so he can cross the street. “I thought you were spying on me.”

“You forget how well I know you.”

“I’ll try not to be creeped out,” Louis says, sensing Harry’s eye roll across the line. “What was your idea for a last minute plan besides accusing me of doing the same thing?”

Harry hums. “I really need to go grocery shopping, honestly.”

Louis laughs at the way the universe works. “Incredible. That’s where I’m going right now. Meet me?”

“Depends,” Harry says, “Where are you going?”

“Whole Foods on fifty-seventh. It’s on my way.”

“I hate that Whole Foods.”

“What? Why?” Louis rolls his eyes as he crosses the street again, the sky darkening quickly overhead with the streetlights flicking on.

“They never have the yogurt I want,” Harry says like it’s common knowledge. “Why don’t you come over to my place? The new market on the corner is really nice.”

“You want me to cross the entire city for a different market than the one already on my way?” Louis asks, eyebrows raised. His voice is injected with no fucking way without actually saying the words. “What kind of yogurt do you get anyway?”

“It’s Fage but it has to be the plain two-percent kind,” Harry explains. “I hate the zero one because
“It’s too thin. But the two-percent is less healthy so, naturally, Whole Foods is always out.”

“I love that you keep saying ‘always’ like Whole Foods being out of your yogurt is the same as gravity always keeping people upright.”

“Fuck off.”

Louis smiles, “Just come to the Whole Foods on fifty-seventh. I promise we’ll find your yogurt.”

Harry sighs, “Yeah, I doubt it. I’m leaving now though, so I’ll be there in ten.”

“Meet you in the yogurt aisle, baby,” Louis says with the sleaziest voice he can manage.

“Yuck,” is Harry’s response. “Never say that again.”

Louis laughs as he disconnects the call.

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Somehow Harry gets to the store first and Louis finds him standing in the dairy aisle with a red shopping basket and narrowed eyes inspecting the yogurt display. Louis starts laughing before he can even say hello. Harry glances over with his eyebrows pulled together but his face softens as soon as he sees it’s Louis making fun of him.

“Can’t find your special yogurt?” Louis asks as he moves fully down the aisle to stand next to him.

“ Nope,” Harry says, popping the ‘p’. “It’s always gone. I already told you.”

Sure enough, Louis sees the Fage line of yogurts with one missing slot where, he imagines, all the two-percent yogurts lived before they got swept away by other shoppers. Not one to be deterred, Louis sets his own shopping basket down and starts shuffling the Fage yogurts still left on the shelf like he’s looking for gold.

“ It’s really not this serious,” Harry says when Louis has all but climbed into the display as he tries to see the yogurt in the very back.

“It seems pretty fucking serious to me,” he says, voice muffled by small plastic tubs of yogurt. “You’ve boycotted Whole Foods over this.”

Harry laughs, “Do you have stock in Whole Foods that I don’t know about?”

Louis rolls his eyes and then grins as he spots three two-percent containers on the very back of the shelf; right behind a completely different brand. He grabs all three and backs out of the shelf with complete triumph on his face. “No,” he says, holding up the yogurts and smiling, “But maybe I should invest.”

Harry clearly tries not to smile as he takes the yogurts from Louis and sets them in his basket, his lips pressed together. “My grocery shopping is never quite this exciting,” he muses as he looks back up.

“We’re dating now,” Louis says. “Everything is more exciting this way.” Harry’s scoff doesn’t seem like he agrees.

“So,” Harry starts as they move down the aisle, both pausing to get cartons of eggs and inspecting their contents before adding them to their baskets. “How was your day?”
“Busy,” Louis says. “Which isn’t how Saturday is supposed to be.”

“Definitely not,” Harry agrees, leading the way to the vegetable section. “Did you get a lot done, though?”

“Kind of. It’s nice not to have three interns demanding my attention but it means I have to work through some of the harder designs which is draining.”

Harry hums and nods, “I wasn’t even planning to go in today.”

“And then what happened?” Louis knows a lot of Harry’s job relies on cleaning up the messes of other people. He’s well in line to become a creative director for Hearst especially after proving himself the past two years as the Assistant Creative Director for three of the publisher’s best magazines. Louis may be a bit proud of him.

“A bunch of models got caught in Atlanta because they’re expecting ice tonight at JFK.”

“Did you have to stand in as a model?” Louis puts three apples in his basket and a couple of oranges. Harry starts grabbing bags of Spinach like they’re on a fire sale.

“Yes,” Harry says. “I’ve found my true calling.” He rolls his eyes, “No. I had to go through a new casting selection with the director using only New York based models who happened to be available today or tomorrow.”

“That’s kind of exciting,” Louis says. “The fact the director calls you because it’s your project so you need to direct the creative vision.”

“It’s amazing,” Harry agrees with a small smile. “But also daunting and not how I wanted to spend my Saturday.”

Louis scrunches his nose in agreement. He definitely would have preferred a two hour nap to a full day at the office. “Did you ever think you would get here?” Louis asks as they move to the pasta and sauces aisle. “Like, the first night we met, did you ever imagine this?”

“Definitely not,” Harry says. “I was halfway to mending my broken heart and had just been turned down on a New Year’s kiss. Not to mention I was an intern who got coffee for editors and sometimes couldn’t even do that correctly.”

Louis laughs at the emerging memory of a few weeks after they met when Harry was in complete agony over spilling a tray of lattes in front of Julia Roberts. “You have to admit the Julia Roberts story is still amazing, though.”

Harry shakes his head as he grabs for a box of noodles, “Except when I seriously considered moving to Brazil and changing my name.”

“You weren’t serious,” Louis says, “You were drunk.”

Harry laughs. “I can’t believe you even remember that. I was so embarrassed. I started drinking at five and waited for you and Zayn to come find me after you left work.”

Louis laughs at the memorised visual of Harry with his forehead on the bar, three empty glasses next to him with his last correspondence to the group text as seven siren emojis and the address of the bar without explanation.

“And you were working that super glamorous job,” Harry says, drawing the conversation back to the point. “Designing hospital brochures, was it?”
Louis scrunches his nose, “Yeah. With almost no direction to my life other than the fact I wanted to live in New York and be a graphic artist.”

“Now look where we are.”

Louis smiles, “Dating each other and shopping at Whole Foods.”

Harry doesn’t bother to respond as he looks at something on his phone, scrolling for a moment before he starts smirking as continues down the aisle. “What?” He asks when he realizes Louis is staring at him.

“What are you smirking at?”

“Am I not allowed to smirk?” He grabs a jar of marinara from the shelf, slipping his phone into his coat pocket. Louis follows after him quickly.

“By the look on your face, I’d say you were texting some cute guy but the only cute guy you should be texting is standing right next to you.”

Harry stops short at the rice shelf and Louis nearly falls into him before catching himself at the last second. “Remember the guy who stood me up the night we met up at Max’s?”

Louis narrows his eyes, “The one who isn’t an athlete but works for an NFL team?”

Harry rolls his eyes. “Yes, him. He took me out for a drink on Tuesday.”

“As in four nights ago Tuesday? The day before we started dating, Tuesday?”

“Yes, Tuesday night.”

“Why did you agree to go on another date with him?” Louis asks as they start walking again. “He literally stood you up without an explanation.” He tries to keep venom out of his voice but this is exactly what Louis was talking about with Julia - Harry goes after people who don’t seem to have responsible feelings for him.

“First of all, this wasn’t a date. Plus he apologized.”

Louis tries not to stomp his foot, “You can’t be serious. That’s not an excuse.”

“Would you calm down?” Harry says over his shoulder as they move to the aisle of bulk foods. “Nothing happened. I just wanted to clear the air so I agreed to get a drink with him.”

“I am calm,” Louis says in a decidedly not calm voice. He clears his throat once he hears himself. There’s just something about Harry going out with a loser mixed with the thought Harry doing this the night before he started dating Louis.

“You’re a little worked up,” Harry says calmly. “Anyway, as I was saying, we went for drinks and it was super casual. He kept apologizing for missing our date and saying he really liked me-”

“Are you telling me this because you’re ending the experiment to go on a date with him or what?”

“It wasn’t a date.” Harry rolls his eyes, “Just stop interrupting and let me finish explaining.”

“You’re taking your sweet time getting to the explanation here, H.”

Harry smiles, “I know you love the way I talk and tell stories.” Louis raises one eyebrow and it
gets Harry moving again. “Basically, at the end of the night, I told him that I was doing this experiment with you so nothing could really happen with us.”

Louis nods, waiting for the next part.

“He said he understood and then we kind of talked about the experiment and stuff.” Harry shifts his weight, clearly hit by a burst of nerves. “And, uh, he was saying, like, you don’t deserve a chance with me if you didn’t take it when we first met and, um, stuff like that.”

Louis raises his eyebrows, again.

“And I told him off for that, obviously,” Harry says quickly. “I said we both wanted to take the chance now and see what happened.”

“Is that all?” Louis asks as people scoot around them in the aisle like they’re an island in a stream. They both move closer to the bags of nuts to get out of the way.

“Pretty much.” Harry clears his throat and shifts again. “Anyway, now he texts me once a day with a countdown to when forty days are over. That was the, uh, the text I got when we were getting noodles.”

Louis feels his face pulling tight, eyebrows coming together. “What the fuck is he planning to do on day forty-one, show up at your front door?”

Harry scoffs. “Yeah, I doubt he’ll still be interested in me by the time this over.”

“If I’m in the way of you and true love, tell me now.” Louis goes for joking but he’s not sure it comes off that way when there’s a sudden crease between Harry’s eyebrows.

“No, that’s not what I meant. I just thought it was kind of funny.”

Louis swallows, “I think it’s annoying.”

Harry nods, his eyes suddenly looking heavier as he blinks. “I’m sorry. I don’t respond to the texts or anything. I just thought you would get a laugh out of it.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry over. He clearly knows about us,” Louis says, not wanting to start an actual fight in Whole Foods. “But I don’t want to be blamed if you lose your chance because this experiment made you unavailable.”

Harry holds Louis’s eyes without blinking, “When I say I’m not interested in him, I mean it. All I’m focused on is you and these forty days. I’m not going anywhere - countdown or not.”

Louis holds Harry’s eyes for a moment more and then blinks and looks away. “Yeah, alright. Maybe text him to back the fuck off for the next thirty-six days? That’d make me happy.”

“I will,” Harry says seriously. “If you really want me too.”

“I’ll think about it,” Louis says as they start walking again. He winks at Harry to tell him he’s not really mad and he swears he sees the tension leave from his shoulders. That by itself tells Louis all he needs to know about Harry’s commitment - the fact he was actually nervous he’d hurt Louis’s feelings.

It takes the rest of their time in Whole Foods for Louis to figure out what’s going on with the pressure in his chest following their conversation. There’s a certain sense of urgency is what he decides on. Where this forty days together seems like a fun idea, there’s also a biting truth: his
hold on Harry is temporary. He has forty days of Harry’s attention but at the end of that time, there may already be people waiting for their chance with him.

Louis is quiet as they ring up their groceries while Harry reads through one of the gossip magazines. He turns the pages quickly to try and get through the entire thing before it’s his turn to check out. God forbid he actually has to pay the three dollars to finish the thing at home.

As Louis pays, he watches Harry out of the corner of his eye. Up to now, even on their fourth day of dating, he hasn’t considered Harry ever becoming his actual boyfriend. Louis squeezes his eyes shut now and tries to imagine what it would be like if he and Harry were really together, if this was just another Saturday of grocery shopping in their neighborhood, if they were going home together to cook dinner and watch television.

He opens his eyes as the cashier says his total, disrupting his vision of an alternate universe before he can really dive in. He slides his credit card with another quick glance at Harry. The truth of the matter is he’s seen Harry as his best friend for so long, he’s not sure he can turn on the potential boyfriend switch on command. But, as the cashier starts scanning Harry’s items, he realizes he needs to figure out if a switch like that exists at all before he runs out of time.

Nothing, he thinks, would be worse than to realize on day forty-one he’s missed his chance for good.

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SUNDAY ~ Day 5

Sunday dawns a new sense of determination in Louis, particularly after falling asleep with his mind running in circles over everything he dredged up at the grocery store. It’s when he’s making his first cup of coffee he comes to a decision he didn’t know he needed to make: he’s needs to consciously start trying to look at Harry like a prospect instead of a friend. He laughs to himself as he walks back to bed to enjoy his coffee and catch up on the news - he’s successfully made dating Harry sounds like car shopping.

When they meet up in the afternoon, Louis watches Harry approach for nearly a block. He just stares at him, noting his tight jeans and brown shearling coat, waiting for some bolt of lightning to make him decide Harry is his one and only. The strike doesn’t come and eventually Louis has to get out of the way of other people entering the building.

For their third official date, they’ve decided to do an art therapy course Louis had heard about from people at work. Fitting, because today’s session is focused on couples. “Second therapy session in one week,” Harry says when he reaches Louis.

“Yeah but this is art therapy,” Louis says knowingly. “Totally different.”

“Totally,” Harry echoes with an edge of sarcasm as he follows after him.

First they register and then they’re are assigned seats at a table in a room with other large tables and couples spread around. The windows in the front of the room make the space bright as an instructor brings around sets of paints and therapy guides to each of them.

Harry and Louis flip through their guides and choose the therapy course focused on past relationships before they can get overwhelmed by all the other options. According to the guide, it’s supposed to be for newer couples and though they’ve already outlined their dating history as friends, maybe it will allow them to share more deeply.
Louis goes off to get them a stack of cardstock from the wall of supplies while Harry goes to the makeshift snack counter in the corner. By the time Harry gets back with a plate of various cookies and two cups of tea, Louis has their paints set up and stacks of paper at each of their places.

“So what do we do?” Harry asks, blowing on his cup of tea.

Louis wraps his hands around his cup for the warmth, wanting the bag to brew a bit longer. “We each do five drawings of things we remember from past relationships and then we discuss after.”

“What about the warm up?”

“What warm up?”

Harry smiles as he turns the instruction guide around so Louis can see it. “Of course you skipped reading the first part.”

Louis scrunches his nose, “You know I don’t like directions.”

“Yes,” Harry says, “I’m aware.” He takes a tentative sip of tea while Louis glances over the instructions for the warm up.

“We start by listing out everyone we’ve been on a date with in the past year.” He reads, glancing up at Harry.

“I’m pretty sure you know all the dates I’ve been on,” Harry muses, picking a thin brush from the jar of brushes between them.

“I didn’t know about Ryan from last Tuesday,” Louis says. “And he really made an impact on you.”

“Oh no. Not this again,” Harry laughs as he puts the edge of his brush in the paint jar.

“Shut up,” Louis smiles, grabbing his own brush.

They make a show of keeping their warm up lists secret as they write them, the sweep of the brush silent but relaxing all the same. Louis loves the flow of writing with paint - the first medium he started with in design school before he got started with digital drawings.

“Done?” Harry asks a moment later, looking up.

“No,” Louis says, only part-way through his list.

“Why do you say that like you have fifty more to go?”

Louis ignores him in favor of finishing his list. He may even write a little slower just for all of the sighing sounds Harry makes from across the table.

“What should we do?” Harry asks once Louis has looked up and set his brush to the side. “Reveal on the count of three?”

“Sure,” Louis says.

Harry counts down from three before they both push their lists to the space on the table between them. “So you’ve dated more people than me,” he states.

Louis nods. Like this it looks odd to have Louis’s twenty-four listed against Harry’s twelve.
“And you can’t remember some of their names?” Harry points out space twenty-three and fifteen where Louis has simply put in question marks and Louis nods. “Right. Okay.”

Louis watches Harry as he looks over the names on Louis’s list and his eyes dart back to his own like he’s comparing. His unease is clearly written on his face. “I think we need to define our idea of dating,” Louis says. “You’re more likely to go on a couple of dates with the same person, right? While my list includes people I’ve just gotten drinks or grabbed lunch with once.”

Harry nods and presses his lips together when he looks up. “Thirty-six people between us and we’re still alone.”

“Thirty-six people between us,” Louis repeats, “and somehow we’re at art therapy with each other.”

Harry smiles at that, though he tries to hide it as he consults the guide for their next steps. It turns out they have underline who on the list they’ve had sex with which takes them down a winding road of defining sex. They decide on leaving out anyone from the list they simply messed around with and underline the people they went all the way with - penetrative sex as Louis points out which makes Harry cringe like a twelve year old.

Louis has had more sex with his list than Harry but, he reasons, he obviously has a larger pool of people to have sex with since his list is longer.

“And I guess we’re not considering hook ups or one night stands?” Harry asks, comparing their lists again.

“Right,” Louis nods. He pauses a beat to wonder how many one night stands Harry has had but doesn’t press. He’s seen Harry go home with people he’s just met - they’ve both been know to do it before. For the first time, though, he actually wonders what has happened after Harry has gotten in the cab with those people, after Louis has stopped paying attention.

“What next, H?”

Harry scratches at his chin as he reads the guide. “Write how many relationships you’ve been in longer than three months.”

Louis scans his brain and comes up with eight while Harry comes up with five. Upon further prodding, they decide Harry has been in the typically longer relationships after three months while Louis’s skew much closer to the three month cut off. Harry has had the longest relationship in general - his college sweetheart - though neither one of them has ever lived with a significant other.

“How many times have we been in love?” Louis asks as he glances at the next part of the warm up, twirling his brush in the air.

They both take a moment to paint their numbers, Louis a careful two and Harry a swirling three. “Hindsight has made the number smaller,” Harry says. “I’ve thought I was in love in the moment before. But it’s turned out to be a trick of the light.”

“A trick of the light,” Louis says, humming. “I like that. I don’t think I let myself get to a point where I can love someone. I always like them an immense amount but curving up over love doesn’t cross my mind as much.”

“Do you think you’re capable of falling in love?” Harry asks, tilting his head slightly.

“Yeah,” Louis says, “I just think it happens without me realizing. I don’t know I’ve ever
acknowledged love while I’ve been in it. Only afterwards.” He tries not to revel in how sad that must sound.

“That’s it for the warm up,” Harry says after a quiet moment. “Now we do five illustrations of past relationships then discuss.”

They spend the next thirty minutes working quietly and making absent conversation. Louis starts his drawings in black paint and then accents with color while Harry does bold typography of phrases and words.

“I like we’re both creative,” Harry says as they start to finish their illustrations, adding on last touches. “It’s nice to be able to do something like this and not have it be miserable for whoever I’m with.”

Louis smiles, “I think you probably date more creative types than I do, though.”

“I don’t date creative types,” Harry says, pausing in his drawing to glance up.

“Models?”

“Are not creative types,” he says with a smile. “And I haven’t dated more than two models.”

“You have a lot of model friends, then,” Louis says.

“I do. Why are we talking about this?”

“You said you liked being creative.”

“I like us being creative together,” Harry corrects with a nod. “That’s all I meant.”

“I like it too,” Louis says with a small smile. There’s something to be said about compatible, quiet company.

“Are you done? Should we share what we have?”

Louis swallows and nods, “Yes. You go first.”

“Why’s that?”

Louis shrugs, “You’re younger than me.”

Harry narrows his eyes, “I don’t see how that has anything to do with anything but I’m going to let it go.” Louis’s lips twitch but he stays quiet. “Alright,” Harry says. He lifts his first painting so Louis can see. In electric pink it reads: My first kiss went something like this… “Do I explain it?”

“That would be helpful,” Louis says, his chin resting on the palm of his hand. “Otherwise this may turn out to be a bunch of gibberish neither one of us can follow.”

Harry smiles and shifts the painting, glancing down at it. “I thought my first kiss would be a good to start off with for this. It was with a boy I met on vacation and I was thirteen. I ran back to our condo and immediately told my parents I was gay. They thought it was fine but my mom also told me I was too young to set a limit like that.”

“Interesting,” Louis says, meaning it.

“They were right, of course,” Harry says with a deprecating smile as Louis laughs. “My second kiss was a girl and I thought I wanted to taste her chapstick for the rest of my life. Of course,
imagine my surprise when I met a guy in high school who wore the same chapstick.” He mimics his mind being blown and that makes Louis laugh too.

“It’s funny what we think we know as kids,” Louis says.

Harry nods, running his bottom lip under the edges of his teeth. “Will you go next and we can trade off? I don’t want to talk about myself for twenty minutes straight.”

Louis smiles, “Sure.” He goes through his stack and chooses one design at random.

“You had the hottest back tattoo,” Harry reads once Louis holds the painting up. He squints at the graphic, “Is that a skull and crossbones? Oh my god.”

“Says the man who tattooed the word ‘big’ on his toe,” Louis says with a roll of his eyes, setting the painting down next to Harry’s.

“Touché,” Harry says with a smirk pressing on the edge of his mouth. “So you hooked up with someone with a skull on their back?”

Louis smiles. “It was spring break in college. I was having a wonderful time realizing how much I liked men.”

“And he had a hot back tattoo?”

Louis grins, “And a nose ring and an earring. It was a lot. In all the best ways.”

“Congratulations on the mind blowing sex,” Harry says with a polite nod of his head. Louis starts laughing first but Harry is quick to join him.

“Okay, you again.”

Harry turns his next piece over with his fingertips. This one is done in green and red: We were young (and very stupid).

“Who’s this?” Louis asks. He likes this is how he’s learning about Harry’s young love life - the kinds of things they never got around to talking about before.

“My best friend’s older brother,” Harry says. “We dated secretly in high school.”

Louis sucks air through his teeth. “That doesn’t sound like it would turn out well.”

“Nope,” Harry says with a quick shake of his head. “When my best friend found out, she was furious. Her brother took her side in it all.” He shrugs, “I lost both of them within twenty-four hours. And he wasn’t even a good kisser.”

Louis laughs with his head thrown back before he can form words. “Devastating.”

“Tell me about it.”

Louis’s next one is done in blue - an airplane with I met you in the air written along the jet stream. “Remember the work trip I took to Portland last year?”

“Vaguely,” Harry says with his eyes squinted like he’s trying to remember. Louis can’t blame him, they both travel quite a bit.

“It was a five hour flight,” Louis says, “The girl next to me had just broken up with her boyfriend and was definitely looking for a rebound.”
Harry sighs, "Airplane toilet?"

Louis’s lips twitch. “More like a darkened cabin with everyone sleeping.”

Harry’s face is ridiculous as he makes a grossed out noise and Louis laughs again. “So far you’ve only drawn your hookups,” Harry notes once he recovers, “What’s that about?”

Louis looks at his two drawings, considering. “It wasn’t intentional. I just drew the first few images that came to mind.” He rubs his lips together, “Perhaps these stuck out more because they’re odd whereas relationships just get boring after awhile.”

Harry swallows, “I don’t think that’s how it’s supposed to be when you’re in the right relationship.”

Louis quickly remembers the point of their entire experiment and nods quickly. “No, yeah, completely. I mean, when relationships end badly, it can be hard to think of the best parts at a moments notice. Hooking up with someone at thirty-thousand feet and never seeing them again sticks out a bit more.”

Harry nods along with Louis’s words. “Alright, I’ll take it.”

Harry’s next one is done in black with grey shading: You were too good for me. It stressed me out.

Louis tilts his head as he reads, “This was a bad thing?”

"Yes,” Harry says on a laugh at Louis’s confusion. “We were nineteen and he was always putting my happiness over his. Like, he’d give up going out with his friends to meet my parents when they came to town or sacrifice his time studying to drive me to the airport.” He presses his tongue against the inside of his cheek until it bulges and then smiles. “It sounds weird, doesn’t it? But I constantly felt guilty when he’d agree to do anything with me because I wondered what he’d given up to do it.”

“Isn’t that part of a good relationship? Both people making sacrifices.”

“Key word being both,” Harry says. “I felt like a sugar baby, honestly. Not because he bought me things,” he says quickly before Louis can interrupt, “But because he kept giving me all his time and attention and blocking everything else out. It didn’t feel right.”

Louis smirks, “Are you convincing me or yourself?”

Harry throws his hands up, “I don’t even know anymore.” He smiles and sets his painting down in the row of others. “Your turn.”

Louis studies his next one before he shows Harry. “This is another hook up one. I feel like you’re going to judge me.”

“Hey,” Harry says, “I’m not judging. I’m identifying trends.”

Louis rolls his eyes. “Yeah, yeah.” The illustration is of four different beds with for four years we shared a bed written out with each word on a pillow.

“Can I guess?”

Louis can’t contain his surprise as his eyebrows lift. “Yeah?”

“College fuck buddy.”
“If I had a prize, you’d win,” Louis says, setting the sketch down. “There was a girl, Laura, and when we were single at the same time, we’d sleep together. It was a weird arrangement because neither one of us ever wanted more than sex out of it.”

“Do you think that’s really true?” Harry pulls a cookie from their plate of snacks and breaks it in half. “She never wanted anything else?”

Louis watches Harry as he chews his cookie, simple curiosity in his eyes. “I mean, she never said she wanted anything else.” Louis narrows his eyes. “I certainly didn’t want it to be anything more.”

“Okay.” Harry puts the other half of the cookie in his mouth. He uses the back of his hand to get the crumbs off of his lips.

Louis blinks. “Do you think she did?”

Harry smiles as he chews, “I don’t know her.”

Louis sinks back into his chair. He’s always thought he would know when someone was the one, when someone was worth his time and effort, and now he’s wondering if he’s just been blind to potential partners this whole time.

“What’s going on?” Harry asks, almost smiling. “You look like you’re having a crisis.”

Louis laughs lightly. “I kind of am. You’ve got me spinning into an existential crisis at art therapy.”

“That was definitely not my intention,” Harry says slowly, watching Louis like he may blow up at any moment. “I was just asking questions.”

“No, I know.” Louis grabs a cookie from the plate and bites into it without looking. “Let’s just keep going.”

Harry’s fourth piece says *we kissed in a blizzard* done in all shades of blue with tiny snowflakes scattered around the edge of the page.

“You came from San Francisco,” Louis says, eyeing the words. “So this must have been in New York. But who were you out kissing in blizzards? Why were you outside in a blizzard?”

Harry smiles, “Remember last year when the snow just came out of nowhere?”

“You’ve described every snowstorm we’ve had, ever.”

“Okay. Well, this is one where I thought I could work just a couple more hours before I went home but then it started getting ridiculous outside.”

“Ah,” Louis nods, “Got it.”

“I proceeded to wait until almost midnight before I left the office thinking it would start improving.”

“It didn’t improve did it?”

Harry shakes his head. “When I finally left, Lily, one of the writers from *Vogue*, was leaving too so we walked together. Eventually we had to take a break from trudging through the streets and we stopped at a cafe for hot chocolate.”
“This sounds a lot like a winter romance novel.”

Harry glances away and Louis laughs at the pink shade of his ears. “Well one thing led to another and when we left we ended up kissing. There was no one else out so the world was silent, and the snow made everything seem untouched. It was like, one of my favorite kisses ever.”

Louis sighs, “And then you lived happily ever after?”

Harry snorts. “And then she got hired by the Washington Post and moved to D.C. two weeks later.”

“Winter romance,” Louis says dreamily. “It will break your heart.”

“Ha,” Harry says, drily.

Louis sets his next drawing down without much explanation, pretty confident Harry will recognize it. There’s a subway and the tracks are made of words: I saw you on the train and I had to know you.

“This is the guy with that amazing loft in Brooklyn.”

Louis smiles, “And the relationship where I learned you really can’t date someone just because you like their housing.”

“A lesson for us all,” Harry says stoically just before his smile bursts into a grin. He glances down at his last painting and the grin slips just slightly. He sets it face up on the table.

We broke up in Paris, Louis reads silently. He knows this one without even asking. “Robert? The guy from college?”

“Longest relationship,” Harry says nodding, “And the most volatile. We never got into a place where I felt like we were safe from outside forces, like we were going to make it.”

“Did it feel like you wasted your time?” Louis realizes the trap Harry got in earlier of making a comment and then realizing it’s heavier implication.

Harry narrows his eyes, thinking. “I don’t think so. I learned a lot about myself, about the things I want out of a partner. At the same time, I don’t know if I was ever truly happy and that scares me. To go two years without being happy.”

“Maybe the most important thing is you realized it,” Louis says. “That counts for something.”

Harry doesn’t look convinced as he shrugs. “By the way, who ended it in Paris? Who was in the city of love and said, fuck it, we’re done?”

Harry’s smile melts slowly on his lips. “That would be me.”

Louis sucks air through his teeth, “Yikes.”

“It was our two year anniversary and we were in some fancy restaurant,” Harry explains, “And it just hit me in a rush. I didn’t want to do it anymore. He left as soon as I told him, obviously.”

“You told him in the middle of dinner?”

Harry laughs, “I didn’t really have a choice. The words just burst out of my mouth.”

Louis laughs, trying to picture it. They all met Harry shortly after the break up and Louis had
always assumed he was the one who got the rug pulled out from under his feet not the other way around.

“I finished the meal after he left,” Harry says. “I ate my way through the dessert menu, tried not to cry in public.”

Louis watches him in slight awe, his lips drawn together. “What a way to end Paris.”

“I always said I’d go back,” he says. “Once I’m really and truly happy so I don’t have such a bad taste in my mouth about it.”

“Good.” Louis licks his bottom lip as he flips his last painting over so Harry can see. “I cheated on this one,” he says. “I didn’t know what to draw.” Instead the words I’m sorry are printed down the center of the page in black paint.

“What’s that?” Louis asks after a quiet moment of looking at the words.

Unlike Harry, it wasn’t Louis’s longest relationship that left him with a broken heart. It was a whirlwind of six months the same year he met Harry and Zayn. He thought he was in love and he saw a future for himself in broad strokes on a blank canvas, a future with Ethan. Until, of course, Apple called Ethan for a permanent gig at their headquarters - in California. Louis refused to follow him, and Ethan never asked him to. They took a good thing and gave it a clean cut.

“Ethan?” Louis confirms. “It’s funny. I don’t even know if we would have stayed together if he was still in New York. It’s the ‘if’ that gets to me.”

Harry stands at the table. “Do you still wonder?”

Louis considers and then shrugs. “Not as much. I think it will always be there but in the scheme of things we didn’t know each other that well. And it probably wasn’t as wonderful as looking back on it seems to be. But it’s still there, you know. I’m still sorry for the way things happened. I’m sorry for the way I was at the end, blocking him out completely. That seems to be my M.O. when things go bad.”

“Leave before you get left?”

“Is that a Taylor Swift quote?”

Harry frowns, “What album?”

“Her last one. I think that’s a lyric.”

Harry closes his eyes and then grins as he hums the bars when he remembers the right song. Louis rolls his eyes. For some reason, one of Harry’s proudest achievements is being able to recall all of Taylor Swift’s discography in casual conversation.

“Swift aside,” Louis says pointedly before Harry can launch into a full song, “That’s a good point. I think I do use that as a way of protecting myself.”

They sit quietly for a moment after that, looking at the words and illustrations they’ve left scattered on the table. Their tea has long gone cold and the cookies are a misshapen battlefield of half-eaten victims and crumbs.

“This has been cool,” Harry says first, looking up and catching Louis’s eye. “I wasn’t sure what to expect.”
“It was,” Louis agrees. “I feel like you learn a lot about your partner without just flat out discussing everything.”

“I kind of like doing it from our perspective,” Harry says. “We know a lot of this stuff about each other but not with tons of detail.”

“Exactly,” Louis agrees.

“Alright,” Harry says with a nod, “Day five has been a success.”

They both laugh and with that, Harry starts cleaning up their work space. Louis sits for one more moment, lost in thought. Harry is one of his best friends and while he doesn’t want to mess that up, he’s starting to think he can’t ignore how comfortable they are with each other, how open they can be about almost anything. Louis helps to gather their garbage and embraces the thought, for a moment: maybe they’re onto something here.


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**MONDAY ~ Day 6**

Over the past four years, Louis likes to think he’s gotten to know some of New York City’s best kept secrets. One being, the best happy hour is at the bar in the bottom of the Ace Hotel. On discovery, he, of course, shared the secret with Niall, Zayn, and Harry so now The Breslin is their favorite place to grab a drink after work.

When Niall suggested meeting up for happy hour there, Louis thought it was perfect: a way to see Harry for day six and hang out with Niall and Zayn. Except when he meets Harry at the front door of the bar on the way in, he barely smiles and doesn’t look all that pleased by their coincidental arrival.

“You okay?” Louis asks not bothering with hello. He holds the door open for Harry to go through first.

“Fine,” Harry says, hardly making eye contact as he breezes by, his cologne the only thing left in his wake.

He tries not to think about the chilly reception as he follows Harry across the crowded room to where Niall and Zayn have positioned themselves at a tables. He doesn’t like the feeling Harry is upset with him but Niall and Zayn aren’t supposed to know they’re dating, pulling him aside now would do nothing but bring on questions.

“I’ll get us drinks,” Harry says as soon as they’ve said hello, turning away before Louis can catch his eye. Louis isn’t picky when it comes to Harry ordering for him but he would appreciate if Harry would actually look at him, stop the tumbling in his stomach like he’s done something wrong.

“Are you guys okay?” Niall asks and Louis has to laugh. He wanted to be careful to not act weirdly and now he’s done it without even trying.

“Yeah, why?” Louis goes for nonchalant but by the reaction of the other two, it doesn’t quite work. He clears his throat. “How was everyone’s Monday?”
Zayn smiles at Niall in a way Louis has gotten used to since they started dating. It’s like no one else exists when they’re together and sometimes it’s cute - most of the time it’s ridiculous.

“Did you get engaged? What happened?” Louis asks, narrowing his eyes. “Why do you look like that?”

Niall laughs as he breaks their eye contact and looks at Louis. “We want to wait until Harry comes back.”

Louis glances over his shoulder to see Harry already winding back through the crowd two glasses in his hands.

“Whiskey,” he tells Louis, setting the tumbler on a cocktail napkin.

“Thank you,” he waits to say pointedly when Harry finally decides to make eye contact with him. Harry half smiles as he takes the open spot next to Louis.

“Niall and Zayn have some big news to share,” Louis says to loop him in. “Such big news they had to wait for you to get back to say it.”

Harry hums and picks up his glass, “What is it?”

“We’ve decided to move in together,” Zayn says with a smile as Niall tries to catch the straw in his drink by using only his tongue. When he realizes Zayn has made the announcement, he sits up abruptly with a casual smile.

Harry’s “Congratulations,” crashes into Louis’s, “Do you not live together already?”

“What?” He says, offended when Harry nudges him with his knee and throws him a look like he’s said the wrong thing.

Niall shrugs, “We’re just making it official, I guess. Considering, like you said, we practically already do. This will just cut our rent by half.”

“Are you getting a new place?” Louis asks, “Or keeping Zayn’s?” They all know Zayn has the most coveted apartment between the four of them.

“We’re moving to Niall’s,” Zayn says without wavering. “The commute time for him to move to mine just isn’t worth it.”

“Oh my god,” Harry deadpans, “I think you’re in love.”

Their group laughter turns to Niall and Zayn looking at each other again and Louis is a little concerned they’re eye-fucking each other until Harry clears his throat. “Right,” Niall says, reaching for his drink. “So how was everyone else’s Monday?”

“Not as exciting as yours,” Louis says. “Kind of average actually.”

“Same,” Harry says without elaboration.

Louis hears the word with an itch attached as he tries to make Harry look at him again. Harry doesn’t bite. That is the way the rest of the night goes, too. Harry seems to be barely following the conversation while Louis tries to find out how to ask him what’s wrong without actually asking.

“What did you do this weekend?” Zayn asks at one point, “It was weird not seeing either one of you.”
Harry and Louis both shift awkwardly and Louis feels like there should be a flashing light that says, we’re up to something over their heads. “I went to an art class,” Harry says, slow and drawn out. It’s the way he tends to talk so it doesn’t seem bizarre though Louis can hear extra hesitation between each word.

“I did some grocery shopping,” Louis says. He chances a glance at Harry, “Bought some yogurt.”

Harry smiles against the edge of his glass as he takes a drink and Louis feels like doing a victory dance. He made Harry smile for the first time all night and it feels good. The feeling doesn’t exactly last, not with Zayn’s watchful eye and Harry staying mostly quiet.

“You guys are being really weird,” Niall points out later as happy hour comes to a slow end and they start gathering their jackets to leave.

“We’re not,” Louis says, answering for both of them and definitely not looking anywhere in Harry’s vicinity.

“You’re an awful liar,” Zayn notes, helping Niall into his jacket. “Just for the record.”

Louis goes back and forth with Zayn and meaningless jabs as they leave, Niall and Harry hanging back. Their group splits in front of the bar- Niall and Zayn going back to Niall’s in the opposite direction of Harry and Louis’s neighborhood. With the absence of other people, Harry’s quietness suddenly seems stark against their shoes scuffing the ground and traffic swishing by in the street.

“I told someone at work about what we’re doing,” Harry says after they’ve gone a block and Louis feels like he’s about to crawl out of his skin.

Just at his words, Louis feels something loosening in his chest. He’s been nervous all night waiting for Harry to say what was wrong, curious if it was something he had done. “Yeah?”

“It didn’t go over so well. The girl was basically telling me we weren’t technically dating unless we were like, sleeping with each other. That intimacy is a crucial part of any real relationship and this is a stupid idea unless we’re physically intimate.”

Louis slows his gait, confused if this is Harry’s excuse for his cold mood - the fact someone said they weren’t really dating just because they aren’t fucking. “Does it matter what she thinks, though? The last I checked, we weren’t doing this to get the approval from everyone else.”

“No,” Harry says, slowing his walk as well. “It just got me thinking because in every other relationship I’ve had sex is a fundamental element.”

“What are you trying to say?” Louis asks, finally just stopping on the sidewalk so they can talk. “We don’t need a standard definition do we? We say we’re dating so we are.”

“No,” Harry says, slowing his walk as well. “It just got me thinking because in every other relationship I’ve had sex is a fundamental element.”

“What are you trying to say?” Louis asks, finally just stopping on the sidewalk so they can talk. “We don’t need a standard definition do we? We say we’re dating so we are.”

“Fine,” Harry says already starting to walk again.

Louis rolls his eyes, his voice turning harsh. “What do you mean, fine? Do you want us to sleep together? Is that what you’re getting at?”

Harry stops again, running his hands back through his hair, clearly exasperated. “I just wanted to have a conversation about it, Louis.” He sighs, “I just wanted to see where you stand since I’ve been thinking about it all day. I wasn’t trying to get in your pants.” He doesn’t crack a smile or anything close to it as they walk the next block in silence.

“I don’t think you start conversations by being distant to me all night and then bringing up sex.”
“I wasn’t distant,” Harry says. “I told you, I have a headache.”

Louis doesn’t feel like pushing it. “Alright. Whatever.”

When they part at their usual corner it’s a quiet, “Bye,” from Harry and “Goodnight,” from Louis. They’ve definitely fought in the last four years of being friends but this time a disagreement feels a bit worse - too serious to laugh off. It makes the walk home longer than usual.

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Louis wakes up in the middle of the night with a burning urge to pee. He squeezes his eyes shut hoping it will pass but he has no such luck and is forced to run across his apartment to the bathroom. Once he’s back under the covers with the blankets pulled up to his ears, his phone vibrates from the nightstand, illuminating one column of light on the ceiling with it’s notification. Louis wants to ignore it, but, being an older brother a long way from home, he reaches his hand out from his cocoon to grab the phone and pull it back to the safety of the blankets.

His mind registers first on the time - three twenty - and then at the notification, a text from Harry. He swipes his finger across the screen, eyes still adjusting to the bright light. He blinks a couple times slowly until his eyes focus on the words: *I was a dick tonight. And I can’t stop thinking about it. I’m sorry.*

Louis reads it once and then twice, his shoulders relaxing on the second read through. He wonders if Harry has been awake this entire time, rolling around in bed and trying to ignore the fluttering at the back of his head that says he needs to apologize.

Louis rubs at his eye before he responds. *Don’t worry about it. Just an off day. See you tomorrow? Or today, I guess.*

He presses send and then watches the three dots that say Harry is typing before he locks his phone. The last thing he sees before he goes to sleep for the second time: *wouldn’t miss it.*

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TUESDAY – Day 7

It’s raining when Louis leaves his last meeting which he uses an empty excuse to take a cab rather than the subway. Today marks the last day of his first week of the experiment with Harry and he’s exhausted.

He feels like each day is an emotional rollercoaster, and like having to vaguely commit to seeing each other is adding another thing to his already busy plate. He doesn’t want to even approach the subject with Harry considering how they left things the night before.

He blows air slowly out of his mouth - all they’re doing tonight is going to an art show put on by one of Harry’s former interns; surely it won’t last more than an hour or two. The cab slows and he hates he’s already counting down to the night being over.

Harry is standing out front of the building, leaning against the wall with one knee bent and his foot flat against the bricks. He has on a black peacoat and black jeans, floral printed boots Louis remembers him buying in the fall. When he sees Louis he pushes away from the wall and meets him halfway.

“Well, hello,” Louis says, buttoning the center of his jacket and watching Harry.

“Hi,” Harry says, somewhat bashfully taking a step closer. “I just wanted to apologize for last
night, again. And also to say thank you for doing this with me. I know it’s a lot to handle and it’s kind of exhausting but I’m glad we’re doing it.”

Louis opens his mouth but no words come out. How Harry has managed to read his mind, he’s unsure. “On the way over here, all I could think about was the one thousand things I have to do. But,” he adds before Harry’s face can fall, “somehow it’s like you already knew that.” He smiles softly, “I’m glad we’re doing this, too. Difficult as some of us may be.”

“Hey,” Harry protests gently, like a kitten in the rain. “It was a bad day.”

Louis smirks, “Don’t worry, babe. I’m sure my night to be difficult is just around the corner.”

Harry does the sign of the cross as they walk in the warm building.

After the awkward way the night before went, tonight falls in perfect contrast. They wander through the exhibits making easy conversation, pausing when they want to look at one or two pieces closer. All of the art is collected from students ranging from high school through masters programs, a diverse selection of subjects, mediums and perspectives.

The last one they come across is the one Harry’s former intern has put together - a gumball machine that produces secrets instead of gum. First, people write their secrets and enclose them in plastic balls, dropped in the top of the machine. Then, they turn the knob at the front and receive someone else’s secret. Louis and Harry stand back watching for a moment before they join the line.

“What do you do if the secret you get is like, serious?” Harry asks, his voice low against the other conversations fluttering around them.

“Aren’t all secrets serious?” Louis asks as they take a step forward. “Otherwise they wouldn’t be secrets.”

“I think some secrets are only serious to us, though,” Harry says. “They don’t have a meaning to outsiders. If, for example, I dance around in my underwear at night a la Hugh Grant in ‘Love Actually’, I don’t want anyone to know that.”

Louis crosses his arms over his chest as he smirks. “But you do dance around in your underwear a la Hugh Grant in ‘Love Actually’ and Tom Cruise in ‘Risky Business’.”

Harry looks around to check if anyone has heard, his cheeks turning the faintest pink. “I was drunk and it was my birthday.”

“And as such,” Louis says very seriously, “We allowed you to live out your dreams uninterrupted.”

Harry looks away, defiant though he’s laughing. “This wouldn’t happen on a date with a stranger,” he says.

“If it helps, the fact you were drunk off your ass and dancing in your tiny black boxers has only made you more charming to me.”

Harry covers his face with his hands. “At least you got me home from the club in one piece.”

“Exactly,” Louis says seriously. “Plus we got you away from that miserable girl who wouldn’t leave you alone. What was her name?”

Harry shakes his head, the phantom smile still on his lips. “I have no idea. That entire night is a blur. Except the dancing but that’s mostly because you insisted on recording it.”
“Zayn did too,” Louis points out.

“Zayn didn’t post it on Instagram.”

Louis clears his throat, “A minor oversight. I meant to send it in a private message.”

Harry crosses his arms to match Louis’s stance. “And have you ever deleted the post?”

“What is this you were saying about serious secrets?”

Harry narrows his eyes like he’s going to fight but his smile breaks through. “What I meant, is what if you get someone’s secret and it’s a murder confession?”

“At a student art show?”

“Weirder things have happened,” Harry says as they arrive at the front of the line to write their secrets.

They both take their job of secret writing seriously, using their hands to block the each other from seeing. Louis takes a moment to think of his and then folds the paper in half. Harry stands at the same time and starts to meticulously fold his into tiny halves until it seems to disappear. They grab the round plastic containers from the display and put their secrets inside before dropping them in the open top of the machine.

“Will you tell me your secret?” Louis asks with a sly grin.

“No fucking way,” Harry says without turning to meet his eye.

“What if I tell you mine?”

Harry rolls his eyes, “Don’t even act like you’re going to tell me yours.”


“Yeah, sure.” Harry turns the knob on the machine and waits for his secret to come out. Louis turns the knob for his as Harry moves to the side.

“This feels very serious,” Harry says holding up his tiny plastic not-gumball. “You open first.”

Louis shakes his head, “Nope. Together.”

They count to three and then pull apart the two halves of plastic, each ending up with a scrap of paper in the palm of their hand. “This is kind of sad,” Harry says, unfolding his paper. “We have someone else’s secret that will probably mean nothing to us yet they thought it was important enough to write down.”

Louis unfolds his and shrugs, “Maybe it’s good luck. We’ll speak their secret into the world and the universe will bless them.”

Harry stares at Louis blinking. “Shut up.”

Louis laughs, loud enough a few people glance over. “It sounded nicer in my head.”

Harry doesn’t humor him with a response, opening his slip of paper fully. “I worry I’ll never find love,” he says.
“What?” Louis looks up from his slip, confused.

“It’s the secret.” Harry clarifies, waving the white strip of paper like a tiny flag.

“Oh.” Louis reads his silently before saying it out loud, “I don’t think I deserve to be loved.”

Harry pulls a face, leaning forward to look at the slip. The words are still there, written in tiny capital letters. “What the fuck?” He whispers.

Louis swallows folding the paper again. “This has all turned a bit depressing hasn’t it?” Harry looks down at his own secret again and shoves it in his pocket. “Are you keeping yours?”

“I feel bad just throwing it away,” Harry says.

Louis shrugs and shoves his in the pocket of his jacket. “I guess. I feel like I have to carry someone else’s burden now, honestly.”

“I guess be thankful it’s not your burden to start with,” Harry says starting to lead the way back out of the exhibit. “There’s a cute dessert place across the street,” he says once they’re nearly to the front of the building. “Want to go?”

Louis thinks back to the cab ride here, how exhausted he’d been just thinking about what he needed to get done. Now, it doesn’t seem nearly as bad. “Let’s do it,” he says, pushing the door open into the rainy street. “I could kill for some cheesecake right now.” Harry’s answering smile is enough to make Louis forget his to-do list altogether.
WEDNESDAY ~ Day 8

Wednesday starts slow and finishes in a hurry, it seems. Louis is in a nine a.m. meeting about re-doing the graphics for the state board and then it’s suddenly six p.m. and he’s shuffling the papers from his desk into his bag to head home for the night. It’s been one of those monotonous grey days where the clouds refused to let up and splutter a few drops of rain at random intervals. Correspondingly, at least in Louis’s eyes, everyone on the subway is irritable and grouchy as they press against each other in the humidity of being underground.

Louis has a missed call from Harry when he resurfaces to the city streets and he calls him back immediately, pulling his hood over his head with one hand as the clouds start spitting again.

“I’m trapped.”

“Where?” Louis asks, smiling at Harry’s blunt way of answering the phone.

“Right now I’m in a room covered in hot pink faux fur.”

“Really?” Louis drops his voice, “And what are you wearing?”

Harry laughs and Louis can nearly see him rolling his eyes from the room he’s described. “I’m turning an entire floor of the Hearst Tower into an installation of thirty different rooms,” he explains briefly. “Each one is promoting a different brand and I’m currently finishing the one covered in faux fur.”

“Faux, hot pink fur,” Louis clarifies as he twirls around a group of beleaguered looking tourists in yellow rain ponchos.

“Yes,” Harry says. “But that’s also why I called. I don’t know when I’m going to get out of here. If I’d known earlier we could have met for coffee or something but I had no idea I’d be this late.”

Louis barely misses a beat, “Let me come to you, then. Surely you need dinner? I’ll grab something and stop by.”

The beat before Harry speaks is longer, “Really?”
Louis tries not to be offended at the surprise in his tone. “Yeah, we have to see each other,” he says, shrugging a shoulder though Harry can’t see it. “Do you want Thai? I’m going to grab a cab back to Midtown and I know there’s that Butterfly Belly place over there, yeah?”

“Wait, back to Midtown?” Harry says even as Louis has his arm out to grab a cab from the wayward sea of cars. “You don’t need to come back at rush hour. That’ll be awful.”

“Harry,” Louis says, rolling his eyes as a yellow car makes a beeline for him and pauses at the curb. “Let me do something nice without so many questions and protests, yeah? Now, do you want crab wontons or, no? I can’t remember if those are the ones you don’t like.” He pulls the phone away to tell the driver to take him to the Hearst Tower and then falls back against the seat. “Hello? You there?”

“Yes, sorry,” Harry says, “I was thinking.”

“About the wontons?”

“About you,” Harry says, laughing after. “And the crab wontons.”

“Hopefully not something sexual relating therein?”

“Don’t kink shame,” Harry says as something crashes in the background. “Oh fuck. I have to go.”

“Faux fur emergency?”

“Something like that,” Harry’s voice goes muffled as he yells something away from the phone. “And yes on the crab wontons, and extra spicy on my pad thai, please.”

“Says the guy who cried over the jalapeno margarita.”

Harry shushes him as something else crashes again. “Motherfucker.”

Louis doesn’t think the expletive is intended for him. “I’ll let you go,” he says, smiling. “Sounds like there’s a lot happening over there.”

“A lot is one way to put it,” he says. He goes muffled again and then comes back on the line. “Lou?”

“Yes, darling,” Louis says, loosening his tie and trying to imagine what kind of chaos is occurring on Harry’s side.

“Thank you. This means a lot.”

The line cuts off before Louis can respond but maybe that’s a good thing considering he’s at a loss for words.

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The rain has let up by the time he’s leaving Butterfly Belly with a to-go bag twisted around his finger. He seems to be the only one going into the Hearst building as people press out in black rain jackets with their faces tucked down. He nearly gets hit with three different umbrellas just on the way up the front steps but otherwise makes it safely to the elevator.

The elevator pings and the doors slip open on the seventy-third floor to reveal a room covered completely in grass and flowers on all sides, a stone path leading down the middle of the floor. Louis steps out and glances around at the walls. Even the ceiling has been covered in roses and he
gets an odd sense of vertigo as he follows the steps to the doorway.

While the flowered room seems nearly complete to his eyes, everything through the next doorway appears to be a work in progress. There are construction workers and fashion types, people with clipboards and ear pieces running back and forth, hammering, and yelling. It’s organized chaos as everyone seems to know where they’re going while Louis looks around in a daze. He can see outlines of doorways with different colors and textures within each one; lights and chatter dulled only by the sound of a drill and then a hammer.

“Who are you here for?” A girl with curly, dark hair asks as she crosses in front of Louis with an old typewriter held under each arm like footballs.

“Harry Styles,” he says, turning to follow her with his body as she keeps walking.

“That’s the creative mastermind,” she says with a nod. Louis doesn’t pretend to hide his smile. “He’s in the satellite room.”

“Right, thanks,” Louis says as she disappears around another corner.

None of the rooms appear to have names but there isn’t a free set of hands to help navigate for him so he starts wandering on his own, turning corners and sticking his head in doorways in search of the one familiar face he’s waiting for – the creative mastermind as it is.

The third hallway he turns down is darker and quieter and where he finds Harry in, what he assumes to be, the satellite room. The walls are all painted dark blue and a strobe light in the center sends pin pricks against the ceiling like stars, a painter’s cloth dropped in the middle to cover the floor.

At first Louis doesn’t even spot Harry as he glances around, eyes adjusting to the darkness. Then, his eyes catch on the familiar form sitting cross legged on the ground, a paintbrush in hand as he writes something in calligraphy along the bottom of the wall. He’s wearing a light blue shirt unbuttoned over a white one and he seems to have lost his shoes since he’s only wearing pink socks; his black jeans are splattered in paint. Louis watches him in quiet, unsure of how to disrupt his focus.

“Hi.” It’s Louis who jumps at the disruption having not realized Harry knew he was standing there. “Let me just finish this one,” Harry says without looking away from his work. He smirks when Louis puts a hand over his heart to calm the wild beating. Louis stays put for a moment more until Harry sets his brush down and turns, running his hands over the thighs of his jeans.

“I didn’t even realize you were a muralist,” Louis says, gesturing at the star coordinates Harry has painted on the wall. His hair is sticking up in different places, an errant curl over his forehead and paint on his cheek as he smiles.

“I’m definitely not but our muralist got food poisoning so now I am.”

“Handy like that,” Louis says, holding Harry’s eyes. He looks extra pretty in this light if not a bit disheveled. There’s something relaxed in his smile Louis wants to touch, something in his eyes seems to sparkle. Louis clears his throat - perhaps waiting until seven to eat dinner is messing with his mind. “I brought food,” he says, needlessly, lifting the bag in his hand.

“I’m starving,” Harry says. “We can eat in here.” He moves to stand, “Let me just turn on the lights.”

“Don’t,” Louis says, perhaps too quickly. “I kind of like it. It’s like a starlight picnic.”
He looks around and shrugs, “Yeah, sure. Come sit?” Louis clumsily joins him on the floor as he tries to figure out how to not get paint on his work trousers. “It’s a bit messy,” Harry says apologetically.

“You think I’d be used to it,” Louis says when he finally settles. “Considering I actually work in an art field.”

Harry smiles, “Computer art.”

“You make it sound like clip art when you say it like that.”

Harry’s smile only widens. “Did you bring me crab wontons?”

“Crab wontons and spicy pad thai,” Louis confirms as he starts to unpack the plastic bag. He disperses the napkins, sauces, and utensils evenly as Harry bites into one of the crispy wontons. “Also, for the sake of this being a date, I feel obligated to tell you there’s a smear of paint on your cheek.”

Harry looks up with his mouth full of food and wipes the back of his hand over his cheek. “Got it?”

Louis scratches his eyebrow and tries not to laugh. “If by ‘got it’ you mean to ask if you just smeared it up into your hair then, yes, yes you did.”

Harry shrugs and takes another bite. “I’m not too worried about impressing you,” he says. “Not only have you seen me throw-up before, you’ve also already signed on for the next five weeks. No point in putting on a show now.”

Louis laughs as he twirls his fork in the noodles. “So,” he says just before his first bite, “Tell me about this project and why we’re in a room full of stars and why you were in a room full of faux pink fur earlier.”

Harry finishes swallowing before he speaks. “Well, we usually do a tradeshow kind of thing, where a bunch of brands get together to pitch their new products to the magazines.”

Louis nods, vaguely remembering Harry hating the long days and boring pitches.

“I decided to make it more engaging this year. Basically, every brand has a room and their room is going to encapsulate their brand. We’ll have editors come in for a two day event to speak with each representative but then we’ll open it to the public like an exhibition. It’s advertising and each room is a perfect Instagram shot so that should go over well.”

Louis gets it now – why the girl up front called Harry the creative mastermind. He keeps the comment to himself as he smiles, not wanting to inflate Harry’s ego too far. “So what room are we in now?”

“It’s for a company that makes sleeping bags. We’ll put out sleeping bags on the ground and have a photographer at the corner,” he points to the ceiling, “To take photos looking down. Like flat lay but for humans.”

Louis smiles, picturing it perfectly. “And the pink fur?”

“A new designer who is using colored faux fur for these like, luxury capes that cost thousands of dollars.”

“Fancy,” Louis says. “And this was all your idea?”
Harry nods as he’s just taken another bite of his wonton. “It’s bringing the editorial world to the advertising one,” he says. “It’s a risk.”

“I think it’s going to be fantastic,” Louis says. “You’re catering to the perfect demographic on this.”

“Trying,” Harry says, swallowing and then taking another bite. Louis is a bit pleased by the way he eats and talks at the same time. There really is no dating decorum between them.

“Well, I’m wildly impressed already. So, there.”

Harry grins and lifts his crab wonton in cheers.

They barely finish eating before there’s a pounding on the wall across from them that nearly gives Louis a heart attack. “That’s the next room to be started,” Harry explains, a bit apologetic. “I have no idea how we’re going to get this all done.”

“When is the opening?” Louis asks as he starts to put garbage back in the plastic bag.

“Next week,” Harry says on a half laugh. “I don’t think I would have even eaten dinner if you didn’t come by, though. So, thank you.”

Louis gets it then – the way this is supposed to feel. Like last night at the art show when Harry made him forget his to do list and tonight when he’s given Harry thirty minutes away from work. One spark in the day to look forward to – that’s what makes this different than just being friends.

“Anytime,” Louis says, swallowing his revelation for the moment – maybe Harry already gets it. It wouldn’t be the first time Louis is lagging behind.

Harry walks Louis back to the elevator even after Louis assures him he can find his way back on his own. “I’m sure you could,” Harry says as they round the last corner, “Or, I’d get a call that you’re trapped in the room with no doors.”

“No doors?” Louis raises his eyebrow, “That sounds like a liability, you know. What brand is that?”

Harry smiles, “It’s one of those escape rooms things, pretty much an experiment in nerves, though. Obviously, you walked through a door to get in the room but when the lights go out, you may forget where the door was.”

Louis snarls his lip and shakes his head. “Remind me to never do a team building exercise with you.”

Harry laughs as Louis presses the button for the elevator. “Are you ready for therapy tomorrow?”

“Do we have a choice?” Louis smirks.

“I think it’s kind of fun.” Harry smiles at Louis’s stare, “What? Is that weird?”

“No,” Louis says as the elevator doors open. A girl with the light blonde hair comes through the far door and pauses like she’s intruding on them. “It’s totally normal to enjoy having secrets pulled from you for an hour. Not weird at all.”

“Maybe it’s your secrets I like to hear,” Harry says with a smirk that makes Louis pause.

Louis narrows his eyes at him and Harry laughs. “See you tomorrow, H.”
The last thing he hears before the doors slide shut completely is a girl’s voice asking, “Harry, is that your boyfriend?” and Harry’s hesitant answer of, “It’s a bit more complicated than that.”

THURSDAY ~ Day 9

Harry is late to their second therapy session and Louis kind of hates him.

He doesn’t hate him enough to do anything about it but he does debate the importance of their friendship while he sits in utter silence with Julia. He’s afraid to talk; worried she’ll get him to admit his deep rooted insecurities with one simple question like in the movies. He fidgets like he’s in the interview room at a police station; crossing and uncrossing his legs, checking his watch, scratching the side of his shoulder, clearing his throat.

Julia looks on with quiet amusement. She acts like she’s writing something down periodically but Louis is pretty sure she’s just giving her material for the inevitable book she’s going to write about neurotic clients. “I’m sorry I’m late.” Harry’s voice is like a blanket when he walks in though his tone is breathless and hurried. “Work emergency.”

“No worries,” Louis says, turning from his spot on the couch as Julia says, “Not a problem.”

“Sorry,” Harry says again, right to Louis this time. He looks as though he’s ran a couple of blocks, his shirt unbuttoned like after a night out and coming untucked from his trousers, cheeks pink. Louis remembers how he left him last night and though his outfit is different, Louis wonders if he’s even slept.

“Everything okay?” he asks, a spike of concern in his stomach.

Harry nods, and puts on half a smile. He crosses his ankle over his opposite knee, licks his bottom lip and redoes one of the buttons that has come loose. “Have I missed anything?”

Louis snorts and Julia says, “Louis chose to wait for you before we began.”

Louis feels his ears go warm as if that’s an intimate gesture rather than the obvious decision. “It is couples therapy,” he says like an answer, his eyes on his fingers as he links them in his lap.

“Well, thanks,” Harry says.

Julia has them recall the week before, tell her what they did together each day. Harry is able to recount it more clearly than Louis who finds the days are already blending together. There are moments that stand out - Harry’s face when he handed him the right yogurt at Whole Foods, Harry’s concentrated scowl at art therapy, Harry with cheesecake smeared on the corner of his lips after the art show, the way he looked last night in the artificial starlight.

Harry recites it all like journal entries and Louis wonders what specific moments Harry remembers the most, what ones are already lodging their way permanently in his mind.

“In terms of time management,” Julia says, “How was the first week?”

“Kind of exhausting,” Harry says. “We’re both busy and this is another thing on the endless list of things, you know?”

“Sure,” Julia says. “Anytime you start something new there’s an adjustment period.”

“I think we’re getting better though,” Louis says, stepping in. “We went to an art show a couple
nights ago and then last night I met Harry at his office for dinner and both times felt like a break from the chaos of normal life.”

Harry nods, “Yeah, exactly. I think we may have been shakier at the beginning than we anticipated.”

Louis flashes to their tense discussion of why none of this felt different last Friday and then arguing about sex, of all things, Monday night. “Definitely.”

Julia looks between them, nodding and waiting. When no one adds anything else she glances at her clipboard. “I want to talk about your families,” she says, “Specifically your parents. Studies have shown romantic histories can be impacted by our parents. That might be an interesting thing to think about for you both.” Louis tries not to grimace at the conversation topic but perhaps this is better than having to talk about themselves.

Harry goes first to say all the things Louis knows – his parents got divorced and remarried but he has decent relationships with all of his step parents. Louis’s history is a bit darker though he tries to lighten the mood with a few jokes. “My mom was pregnant fairly young and my dad told her to choose between me or him,” he says. “Clearly I’m here so we know who she chose.” His grin falls on Julia’s flat eyes and then melts as he explains he has no current relationship with his father and his mom has a steady partner but never remarried.

Julia smiles. “Should I give you a therapist’s analysis of how your stories will affect your relationships?”

Louis glances at Harry and they both shrug. “I guess,” Harry says, “Although you do make it sound a bit scary.”

She laughs lightly, “It’s just interesting. Not necessarily like telling a fortune or anything.” She pauses as though waiting for them to protest. “Harry, for example, because your parents were successful at finding love again, you may feel additional pressure to find a happy ending. While, Louis, having seen men break your mom’s heart you may end up building walls around yourself to avoid getting emotionally attached.”

Louis and Harry just stare at her, a little confused by what’s going on and whether she’s telling them they’re doomed from the start.

“Of course they always say that we can break away from our parents’ mold,” Julia says. “Where we came from certainly doesn’t have to dictate where we end up.”

They both nod at her like it makes sense though Louis thinks this part of therapy may have been lost on them. Perhaps sensing this, Julia follows up with some softball questions about when they first met each other and how they became friends which naturally leads to a discussion of Zayn and, following that strand, discussion of Niall and Zayn and their being in a relationship.

“Thank you for indulging me in all the details of your lives,” Julia says finally, closing her notebook. Falsely, Louis thinks they’re finished. “But the one thing we haven’t gone over is sex,” she says. “Physical intimacy. Have you discussed how you expect sex to play into these forty days?”

Where last week they froze at a question they didn’t expect, this time they both laugh quietly, sharing a quick glance. “It’s funny you ask,” Louis says, a smile softening his words. “We got in an argument over this just the other night.”

“Not an argument,” Harry says, “A conversation.”
“Resulting in us both feeling guilty about the way it turned out.”

Harry shifts on the couch. “That’s fair.”

Julia’s eyes flicker between them like this side conversation is the most enticing one they’ve had all session. “What was the argument - or conversation about?”

Louis looks at Harry before he answers. “We were discussing the validity of our relationship if there isn’t sex involved. There was, uh, outside concern it may not be legitimate if we keep our clothes on at all times.” Harry snorts and Louis tries not to smile.

Julia nods. “How you define a relationship – whether it involves sex or not – is up to you. In my eyes, your commitment to each other is valid enough to make this a true relationship.” Louis nearly cheers – considering her answer was his thought all along. “But my question here is a little simpler: do you want this to be a physically intimate relationship?” This time the quiet draws, neither one of them eager to jump with an answer. “Louis?”

Louis knew it was coming, being called on like a student in class. This is worse than the question of being attracted to each other last week. This is a question of lips and tongues, fingers, hands, shared orgasms. For a friendship that has always been platonic, this is not something to be admitted in broad daylight and while sober. Louis swallows as his mouth goes dry. He takes a deep breath.

“I wouldn’t mind,” he says slowly. “I think sex is important in relationships and if we do want to trial a real relationship, it is certainly an element. But, I also think sex can complicate things. I wouldn’t jeopardize our friendship for an orgasm.” He hears Harry sniff as though to stifle his laughter at his word choice and feels his stomach lighten some. As long as they can laugh, maybe they’ll make it out alive.

Julia smiles and tilts her head slightly, “But to answer my question - yes or no - are you interested in a physically intimate relationship with Harry?”


“And Harry,” she says, looking to his side of the couch. “Are you interested in a physically intimate relationship with Louis?”

Harry hesitates slightly. “I think sex is a fundamental part of chemistry and all relationships I’ve been in have had that level of intimacy-”

“It’s a yes or no question, Harry,” Julia says. She’s not necessarily rude but where Louis was able to waffle around the answer she’s made Harry cut to the chase after thirty seconds.

“Yes,” Harry says, almost too quickly. “Yes.”

Louis skips his next breath, his lungs pausing for a moment. Even though he has just admitted to wanting those things with Harry - the lips, tongue, fingers, orgasms things - it’s something else altogether for Harry to admit to wanting those things with him.

Julia wraps up the session in the next few minutes but, even under oath, Louis wouldn’t be able to recall a thing she says. Instead his mind is spinning - no longer about sex but with how they are supposed to leave this room and continue on with their day.

Acting like this conversation hasn’t happened would be naïve but they certainly can’t start making out in the hallway having never even kissed in the first place - never even addressed the idea they
might want to kiss. Maybe they should have started with a kissing conversation instead of a literal
fucking conversation.

By the time they stand up to leave, Louis thinks he may be getting lightheaded. Harry shakes
Julia’s hand in thanks so Louis follows suit, deftly avoiding Harry’s eyes. He’ll take the lead once
they’re in the hallway, he decides; he’ll make a joke that will get them over this hump of
awkwardness. Hump. He smiles. Harry may appreciate that one.

In the hallway, though, Harry doesn’t give Louis the chance to get a deprecating joke out. “I have
to go back to work,” he says as they walk toward the front doors. “This installation might kill me.”

Louis nods, “Is that why you were late? Working on the rooms?”

“Yeah,” Harry says. “It’s been total madness all day. Brands falling through, new ones being
added. I’ve fought off two headaches and drank four cups of coffee.” He rubs his head, “Just a
few more hours and then I’ll go home.”

Since Harry is going back downtown, they can’t share a cab this time and Louis lets Harry have
the first one, insisting when Harry hesitates. “Go, go,” Louis says, shoving his shoulder lightly.
“Sooner you get there, sooner you leave.”

Harry nods, one leg in the cab. “See you tomorrow?”

“See you tomorrow,” Louis says like a promise, waving as Harry drops into the car and closes the
door.

The next cab follows shortly after and Louis sighs as he sits in the back. He needs a glass of wine
and then he could probably work on his latest project for a couple of hours.

He almost finds it funny - how he debated what to say once they left Julia’s office while Harry left
it all behind in a hurry. Louis can’t help but be thankful for the distraction despite the way it
pushes everything to the back burner. God knows nothing stays on the back burner forever,
though. Louis only hopes this one doesn’t gain a life of its own when it comes back around.

His mind wanders to Harry’s rushed arrival and exit as the cab cuts through the city. He’s clearly
stressed but made the time to come to therapy; therapy for a relationship that isn’t necessarily real
– just something they’re trying. Harry did it for him – despite the added pressure to the rest of his
night.

It’s not much to show his appreciation but Louis opens Instagram and proceeds to send Harry no
less than ten videos of different animals cuddling each other and babies laughing. They’re all
saved in his likes already which makes it easy, if not slightly embarrassing.

Once they’ve all been sent he adds a note to the end: “Hope these help you through tonight.” He
gives himself a full twenty seconds before adding a second message, a simple: “xx”. Maybe it’s
what he would do for Harry as just a friend but maybe it’s part of what he figured out last night:
how to be each other’s escape from the chaos. Maybe week two is a sign of shifting tides. Maybe,
maybe, maybe.

* *

FRIDAY ~ Day 10

Louis calls Harry in the morning when he gets to work, mostly to check in on him but also
because he has a proposition. “Did you sleep last night?” He asks as a starting point.
“Yes, actually,” Harry says and Louis can hear his smile. “The team made me leave at eleven and then I came in this morning at eight.”

“That’s not a ton of sleep, H,” Louis points out.

“It’s better than the three hours the night before.”

“Don’t even tell me that,” Louis says shaking his head.

“Stop worrying,” Harry says, another smile in his voice. “And tell me why you called.”

Louis takes a deep breath, “You can say no to this, no pressure, but I have tickets to the Knicks game tonight, if you want to go with me.”

“Really? For re-doing their logo for next season?”

Bless Harry for remembering Louis’s projects and for realizing he would never buy Knicks tickets on his own. Louis smiles, “Evidently they were pleased with the proofs. They’re courtside seats, if that sweetens the offer.”

Harry lowers his voice like it’s a secret, “You know I’m not that big of a basketball fan, right?”

Louis laughs, “And you think I am?”

“Have I ever told you the story about the last Knicks game I went to?”

Louis tries to remember Harry ever going to a Knicks game but comes up empty. “I don’t think so.”

“Last year I met a guy at the bar where I was watching the Packers game. Since I knew so much about football, he assumed I liked all sports.”

“Of course,” Louis says, nodding as he spins in his chair to look out the windows. “I know exactly the type.”

“He invited me to a Knicks game as our first date. I agreed because he was cute and seemed funny, all the good stuff. But I hate basketball.”

Louis smiles in anticipation, “Oh no.”

“I guess I should revise to say, I hate basketball and there are few things he loved more than basketball.”

“Oh god.”

Harry laughs, “I guess I had too many questions and then was told I wasn’t attentive enough to the game because I was trying to make conversation. At one point he said, ‘Would you just shut up for a minute?’.”

“What the fuck?” Louis looks to make sure his office door is closed. “What an ass. I hope you kneed him in the balls.”

“I dropped my beer in his lap and then left.”

“Good,” Louis says. “He deserves it. Why didn’t you ever say anything to me about it?”

“I was embarrassed,” Harry says on a soft laugh. “And I wasn’t able to laugh about it for a long
time. By then, it seemed irrelevant to share.”

“Ah, got it,” Louis says. “In the future, though, I prefer to hear all of your embarrassing stories, irrelevant or not.”

“Noted,” Harry says.

For a second, Louis lets himself wonder what other things about Harry he doesn’t know; what things Harry has deemed irrelevant. It’s a sobering realization he doesn’t actually know everything about him.

“That being said,” Harry says when Louis’s quiet wondering has drawn on. “I’d love to go with you tonight.”

Louis smiles, “You can talk all you want. I promise I won’t get mad.”

* *

Louis meets Harry at his apartment before the game and finds Harry in a scramble to get ready having just come from another day of working on the installation at Hearst.

“I’m sorry,” Harry calls from the back corner of the apartment as Louis finds a spot on the couch and takes out his phone.

“You’ve already said that,” Louis says, scrolling through Instagram. “Like, twelve times.”

It had been especially harried when Louis had gotten to Harry’s apartment two minutes before Harry himself. He’d just been standing in the lobby but Harry acted like it was a three hour delay as he came through the front doors. There hadn’t been any paint on him this time but as they got in the elevator Louis realized Harry was covered in all shades of glitter. “Fairy dust room,” Harry said without further context or explanation.

Now there’s the sound of a closing drawer and then a pair of shoes being dropped to the ground followed by another apology. “Sorry. I’ll just be another minute.”

“If the game starts without us, I’m sure everyone will survive,” Louis says as Harry bounces back into the main room on one leg, midway through putting on his shoe. “Despite common perceptions, I am not on the team.”

Harry rolls his eyes as he zips his boot. He’s gone for jeans and a black t-shirt with a navy jacket over the top. There’s still a sheen of glitter on his face but Louis isn’t planning to tell him. “Fuck, sorry, I need my wallet,” he says as he turns and runs back to his dresser.

“Would you stop apologizing?” Louis asks, standing from the couch.

“No,” Harry calls just before reappearing. “I feel bad.”

“Because you had a project that went later than you anticipated?”

Harry slips his wallet in the back of his jeans. “Yes, and have nearly made us late now.”

“To a game we’re going to sit and watch,” Louis says slowly. “That will continue whether we’re there or not.”

“Okay?” Harry buttons his jacket and puts his phone in his pocket. “What do you want me to say?”
“I want you to relax for one thing,” Louis says as he turns to lead them out the front door. “You’re stressing me out right now.”

Harry smiles, grabbing his keys off the countertop in the kitchen. “Sorry.” He pauses, “Wait, sorry for saying sorry.”

Louis laughs, waiting for Harry to lock the door. “Why are you so sorry?”

“I don’t know. I’m stressed out about these rooms and everything seems to be moving at the speed of light while I flail around and try to catch up.”

Louis pauses in the hallway. “Hey, if you would feel better catching up on work than going to see a dumb basketball game, I won’t be upset.”

“No,” Harry says before he can continue. “I want to go with you. It’s our date.”

Louis rolls his eyes, “Yeah but we can do something date worthy another night. I don’t want to be part of your stress, H.”

Harry smiles, “Would you believe me if I said this is the one thing I’ve been looking forward to all day?”

There’s a butterfly sensation in Louis’s stomach. “To go to the Knicks?”

“To hang out with you,” Harry says like it’s obvious. “So, yes, I’d still like to go to the game.”

Louis can’t get any words to form so he nods instead. He’s been looking forward to this, too, is what he doesn’t say.

It goes back to their last few nights; this is good for them, not a chore. More than usual, Louis is finding something calming in Harry’s presence. He can’t pinpoint the change other than to say it’s counter intuitive. All of the constraints on their current predicament, the rules and the therapy, should have them awkwardly on edge like they were the first week. This feels like they’re finding their pace together, figuring this thing out on their own terms.

There’s a fancy process involved for them to get to their courtside seats when they arrive at the arena - namely an escort from the entrance and directions to the secret vendors beneath the arena. Though they arrive before tip-off, as soon as the players arrive at center court to start, Harry looks at Louis with raised eyebrows. “Should we go check out the secret vendors?” Louis laughs as he agrees, both of them quickly making their way from their seats to the tunnel their escort pointed out.

The vendors through the side tunnel are far more elaborate than the hotdogs and popcorn on the main concourse. They both end up with craft beers and honey chicken sandwiches with waffle fries covered in bacon and cheese - definitely not in either of their normal diets. Rather than battle their way back to their seats, they take their time at one of the tables set up near the private concourse, eating and chatting as the game continues on without them.

Almost unconsciously, Louis keeps the conversation away from work. Partly because it’s a Friday night and it’s the last thing he wants to talk about but mostly for Harry since he already admitted to being under pressure at work. He meant it when he said he didn’t want to be a source of Harry’s stress.

They each get another beer before they head back and laugh about being the worst basketball fans
in history. At their seats, they manage to talk through the rest of the first half, raising their voices above the crowd noise. It’s perfect for people watching and the half time show is a woman who changes dresses at lightning speed which keeps them engaged.

At one point in the third quarter, the President of the team comes over during a timeout to introduce himself to Louis and to thank him for his work on the logo. “I’m a bit star struck,” Harry says once they’re alone again - or as alone as they can be when surrounded by a stadium of people.

“Why’s that?” Louis takes a sip of his beer, “Do you know him?”

“No but he’s the President of an NBA team. That seems like a big deal.”

“A position and title wasted on us, no doubt,” Louis says, wrinkling his nose.

“Hey, no,” Harry nudges him with his shoulder. “You’re the one who redid his logo and you’re the one he wanted to meet. You did a damn good job on it and he appreciated it enough to come find you. I doubt he does that to everyone sitting courtside.”

Louis tracks the President with his eyes as he finds his seat under the far basket. He doesn’t talk to anyone else until he sits and then speaks quietly to the woman beside him - perhaps his wife. Louis lets his pride flare for just a moment at the recognition - not something easy to come by in his industry.

He smirks at Harry, “Yeah, okay, it’s kind of cool.” Harry smiles back at him and the moment hangs before being split in half by the referees whistle for the start of the last quarter.

* 

The Knicks lose magnificently but as Louis leads the way back out to the garage where a line of cabs are waiting, he can’t help but feel basketball is hardly the point. He’s had such a good time just chatting with Harry, people watching and eating food, drinking not-so-great beer. It felt like a real date - like they weren’t thinking about anything else but spending time together. He kind of doesn’t want it to be over.

“Do you want dessert?” he asks.

Harry stops and looks over. “Always.”

Louis grins and then he presses his lips together as he directs Harry away from the line of waiting cabs. “Come on, then. I know a place.”

They end up at Magnolia Bakery after they run three blocks through the pouring rain, not a rain jacket in sight for either of them. “I’m so sorry,” Louis says as he opens the door to the bakery and lets Harry go in first. “I definitely didn’t expect this.”

“Are you apologizing for the rain?” Harry shakes his arms to dry them and then pushes his hand back through his wet hair. “And I’m the one who apologizes too much.”

Louis laughs, wiping his feet off on the mat at the front door before they walk in further. He’s not in the best shape of his life and the run has made him a little breathless. “I didn’t mean to make you earn dessert,” he says, attempting to dry his hands on his jeans which doesn’t work considering his jeans are wet too.

“I like the anticipation,” Harry says and something about it is ridiculously close to sounding like a tease. Louis’s eyebrows raise and Harry just coughs into his hand and nudges his head to the back
of the line at the counter as they join it.

They end up with two cupcakes and a booth tucked in the back away from the rest of the crowd. Magnolia is a typical tourist trap but the crowds tend to fade at night - rainy nights in particular.

“You have frosting on your nose,” Harry comments once Louis takes his first bite.

“You have it on your chin,” Louis says back easily, wiping the back of his hand over his nose.

“Shit,” Harry whispers as he swipes at it with a napkin. “I don’t usually eat like when I’m on dates. So far every time we’ve eaten, I’ve somehow put food or paint on my face.”

Louis laughs, “What did you say the other day? It doesn’t matter because I’m locked in for five weeks?”

“I meant that as a joke.”

“I know, I know,” Louis says before Harry can think he’s offended. ”I’m usually meticulous about eating if I’m on a date.”

“If you were anyone else, I would be eating this cupcake with a fork and knife right now. As it is,” he shrugs and then takes a massive bite, smearing it all over his lips. Louis nearly chokes for laughing so hard.

“Do you think it’s a good thing?” Louis asks as Harry cleans off his face for a second time. “Or bad?”

“I don’t know,” Harry says. “I think this past week and a half I’ve asked myself that a lot and I come up with different answers.”

“Care to share?”

“No,” Harry says, smirking. “Maybe when I come up with a definitive answer.”


Harry rolls his eyes, “I’m sure.”

As they get ready to leave, they survey the rainy night while putting on their jackets. Usually, they’d do the twenty minute walk home without question but on a shared look they agree to get a cab. “Wait,” Louis says as Harry moves toward the door. “You still missed some cupcake after your little show back there.”

“Where?” Harry asks, smiling so his dimple curves in.

Louis doesn’t hesitate as he reaches and brushes his thumb over the corner of Harry’s lips to get the smear of white frosting. He leaves his hand there for a beat longer than necessary and meets Harry’s eyes right on. They’re close enough he can see the freckle in Harry’s iris and he realizes he’s never seen it like this before. He blinks slowly and wonders if he’s just never noticed or if he hasn’t been paying attention. Harry, for his part, stays perfectly still, waiting. Louis clears his throat and drops his hand in the same moment, taking a step back for good measure. “Ready?”

Harry smiles softly and nods, leading the way back outside and holding the door for Louis. For the first time, Louis almost wanted to kiss Harry and he’s not sure what to do about it. If it was anyone else, he wouldn’t have paused. But it’s Harry. A kiss could change everything.
He watches from under the covered awning while Harry tries to get a cab, rain spluttering and the streetlights casting wet light all around them. After a couple minutes, a cab swerves to the curb and splashes through a puddle, completely soaking Harry. Where Louis would curse, and many men he knows would get angry, Harry turns to him and bursts into laughter.

“It looks like I peed my pants,” he says through his smile and then Louis is laughing with him, unable to make himself stop.

“Don’t move, I’m taking a picture,” Louis says, getting out his phone.

They’re both idiots, standing in the rain with a warm cab waiting as Louis takes a picture and Harry makes a face of surprise, both of them laughing through it.

A kiss with Harry, Louis thinks again, could change everything. And, maybe, for the first time, he’s willing to let it.

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It’s not until he’s home a few hours later he realizes he has a missed text from Zayn. He has to squint to make out the picture in the message and he nearly responds, “What the fuck is this?” before he sees it clearly.

The picture is Zayn’s television with Louis and Harry on the screen. It’s a crowd shot from the Knicks game for the television broadcast though neither of them are actually looking at the camera. Louis has no idea when a camera was even on them; all he can focus on is his face, the odd soft smile and crinkles by his eyes as he looks at Harry. His stomach swoops low like he’s on a rollercoaster.

* 

**SATURDAY ~ Day 11**

“Clearly he’s suspicious.”

Harry smiles as he takes his coffee from the barista and moves to the side so Louis can get his. “I think he was just pointing out he saw us on the broadcast.”

Louis rolls his eyes, “Then why didn’t he send it to the group text? Why is it like an accusation directed at me?” He takes his coffee with a nod of thanks and follows Harry back toward the front door. “Why didn’t he text you?”

“He’s probably jealous you had courtside seats and you didn’t invite him,” Harry says over his shoulder, winding through the mass of people also getting coffee on a Saturday morning.

“Yeah, well, you’re my boyfriend and he’s not,” Louis says, loudly enough a couple people glance over.

“Boyfriend?” Harry smirks as he turns to face Louis in the clearing near the door. “I thought we were dating.”

Louis rolls his eyes, “You know what I mean. Back to my original point, he’s suspicious. He
knows you don’t like basketball so why would I take you?”

Harry narrows his eyes, “Am I supposed to be offended by that? I can’t tell.”

Louis takes a slow sip of his coffee, and shrugs. “What are we going to do?”

“We could tell him and Niall both,” Harry says, holding the door for Louis as they step outside. The rain from last night has lessened significantly though a haze of grey clouds still hang over the city. “We’re going to that potluck tomorrow at Niall’s place. That could be a good time to do it.”

Louis winces, “I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

Harry doesn’t even flinch. “Why’s that?”

“I think we’re risking enough by ourselves without tying them up, too.” It’s a bit bleak to say it out loud but it’s true. The experiment is supposed to be between the two of them, not the whole world.

“So, what’s our plan?” Harry asks as they start making their way toward the subway station.

“Let it go until we absolutely can’t.” Louis says. It’s not the best plan but it’s something that keeps them safe a while longer.

“That’s fine,” Harry says. “It’ll make dinner tomorrow interesting.”

Louis laughs lightly, “If we’re lucky, neither one of them will even mention it.”

“Yes,” Harry says, sarcasm coating the word. “What are you planning to bring for the potluck anyway?”

Louis actually hasn’t thought much about the potluck at all. It’s not as though he’s dreading it - but it would be a lie to say he’s looking forward to it. Zayn and Niall host a dinner every few months and though Harry and Louis are always invited, so are a random scattering of co-workers and neighbors. Louis likes to be social, or thinks he does, but there’s something to be said about being together with close friends versus having to make small talk with strangers.

“You haven’t thought about it, have you?” Harry asks, reading his mind like he’s been known to do.

Louis smiles guiltily, “No. I haven’t. Why? Have you?”

“I’m bringing fruit salad,” Harry says easily. “It’s the simplest thing you can do.”

Louis groans, “That’s such a good idea.”

Harry grins. “I can send you a recipe for a yogurt dip, if you want? It can be paired with the fruit.”

“Really? I’d owe you forever.”

“For a yogurt dip recipe?” Harry raises his eyebrows, “Hardly.”

“I would really appreciate it, though,” Louis says. “Seriously.”

“Good. I’ll send it to you when I get to the office. On a related note, I can’t believe we’re going to work right now.”

“On a Saturday,” Louis agrees.
Harry smiles, “As if it’s not what we usually do on Saturdays.” Louis scrunches his nose. It’s true: for both of them the work week has always been six days, seven if they need it. “We’ll have to take a day off sometime,” Harry says. He takes a drink of coffee and glances at Louis. “We’ll binge Netflix in our sweats and not get off the couch.”

“Except to answer the door when food is delivered to us.”

“Yeah,” Harry says, excitedly, his eyes brightening.

“Not today, though,” Louis adds with a sigh as they start down the stairs into the subway station. “I have a stack of designs to critique as tall as this cup.” He lifts his coffee pointedly and then takes another sip.

“I still have enough rooms to decorate to fill at least a full house,” Harry says.

“Bright side, you may be a certified interior decorator by the time you finish.”

“Will you design me a certificate that says that?” Harry smiles, “I’ll hang it in my office.”

Louis laughs, “I’ll add it to my project list.”

They have to split at the next set of steps to catch their respective trains as a crowd of people pulse around them. “Share a cab tomorrow?” Louis asks as he starts getting pushed backwards by a group of tourists in bright green lanyards.

“Yes,” Harry says as a woman with a walker nudges at him to start moving again. He glances at her and grins which seems to appease her momentarily. “I’ll send you that recipe soon.”

“Okay thanks,” Louis calls just before he disappears into the stairwell, a bunch of middle school kids surrounding him.

ＳＵＮＤＡＹ ~ Day 12

Sunday evening, a paper bag precedes Harry’s entrance to the waiting cab. It’s followed by one black jeaned leg and then the other, a black coat and messy brown hair following after smoothly.

“I have something for you,” Harry says. He puts the bag on the floor as he shuts the door.

“Hello to you too,” Louis says just to make Harry roll his eyes. Louis is holding a covered glass bowl with the yogurt dip in his lap but it doesn’t stop Harry from placing his bowl of fruit on top as he gets his seatbelt on. “Sure, I’ll hold that,” he says and then gives the cab driver their next destination.

Harry laughs as he gets the paper bag off the floor while Louis tries to rearrange the two bowls to not go flying into the front seat as soon as the driver takes off. “Hi,” Harry says finally, smiling.

“That was quite the entrance,” Louis says.

“Thanks.” Harry reaches into the bag and pulls out three thick books. “These are for you.”

“What are they?” Louis asks, tilting his head as he tries to see the titles.

“Uh, graphic design technique, design history and the use of graphics in the magazine industry.”
Louis can’t help the way his eyebrows pull together. “Where’d you get those?”

Harry thumbs through the pages of one and then places his hands on top of it. “I bought them.”

“You bought them?” Louis knows the running price of coffee table books and the last thing he wants is Harry spending his money on books about a subject he’s not even interested in.

“I got off on the wrong floor of the Hearst Tower after lunch yesterday,” Harry says. “And they were having a book sale. I was browsing around and found these. I know you like to keep up with the industry.” He clears his throat as his voice trails off quietly.

“So you bought them for me?”

Harry twists his lips and nods. “I thought you’d like them.”

“I do,” Louis says, quickly realizing his reaction so far has been absolutely terrible. He’s been told by one too many sisters he’s awful at receiving gifts and Harry’s nervous smile is making him think they may be right. “That’s like, exactly the kind of books I usually buy,” he says. “I just don’t want you spending a fortune on me.”

“It wasn’t a fortune,” Harry says. “And I wanted to do it. No one forced me.”

Louis nods, undeniably touched by the gesture. His mind is trying to connect the dots - if this is something Harry would have done three weeks ago or if something has changed in the last twelve days since they started this whole thing. “Thank you,” Louis says, meeting his eyes. “I’d love to skip this whole potluck altogether and go home to read those, honestly.”

Harry’s smile is crooked when he says, “Really?”

“Yes, really,” Louis says. “I’d like to look at them right now but you have me holding your fruit bowl.”

“Oh shit,” Harry says after a quiet beat as he glances to Louis’s lap. “I forgot about that.”

They do a swap, laughing as they try to keep the bowls from falling until finally Harry is holding the fruit and dip and Louis has the books.

“These are amazing,” he says, mostly to himself though he can feel the warmth of Harry’s smile as he turns the pages of the one about the magazine industry. “I’m going to need to take a day off just to read them.” He looks at Harry and finds his pleased smile a bit disarming. He’s always known Harry to be thoughtful but this feels like a whole different side.

All too quickly, the cab stops and they’re jolted from their miniature staring contest as they scramble out of the car. Louis puts the books back in the bag and ends up carrying those while Harry takes care of their dishes. “In hindsight, I probably should have given you the books at a different time than before we go to dinner,” Harry says, scrunching his lips. “Oops.”

Louis laughs as they head into the lobby of Niall’s building. “Don’t worry about it. I’m just excited to have them.”

Harry waves at the doorman as they walk in and he smiles back already having come to recognize them over the years Niall has lived here. “Do you think they’ve started moving Zayn’s stuff yet?” He asks once they’re in the elevator.

“I thought Zayn said he was doing it slowly. One box at a time.”
“That’s so weird,” Harry says. “Like, combining their stuff. You obviously don’t need two of everything so how do you figure out whose stuff has to go?”

Louis shrugs, he’s never lived with anyone besides roommates in college. “No idea. Figure out which can opener works better and keep that one? Whose records have less scratches?”

“I’m still stunned they managed to choose Niall’s apartment,” Harry says. “That’s a big deal.”

“If it was you and me, I’d choose your apartment,” Louis says. “I’ve always loved the way your bed is lofted above everything else. It’s private even though it’s a studio.”

There’s an awkward beat before he realizes why it’s awkward and the weight of what he’s just said settles over them. They talk hypotheticals all the time - even before this thing started - but suddenly a hypothetical about them moving in together is startling.

Louis isn’t sure what to say to amend the situation and Harry must be at the same loss as they stay quiet until the elevator opens again. The cloud doesn’t get the chance to hang for long as Zayn is already opening the door for them by the time they reach Niall’s unit.

“Zayn? I thought this was Niall’s building. Are we at the wrong place?” Harry asks with his typical dad-humor that makes Zayn and Louis both roll their eyes.

Louis assesses the small group of people assembled as they step inside the apartment - all faces vaguely recognizable but not one he can place perfectly. Luckily there’s a very familiar face cutting through the crowd as Niall swoops toward them.

“How did you bring books?” Zayn asks, as he takes the paper bag from Louis’s arms and looks inside. Niall pulls Harry into a hug to say hello.

“I didn’t bring them,” Louis says, pausing to hug Niall when he lets Harry free. “I mean, I brought them. But not on purpose.” Niall and Zayn both pause to stare at him while Harry pretends to be incredibly interested in the shoe rack on the ground. “Harry gave them to me. As a gift.”

He takes his jacket off in the ensuing, “Why did Harry give you a gift?” from Zayn, and “What kind of books?” from Niall. Louis snatches the bag back from Zayn’s arms and sets it near the coat rack, out of the way. “Graphic design books,” he says, choosing to answer Niall’s question.

“Nice,” Niall says. He takes the two bowls from Harry and disappears toward the kitchen.

Zayn steps in front of Louis to hug Harry before Harry turns away to hang his coat. “I didn’t get a hug,” Louis points out only to hear Harry’s muffled laughter behind him.

“You didn’t bring anything to the potluck,” Zayn says, crossing his arms.

“That’s false,” Louis says. “I brought the yogurt dip Niall just took away from Harry.”

“Yogurt dip?” Zayn tilts his head, “What the fuck are we supposed to do with that?”

“It goes with the fruit Harry brought,” Louis says as though he knows what he’s talking about.

“You coordinated your dish with Harry?” Zayn narrows his eyes, “The last time we did this, you brought an already open bottle of tequila.”

Louis prays for the fire alarm to go off to cause them to evacuate the building but the doorbell ringing right then has a similar effect as Zayn goes to answer and drops his interrogation. “I think I need a drink already,” Harry says lowly as they hurry away from the front door before Zayn
remembers they’re there.

“Amen to that,” Louis says just as quietly. “Let’s find the wine immediately.”

Everyone seems to know either him or Harry as they try to navigate to the small table holding the alcohol at the back of the apartment. Seemingly, they’re the most popular duo in the place mixing passing small talk with saying hello to people they barely know. By the time they reconvene at the wine table, their cheeks are red and smiles subdued.

“I don’t remember a lot of those people,” Harry says out of the corner of his lips when they’ve turned their backs and everyone has returned to their own conversations.

“You’ve taken the words from my mouth,” Louis says just as quietly.

Louis chooses the wine - a Willamette Valley red - and Harry picks two clean glasses from the rack, holding them while Louis pours. They do a small cheers before their simultaneous first sips, eyes wide as they size up the night in front of them and turn to face the group again.

“I have an idea,” Harry says, covering his mouth with his wine glass as he speaks.

Louis glances over, “The last time you said that, we ended up dating.”

Harry smirks and nods in acknowledgement. “That’s a good point. Would you still like to hear my idea?”

“Of course, darling,” Louis drawls, trying not to laugh.

“We make it a game. We each have to talk to five people in the room and find out where they had their first kiss.”

“No fucking way,” Louis interrupts, a stupid big smile on his mouth.

“Yes fucking way,” Harry says, his mouth managing to make the word ‘fucking’ look attractive.

“And how do you suggest we bring that into the conversation?”

“That’s the game, sweetheart,” Harry says, saccharine sweet with a smile.

Louis purses his lips, considering. “What are the rules? What does the winner get?”

Harry bites his lip, “Winner gets to choose where we go to dessert when we ditch this party. Rules are you can’t get more than one location from each group or people. Like, if you have a conversation with a group of three, it only counts as one location, one point.

Louis can’t help his smile even as he rolls his eyes, “You’re on, cupcake.”

“Cupcake?” Harry scrunches his nose, “Not sure I’m fond of that one.”

Louis laughs, “Go get ‘em, peaches.”

Harry shakes his head, “Also, a no.”

“Sex kitten?”

Harry frowns, “Fuck off.”

Louis laughs again and then they each take a drink of wine to seal their agreement and turn
opposite ways, the apartment a sudden playground instead of a minefield.

If anyone knows what they’re up to, they certainly don’t let it on even as Harry and Louis weave through their conversations like they have attention deficit disorders. The first time Louis pops into a conversation, he immediately feels out of his depth when he realizes the group is talking about the feminist movement and implications of white celebrity women partaking. Louis bounces on the balls of his feet, waiting for an opening with one eye on Harry across the room as he grins at something being said in his group, his dimple curving in.

When the conversation switches to Ke$ha, Louis takes a running leap of desperation. “You know the song she did a few years ago with 3Oh!3?” He asks as soon as there’s a lull. “I think that’s my favorite song of hers still.” It’s a lie - he definitely likes ‘Praying’ the most but now is not the time for honesty.

“What’s that one?” A girl with the dark hair asks from across the circle.

The opening is too perfect. “My first kiss went something like this,” he sing lightly, nodding as he sees the recognition in their faces. “Yeah, yeah, that’s the one. A bit romanticized for a first kiss, yeah?” There’s a murmur of agreement around the semi-circle. “Does everyone remember where their first kiss happened? Come on now, let’s hear it.”

“My first kiss went something like this,” he sing lightly, nodding as he sees the recognition in their faces. “Yeah, yeah, that’s the one. A bit romanticized for a first kiss, yeah?” There’s a murmur of agreement around the semi-circle. “Does everyone remember where their first kiss happened? Come on now, let’s hear it.”

“Mine was in a barn,” the girl with the dark hair says again. Louis very nearly does a fist pump in the air. Instead, he politely waits for everyone to say where their kisses were before he excuses himself from the conversation to join a new group.

It gets more competitive as he sees Harry moving from group to group. At one point Louis fakes a sneezing attack to get away from one of the most boring couples he’s ever encountered who - while happy to share the stories of their first kisses - also wanted to share their entire relationship with him. Typically, he would grin and bear it to be nice but not in the face of tonight’s competition.

They each end up in their fifth group at the same time. Louis subtly points at Harry as they approach their final groups, and Harry winks as he sidles up to the edge of his circle.

“And she died of cancer when I was twelve.” It’s only nine words but Louis knows he’s sunk as he realizes he’s just walked up to a group where one of the women is explaining the untimely death of her cats - all eleven she’s ever had. Even with creativity at the tips of his fingers, Louis can’t quite figure out how to change the mood to something more fitting to his mission.

There’s a sudden “Yes!” exclaimed from the corner of the room and Louis turns to it immediately, already knowing by the tone who it is. Louis’s isn’t the only set of eyes to fall on Harry as the entire apartment goes quiet to see what his outburst is about.

Harry clears his throat, “I just remembered the Packers won their playoff game yesterday,” he says. “Go Pack Go.”

There’s a flutter of laughter throughout the room as people turn back to their conversations, pleased with the explanation. Louis shakes his head slowly, eyes never leaving Harry. Harry grins when he finds Louis looking at him and mouths, “I win,” just as Niall announces they should move into the dining room for dinner.

The dining room is actually a makeshift one with a bunch of chairs gathered around a variety of tables rounded up between the neighbors on this floor. All of the food is lined up on the kitchen island and they fill their plates buffet style before sitting down to eat. Louis makes sure he and Harry get spots next to each other even though he pretends to be upset Harry beat him at the
Partway through dinner, Louis gets up to refill their wine glasses only to find Zayn staring at him from the other end of the table, eyes following him silently. Louis hasn’t done anything wrong but the eyes of his best friend falling on him like this, sends a chill over his spine as he pours more red in the glasses. As he goes back to Harry, he meets Zayn’s eyes and narrows his gaze until Zayn breaks, smiling and glancing away. Louis takes a deep breath with the realization they won’t be able to fool Zayn any longer than is truly necessary. He may already be onto them.

When Louis gets back to his seat, Harry glances at him with a quiet, “Thanks,” as he accepts his wine but then his attention is pulled to the person next to him and whatever they’re saying. Harry is so much better at socializing than he is. He’s all easy smiles and effortless charm in a way most people have to work toward. He’s also good at being inclusive, pulling Louis into different conversations casually, changing the subject if someone looks uncomfortable. But even Prince Charming reaches his limit and once the plates are nearly empty Harry seems to deflate. He glances at Louis, “Can we leave yet?”

Louis laughs, his eyes curving with it. “You’re not having fun?”

“I’m bored of pretending to care,” Harry leans in closer to whisper which makes Louis laugh even louder.

“Let’s go get dessert,” Louis says. “If I remember correctly, you get to choose where we go.”

Harry scratches the side of his neck and then nods, “How do we do it?”

Louis knows what he means without asking for context. “I’ll tell Zayn you’re sick and we’re leaving. You just go get our jackets and meet me at the door. And don’t forget my books.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry says, already standing and clearly desperate to get going. Louis waits a quiet moment like he’s not going to follow and then he pushes back his chair and navigates his way to Zayn at the head of the table.

Telling Zayn proves difficult mostly because his eyebrows nearly disappear into his hairline and he stays quiet after Louis leans down to whisper their excuse. “You both have to leave?” He asks, turning slightly in his chair to look at Louis.

“Yes,” Louis says. He doesn’t offer further information.

“Are you connected by the hip and I just can’t see it?”

Louis presses his lips together. “Z, come on.”

Zayn sighs, “What the fuck is going on Louis? You guys have been weird for almost two weeks now. I’m your best friend, yeah? Can’t you loop me in?”

Louis bites his lip, “I promise we’ll tell you what’s going on. Soon. Just…not tonight?”

Zayn watches Louis for a quiet beat and Louis can read the questions in his eyes, the hints at betrayal he feels at being left out of the inner circle. But then he nods, “Yeah, go. If I could leave, I would too.”

Louis quite nearly kisses him but grins instead, offers a quick, “Thanks,” and then scurries toward the front door where Harry is already bundled in his jacket with the books in his arms, Louis’s jacket in his hand.
“Did we get permission?” Harry asks, smiling.

“Kind of.” Louis puts the jacket on and connects the zipper pull at the bottom. “We’re going to have to tell Zayn what’s going on. About what we’re doing.”

“What?” Harry shakes his head, “You literally gave a speech yesterday about it just being you and me.”

Louis nods, “That was before I had to promise Zayn I would tell him if he let us leave tonight.”

No reaction plays across Harry’s face as he studies Louis, clearly trying to detect what happened in his conversation with Zayn.

“H, if something happens between us, if we decide this works,” Louis swallows, “Don’t you think Zayn deserves to know? Of all people?”

Harry swallows and nods almost simultaneous with Louis’s words. “You’re right,” he says. “Tonight, let’s focus our priorities, though. Firstly, importantly, dessert.”

Louis smiles as he follows Harry into the hallway, his chest light with laughter as the door closes behind them.

Harry chooses frozen yogurt because it tends to be his favorite. Louis doesn’t really understand the thrill of it but he does enjoy loading his blackberry yogurt with all of the toppings possible, smirking when Harry jokes about him being the happiest he’s ever seen him. They take their time eating, the books Harry bought for Louis situated under their table.

“This makes up for the fact I didn’t get to try my yogurt dip before we left,” Louis says, pointing at his cup of frozen yogurt with his spoon.

Harry pauses mid bite, “Are you telling me you didn’t taste test before we got there?”

Louis shakes his head, “Nope. Didn’t think of it.”

Harry scoops another bite of his dessert as he laughs. “So you have no way of knowing if it actually tastes any good?”

Louis scrunches his nose. “Could taste like come, I suppose.” He’s pleased by Harry’s reaction as he chokes and hits his chest with a closed fist.

“That’s disgusting.”

Louis tips an invisible hat, “Thank you.” Harry rolls his eyes.

By the time they’re ready to leave, their containers of yogurt have sat empty for nearly half an hour. Louis is unable to pinpoint what they’ve really talked about other than to know his lips hurt from smiling and Harry has matched his smile nearly the entire time.

Louis realizes he has butterflies in his belly as he puts on his jacket. They’re just gentle ones but lingering nonetheless. There’s been something different tonight: knees knocking under the table, laughing too loudly, teasing smirks, suggestive eyebrows and jokes. It’s nothing serious, nothing to write home about but it feels a lot like the beginning of each relationship he’s been in - the easy innocence. It’s like they’re starting to let themselves be more than friends.
“Share a cab?” Harry asks as they start down the sidewalk, away from the side road where no cars seem to be roaming.

“Of course,” Louis says, shoving his hands in the pockets of his coat. “Fuck,” he says once he realizes how empty his hands are. “My books.”

He jogs back to the yogurt shop without further explanation, leaving Harry on the sidewalk. The bag is just where he left it and he grabs it up with a quick smile at the cashier behind the front counter. As he walks back outside, he catches a glimpse of Harry in the glow of the streetlight, looking up at it with his eyes squinted.

He looks like an idiot, but just like in the grocery store, Louis lets himself wonder at the prospect of Harry being his idiot. If this - a night of friends, frozen yogurt, and a shared cab home - was ordinary instead of experimental, casual instead of an innocent start. He sighs and like a wish, the thought flutters into the air.

Finding a cab proves harder than they think but Louis refuses to give up and call an Uber, telling Harry it will prove their worth as true New Yorkers to be able to get a cab in a deserted part of town. Twenty minutes later, when they climb in the backseat of the yellow car, they can’t stop laughing and Louis is sure the driver assumes they’re drunk.

The city races by in the dark, slashes of light thrown through the window at odd angles. There’s a spark of the earlier flirtation as Harry links their pinkies in the middle seat. It’s so simple, smallest fingers touching, but it’s more than they’ve done so far and something about it feels important.

“You ain’t seen nothing yet, Tomlinson.” Harry moves his hand another small inch so their ring and pinky fingers are crossed. They both stare at the movement and laugh when they look up at each other.

“I might swoon,” Louis warns, wiggling his fingers a bit.

“This is how I get all the boys,” Harry says with a flip of his imaginary long hair.

Louis laughs despite himself. Harry cut his hair shortly after they met but he used to flip it all the time before he did. He’d brush it off his shoulder to punctuate his sentences. Louis was always a bit in awe of the way he did it, how he moved his mouth and blinked like he was a showgirl. He blinks quickly as he realizes his mind has gone on its own train of thought.

Harry presses his fingers down on top of Louis’s on the seat. “What are you thinking?” He asks quietly when Louis meets his eyes. Louis licks his bottom lip, unsure if he should actually say. “Don’t lie,” Harry says, catching him with a smirk “You’ll ruin the results of the experiment.”

Louis smiles. He flips his hand under Harry so the front of his fingers press to Harry’s.

“Tell me?” Harry asks without pressing.

It feels a little fragile. Suddenly too serious and Louis puts his hand back in his lap. He pretends to miss the way Harry’s eyes track the movement. “I was just thinking if this were any other date, I would ask you to come back to my place.”

Harry stays quiet but his attention is on Louis as a stoplight casts the entire car in red.

Louis sighs, “I wouldn’t hesitate.”

Harry swallows, “But?”
The light turns green and then the glow passes as the car accelerates and leaves the traffic light behind.


Harry glances down at where his hand is still sitting on the center seat of the cab, palm up just the way Louis left it. “It’s us,” Harry says, not like he understands but only as an echo.

“It means more,” Louis says, spelling it out. “Asking you to come back to my apartment with the intention of something more than just like, watching television, is a big deal. I know I’m the one who said we’re not supposed to overthink this,” He presses his hands to his eyes and then drops them in his lap. “But I can’t get it out of my head - what would happen if … if something happened.” He moves his hands around to try and illustrate it but he’s not sure he’s done it right.

“No, I know,” Harry says. “I know.”

Louis sighs, “I’m sorry. I’m ruining tonight, aren’t I? And it was going so well.”

“No, it’s fine,” Harry says quickly, though his voice doesn’t exactly sound light.

Louis presses his lips together. “Is it bad I told you what I was really thinking?”

“No.” Harry turns in the seat and looks at Louis, shaking his head to go with the word. “We have to be honest, yeah? The second we stop being honest, this stops working.”

Louis rubs at his face again even as he nods in agreement. “I feel like I’ve put a terrible end cap on this night and that’s not at all what I meant.”

Harry smiles, a small quirk of his lips. “You did. But it didn’t ruin the rest of the night. Which, mind you, was a roller coaster all on its own.”

Louis plays the last few hours in a montage and smiles. “It really was.”

“It was bearable though,” Harry says, “More than bearable because you were with me.” Louis smiles into the darkness of the car, the butterflies fluttering their wings again.

The cab slows as they pull in front of Louis’s building. “You just said that so I would write good things in my journal about you,” Louis says, gathering his bag of books and opening the door.

Harry laughs, “I like how you said that like you’re writing a Yelp review.”

Louis smiles as he sets one foot on the curb outside the cab and pauses. “Now there’s an idea. Should we scrap the whole thing and start a dating app instead? Yelp for finding romance?”

Harry shakes his head, trying not to smile while the cab driver clears his throat impatiently. “We could but I’d kind of like to see how this ends first.”

Louis nods as he stands and checks his seat to make sure he hasn’t forgotten anything. He meets Harry’s eyes across the dimly lit car, “So would I.” He shuts the door on that note, taking a step back so the cab can pull away. He holds up his hand in a wave, not sure if Harry even sees him. He turns to go inside and isn’t all that surprised to find himself still smiling.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

"Take Your Time" - Vance Joy

"I let you figure me out
Tear all my fences down
We've been so tired
Asleep on our feet
Chasing things we'll never keep."

MONDAY ~ Day 13

Monday morning comes like a hammer against a wall when Louis’s alarm goes off. It’s all his own fault, though, and he knows it. He’d stayed up until well past midnight with a bottle of wine and Harry’s books, going through the pages and taking notes. It was with good intention until he let his mind wander to the place it had kept going with Harry all evening - what if this turns out to be real, what if they do have feelings for each other.

He started to spiral a bit as he tends to do past midnight with the aid of some good Pinot. He tried to imagine holding Harry’s hand in the subway and the picture wasn’t too hard to conjure - nor were pictures of eating dinner together, sharing a blanket on the couch, stumbling out of a bar drunk.

Though he was trying to make the images intimate, he realized he was pulling up things they’d already done together. In the dull light of one a.m. he rubbed at his forehead and fought the two: were they romantically compatible because they were friends or had they been romantically compatible all along? It was around three he actually fell asleep - any lingering answers pushed away by a mash of misshapen dreams.

Now, he picks up coffee from a street vendor before he gets on the train and tries to drink it as quickly as his tongue and throat will allow. His eyes are bloodshot from the wine and he feels dullness radiating off of him, spurred on by sleeplessness. He grabs another coffee when he gets to the office and hopes that doesn’t backfire as too much caffeine.

At work, he finds himself able to actually focus on some of his art - having done much of his administrative work on Saturday when he was alone. He takes a small break around noon to check emails and stretch his back, his spine crackling pleasantly.

Near the top of his inbox, there’s a message from a spa he recently worked with - a design for one of the walls of their rejuvenation rooms - and he clicks on it first thing, hoping to see progress pictures. He doesn’t find any images but, instead, an invitation from the director to come by to see the completed wall plus a pass for the tranquility baths for him and a friend.

He scrunches his lips trying to figure out how he’s going to swing a full on trip to the spa on a Monday night when his phone lights up with a text from Harry: What are we doing tonight? I’m finishing my last room this morning and then going home to take a nap. Exhausted.
Louis grins as he hits reply on the spa email before he responds to Harry. He’d feel obligated to take a co-worker if he hadn’t maneuvered the whole project solo and if he didn’t know of someone far more deserving of a spa date.

Harry meets him at the AIRE spa in Tribeca with two pairs of swim shorts in hand, waving them around like flags as Louis approaches. Louis had only remembered he would need a swimsuit after he left the office and frantically text Harry to bring him an extra pair.

“I got on the subway, forgot these, went back home, grabbed them and still made it here before you,” Harry says smugly.

“Would you like an award?”

“Yes,” Harry says, his smile widening as Louis meets him on the sidewalk. “I would like to have a free bath at this great spa place nearby.” He nudges his head at the brick building next to them, “I hear they have some fucking great art on the walls, too.”

Louis bites down on his grin, “Lucky you, my wish is your command. Thank you for the shorts, by the way,” he says as they walk up the front steps. “I figured a nude bath would not be the intention of a place like this.”

“Not since the eighties,” Harry says, wiggling his eyebrows.

That had been their conversation earlier when Louis called to invite Harry along. Whether AIRE, a spa famous for ancient baths, was once part of the booming gay scene of the seventies and eighties. A brief internet search had proved inconclusive.

Louis gives his name at the front desk and is immediately introduced to Leonard, the director of the house. He’s able to make Louis blush multiple times in the span of their conversation as he praises the work he’s done for them.

It’s funny to hear it now considering Louis thought it was a bizarre project to take on in the first place - his specialty certainly not interiors or tiles. His team had insisted he try it anyway, infusing the AIRE logo in a square with a mash of other colors and then assisting with the translation onto tiles.

This invitation to the spa for an evening is purely a perk he didn’t expect. He’d just been excited to add the project to his portfolio.

Leonard gives them a tour to start, winding through the different baths and pointing out the benefits of each. Louis has never actually been in a bath house but this one seems remarkable. The ceilings are vaulted like a church and quiet music seems to reach up endlessly to the dark peaks. There are stained glass windows surrounding each bath - most the size of a swimming pool, some smaller. Most have edges lined with candles, the only light provided besides the lamps at the bottom of the pools. There are different temperatures ranging from burning hot to icy cold, salt baths and rock baths, too. There are luxurious massage rooms and cavernous saunas deep in the back.

Harry seems as enthralled as Louis, quietly pointing out different features - like the way the tiling along the bottom of the hot pool looks like fire, and the giant ice cubes floating in the coldest baths. No one seems bothered by their tour - most people floating quietly or in conversation with one or two others. Leonard explains the unique mind and body therapy of water and Louis is about to drop five-hundred dollars on a full spa package by the time they get to the room where
his artwork is.

“T’m sure you recognize this,” Leonard says kindly as they approach the wall. Harry grins when he looks at Louis, his hands twisting the swim shorts he’s still holding.

“It’s so crazy to see it like this,” Louis says, slightly in awe. He works in such flat mediums, to see his work brought to textured life on a wall is a strange experience, if not humbling. “Do you mind if I take a photo?”

“Not at all,” Leonard says, motioning ahead of him. “We closed this room early tonight knowing you would be coming.”

“Thanks,” Louis says quietly, opening the camera and taking a few shots at different angles.

Harry plays the part of a proud soccer mom, taking Louis’s phone to get a photo of him under the wall and then one of Leonard and Louis with wide grins on their faces. “And one of you two,” Leonard says as soon as his photo has been taken. “You must be so proud of him.” Harry gives Leonard the phone with a shy smile, crossing the tiled floor to stand next to Louis. Leonard does some mild directing until they’re lined up correctly, Harry’s arm around Louis’s shoulders and then he proceeds to take a few shots of them together.

After, he leads them to a locker room to change and gives them free reign of the baths. He follows up with another profuse thanks to Louis and then disappears, leaving them alone. They change quickly, tucking their clothes in a locker and stripping down. Louis pulls on the yellow pair of shorts Harry has brought for him and finds them to be ridiculously short, even though his legs are shorter than Harry’s. The pink shorts Harry puts on are no better, cutting his thigh tattoo in half.

“You can pull on the edge as much as you want,” Harry laughs as Louis does just that. “It’s not going to make them longer.”

“Why are they so short?” Louis twists to look at his ass in the mirror. “Did they shrink?”

Harry laughs, “No these are the ones I always have. I wear them every summer. How have you never noticed?”

“Honestly, I’m not sure,” Louis says. “Maybe I was always distracted by your legs but these are like, indecent.” He laughs as Harry wiggles his hips, his pink shorts hugging him perfectly. “Indecent,” he repeats sternly, leading the way back out of the locker room.

“Says the guy with an ass that won’t quit,” Harry intones quietly.

Louis glares at him over his shoulder. They’ve had plenty of ass related conversations in their friendship - Louis having the roundest, Harry having a perfect handful, Niall having pure muscle, and Zayn having a nearly nonexistent one. It’s not a conversation Louis can imagine having in many friend groups but for theirs, it’s the status quo.

“Where should we go?” Louis asks, grabbing two towels from the rack and handing one to Harry. Harry puts the towel around his neck and somehow that movement draws Louis’s attention to his stomach where there are actual ab muscles. Softly defined, but more than he can say for himself. He glances up again before he gets caught staring though Harry is already smirking at him knowingly.

“Like what you see?” He asks lasciviously, shaking his hips again. Louis tries not to laugh as he rolls his eyes. This is the thing he was struggling with last night while he should have been sleeping - how does he go from noticing Harry’s abs to deciding he wants to touch them, where
does the friend line blur, how do they make it blur?

“I feel like I have a lot of tension,” he says, changing the subject. “So let’s do that hot one? Not the hottest, I know you have sensitive skin.”

Harry smiles, “I’ll be red for days.”

“Exactly,” Louis says. “Now, do you remember what direction that bath was? This place is a maze.”

They make their way back to the correct room eventually though they end up weaving through the other baths like lost puppies for a bit too long. The warm bath is mostly empty save for an older man at the other end reading a book and lounging; Louis would venture to guess this whole thing is just a glorified hot tub.

Harry honest to god giggles as he gets in the water, saying it’s too hot and then squeezing his eyes shut as he continues down the steps. Louis keeps it together a bit more though he lets out a quiet, “Fuck,” as the water climbs up to his thighs before he sits along the submerged bench on the edge of the pool.

Upon his initial tensing up of getting in the water, he finds it relaxes him almost immediately; the steam filling his lungs and making it easier to breath the way Leonard had so thoroughly explained during their tour. The music is gentle and the candles throw shadows on the wall, the vaulted ceilings making everything feel like infinity.

“This is so sick,” Harry says, almost to himself. Louis hums in quiet agreement, tipping his head to rest on the lip of the bath, his eyes closing. He hears Harry’s fingers running gently through the water, his own quiet breathing in the silence.

“Do you think people fall asleep in here?” Louis asks after a few moments, opening his eyes and blinking before it happens to him.

Harry has his head lolled on his shoulder but blinks and sits up quickly with a small smile. “I think I was about to,” he says.

“Wouldn’t that be dangerous? Just drowning in a bath house by yourself.”

“Maybe they have lifeguards or something,” Harry muses, glancing around like he hopes to spot one.

“But that would take away from the therapy. Some guy in a white muscle tank with one of those big red floating things and a whistle marching around.”

Harry runs his hands over the surface of the water and laughs lightly. “Do you imagine all lifeguards the exact same way?”

Louis smiles, “Kind of. One of my sisters had a Ken doll when we were kids and he only had one outfit - a lifeguard.” He sighs wistfully, “He was my favorite so, yeah, I would argue it ruined my perception for all other lifeguard outfits.”

Harry laughs. “We didn’t have a Ken in my house. But, we did have a Barbie whose hair changed colors in warm and cool water. She wasn’t supposed to be mine but I carried her everywhere so she became mine.” He bites his lip and smiles over some unspoken memory. “I actually used to draw tattoos on her with markers. Butterflies and flowers and shit.”

Louis clicks his tongue, “Only to grow up to be a man with tattoos of a butterfly and a flower?”
Harry lifts his arm out of the water as if to check for that exact tattoo. “I guess I did.” He laughs and slips further in the water. “Me and Mermaid Barbie. Twins for life.”

Louis raises his eyebrows, “The resemblance is uncanny.”

“Do you remember when we got tattoos together?” Harry asks after the quiet lapses again. “That night in Brooklyn?”

“Remember?” Louis laughs, “How could I forget? We went for a drink and then ended up Googling tattoo parlors before we’d even finished the first beer.”

“That’s true.” Harry smiles, “You’d just broke up with that girl with the nose ring.”

“Rosalee, yes,” Louis says, nodding. “She hated how I worked so much. And Kevin had just dumped you.”

“Frustrated by my inability to say I loved him,” Harry recounts. “After two weeks.”

“That’s right.” Louis laughs too loudly and clasps a hand over his mouth before it can start to echo.

“If I remember right, I thought if we got tattoos we’d feel better.”

Louis presses his fingers to the paper airplane on his arm absently. “It worked, didn’t it?”

“Yes,” Harry says. “I got to learn how fucking awful it is to get a tattoo on my hand.” Louis remembers thinking how Harry’s cross was eighteen thousand times more meaningful than his fucking paper airplane, as if it were a competition. “And the tattoo artist thought we were together.”

Louis pulls his eyebrows together and then laughs as he thinks of it, “Because of the dagger and the rose, right?”

“A common partner tattoo,” Harry quotes, his smile widening. “Remember we told him we’d both gotten ours in college before we knew each other? He thought we were lying.”

“He also said he thought we were soulmates,” Louis says, completing the story with a laugh.

“If this all works out, that’ll be a story for the grandkids,” Harry says grinning before it abruptly drops from his face. “Oh my god, pretend I didn’t say that.”

Just like last night when Louis mentioned them moving in together, he gives Harry a pass. “I haven’t heard a thing.” Silence lapses again but it’s not clunky or awkward. It settles like a dragonfly on a lily pad, calm and comforting as they continue to soak.

Once they’re satisfactorily relaxed they venture to the sauna to finish themselves off, finding a private room and pulling the door shut. It’s a bit of a do-it-yourself experience, pouring the water in the steaming hot basin and letting it infiltrate the room in sweet smelling steam.

They sit across from each other, Harry with one knee pulled to his chest, Louis’s legs and feet resting on the bench sideways. Harry sighs and closes his eyes, his head resting back on the wall and exposing the front of his neck. Louis uses the moment to stare uninterrupted, something he’s letting himself get used to. Prior to this, staring so openly at his best friend was an unspoken no, something he just knew not to do. Now, he supposes it’s alright.

All of the humidity has made some errant curls in Harry’s hair twist, his face pleasantly flushed,
skin on his chest shiny. He’s a bit of a vision and Louis wars with telling him before biting his
tongue.

Harry opens his eyes slowly and the way his lips twitch, Louis feels like he knows he’s been
ogled for the past couple of minutes. Louis runs his sweaty hands along the tops of his thighs,
though he’s unsurprised to find them sweaty as well. He adjusts his hips, feeling a bit sticky and
warm in ways he never likes even when he’s just finished a workout. Harry looks perfectly
content, California blood rolling thick in his veins.

“I’ve been thinking,” Louis says, apropos of nothing.

“Oh no,” Harry says, even as he fights a smile.

Louis flips him off. “I’ve been thinking that it may be impossible for us to be involved
romantically.” It’s the culmination of his thoughts over the last twelve-plus hours and he figures he
may well get it out in the open like this.

Harry barely flinches or moves at all. “And why’s that?”

“We’re just - we’re friends,” Louis says like it’s the whole thing right there.

“And shouldn’t that be what you look for first in a romantic relationship?”

Louis sighs, fully aware he’s explaining himself poorly. “We’ve gone to dinner probably hundreds
of times just you and me, right? What makes going to dinner now any different? Why does that
suddenly become a date when every other time it was just friends hanging out?”

“We’ve already had this conversation. It’s a date because we say it’s a date,” Harry says easily.

“What makes it a date, though? Does us kissing make it more of a date than just going home at the
end? Is the only thing we’re missing from this whole equation a physical side of things? Because,
honestly, I don’t know how we’re supposed to kiss when we never have.”

Harry laughs and shakes his head, his face staying light even as Louis starts to spiral into his two
a.m. thoughts again. “Calling something a date doesn’t change everything all at once,” Harry says.
“You decide if it feels like something more than usual. That’s where the whole thing with having
feelings comes in. Romantic feelings verses friendly feelings.”

Louis sighs, not exactly subdued by Harry’s answer.

“I’m telling you the way I see the difference, you don’t have to agree,” he says smiling like he
can’t help it. “As for kissing, everytime you kiss someone for the first time, it’s just that: the first
time. You’ve never done it before. There’s something that makes you kiss someone, something
besides obligation. Just because you never have doesn’t mean you never will.”

“And us?”

“I don’t know, Lou,” Harry says, endlessly patient with Louis’s questions. “It’ll either be there or
it won’t.”

“Have you wanted to kiss me?” Louis asks, meeting Harry’s eyes. “Since we started.”

“Yes,” Harry says. He blinks and looks away but doesn’t ask Louis the same question. Probably a
good thing since Louis’s mind has just taken off on a horse race of when Harry wanted to kiss him
and why he didn’t.
Louis squeezes his eyes shut, “Can you tell I’m freaking out?”

“Yes,” Harry says, laughing lightly, “I can.”

“I can’t make my brain shut up.”

Harry smiles again, his tongue smoothing over his bottom lip quickly. “I know what you’re doing, you know.”

Louis raises his eyebrows, “What’s that?” Maybe Harry has the answer he’s been looking for.

“You’re putting up walls to save yourself from any emotional turmoil. You’re trying to protect yourself.”

“I’m sorry, Julia,” Louis drawls, “I didn’t realize we were in therapy.”

Harry sighs, “Shut up. You just don’t want to admit you have a crush on me, so you’ll do everything in your power to convince yourself this won’t work.”

“Excuse me?” Louis’s eyebrows shoot up again quickly.

“You have a crush on me, Lou.”

Louis laughs, “Stop it.”

“You’re blushing,” Harry says, pointing across the room.

“We’re in a steam room,” Louis huffs back indignantly, laughter coloring his words.

They hold each other’s gazes for a moment before Harry gets up to put more water in the basin to continue their sauna. Louis watches his wide shoulders and thin waist, the strong muscles running up the sides of his back and then squeezes his eyes shut.

Fuck, he thinks. Maybe he really is refusing to look the truth in his face. Perhaps it’s been four years in the making and he’s just now starting to acknowledge it, perhaps it’s only been brewing for thirteen days. When he opens his eyes again, he sees the truth looking at him with wide eyes as steam fills the room: He’s definitely got more than a crush on Harry Styles.

* * *

**TUESDAY ~ Day 14**

“I can’t believe I haven’t been here,” Louis says as a greeting when he finds Harry in the Grey Dog Cafe just before eight. “Not that I’m in Chelsea often.”

Harry smiles as Louis takes a seat opposite him, “I was just going to say that. When do you ever come to Chelsea?”

Louis smirks, and pulls the latte Harry ordered for him a bit closer. It’s a blue mug on a multi-colored saucer with a heart done in the top that almost makes Louis feel guilty for taking a sip.

“How are you?” Harry asks, fingers pressing around his own cup of coffee.

“Alright,” Louis says. “Too early in the day to be overly stressed which is good. You okay?”

Harry smiles, “Yes. Surprisingly more relaxed after last night.”
“Seriously. I didn’t realize a bath could do that much.”

“And good company,” Harry adds with a campy wink.

“What are we doing on Thursday?” Louis asks, crossing his legs and resting his ankle over his knee. His trousers pull up to reveal his orange and blue socks. Harry moves his own leg to show his light pink socks where they’re exposed at his ankle above his black oxford shoe.

“What’s Thursday?” Harry asks, getting back on track.

“Someone we know is turning twenty-six.”

Harry scrunches his nose, “I was hoping you wouldn’t remember.”

Louis presses his lips together. “My iCal works wonders. Honestly though, what do you want to do? Rent out another club like your twenty-fourth?”

“We only did that because I was having a joint party with you and Zayn.”

“Only way we could afford it,” Louis reasons, smiling. There had also been a herd of strippers brought in for the occasion and enough Jello shots to leave them all throwing up on the sidewalk with Niall watching over them like a guardian angel. “What do you want this year? Another club? I’m sure we can get comped somewhere.”

“Can we just get dinner and go out for drinks?” Harry asks as he lifts his mug. “The four of us.”

Louis sighs, though this is what he expected all along. They’ve been out of the club scene for at least a year but since Harry is the youngest, Louis thought he’d offer one last chance. “I guess so, if that’s how you want to ease into your late twenties.”

“It is,” Harry says, smiling.

“Fine.” Louis says like it’s a hardship. He glances out the window as a street vendor sets up their flower display. “You know, this has always been my dream neighborhood for when I’m a millionaire.”

Harry laughs, “Fingers crossed for that one, babe.”

“What, like you’re above it?”

“No at all,” Harry says. “It reminds me a lot of the New York you see in movies - which is probably what keeps the pricetag high.” He gazes out the window for a moment and Louis lets the quiet rest. When Harry looks back, he’s smiling. “Do you remember when we first met and I asked you to coffee?”

“Vaguely.” In the beginning, they asked each other to meet up more often than a bunch of twelve year olds harboring crushes - all three so ecstatic to have actually made friends in a new city.

“Well, I did.” Harry says. “And you said you would go with me and then an hour later you asked if I’d invited Zayn.”

Louis has no recollection of it and he feels kind of betrayed by his mind for burying the memory, for not cataloging it as something he would need to remember. “I was very excited about us being the three musketeers.”

“Right,” Harry says slowly. He swallows and glances up, “I told you I had asked him already but
I actually hadn’t. So I sent him a text super fast and prayed you wouldn’t find out. I had planned to meet up with you at this cafe actually, but when Zayn joined I changed the location and we met at the bagel place by his old place.”

“I remember the bagel place,” Louis supplies, not fully helpful. “I was obsessed with it the whole year he lived over there.”

“Right.” Harry nods and Louis feels like he missed the point. “Nevermind.”

“What?” Louis moves his head until he can catch Harry’s wandering eye. “What were you going to say?”

“Nothing,” Harry says, shrugging his shoulder. “I was just thinking about that whole thing when I was on my run this morning.”

“What about it?” Louis implores, leaning forward slightly. “What am I missing?”

“Actually, I don’t think I was,” Harry shakes his head, “I know I was.”

It kind of feels like finding out your favorite shirt is green not purple and Louis thinks the confusion shows on his face as his eyebrows pull together and his lips turn down. “There’s no way you were asking me out.”

“I was,” Harry says. “I know I was because after the night when we met, you were all I could think about. I was so happy to have met Zayn but I really liked you. So, I asked you to coffee. Alone.”

Louis goes to speak but runs out of words, his lips pressing together. “And I invited Zayn?”

Harry smiles, “You invited Zayn. I let it go, I didn’t think you were interested.”

“Right.” Louis studies his half gone latte, the foam on the edges drying unevenly.

“Sorry,” Harry says, “Is this weird for you?”

“No, not at all,” Louis says, putting on a smile even though his insides are pulsing with confusion. “I’m flattered.” He knows he was excited by both Harry and Zayn when they met, he couldn’t wait to hang out with them. Looking back now, he can’t remember if he ever favored one over the other or if it was always a package deal in his eyes.

“I’m thankful we didn’t do it,” Harry says. “It could have ruined everything between us before we started.”

“So you had a crush on me?” Louis says, wiggling his eyebrows in an attempt to lighten the mood.

“I did,” Harry says. He rubs at his eye, “But, like I said, I got over it.”

“Why?” Louis tilts his head, interested to hear this piece of hidden past he didn’t even know existed. “Did I do something that made you change your mind?”
Harry shakes his head, “No. I still wasn’t sure if I really liked you as just a friend or if I was confusing my feelings. And then it didn’t matter.”

“Why’s that?”

“You met Ethan,” Harry says with a small smile. “And I didn’t really think about it anymore.”

“Ah, and look how well that turned out for me,” Louis says with a smile. “Romance and emotional damage.”

“If only you knew before getting in relationships all the ways you could get hurt,” Harry says brightly. “That would save some trouble.”

“The lessons are in the living though,” Louis says like it’s obvious. “You don’t know real pain unless you feel it yourself.”

Harry laughs, “Yeah, yeah, I know. Still sucks sometimes.”

“Understatement.” Louis checks his watch the same time Harry does and they both smile at the coincidence.

“I’m sorry I invited Zayn to our first date,” Louis says as they stand to leave. “Even though I didn’t know that’s what it was.”

Harry laughs as he puts his jacket on. “I can’t even say that I would have had the balls to make a move if you said yes,” he says. “We could have still ended up here anyway.”

“Fine,” Louis says. “Don’t play the part of the scorned lover in our tragic play.”

Harry waits for Louis to look at him and pointedly rolls his eyes. They split in front of the cafe with quick goodbyes and then Louis tries to hail a cab as Harry disappears down a corner to get on the subway. Louis can’t help himself from thinking about it - if something would be different had they gone to coffee together at the very beginning. Would he have even realized there was something going on - would he have even wanted it? His phone rings with a call from his sister and effectively ends the train of thought before it can start.

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**WEDNESDAY ~ Day 15**

“Louis, is that okay? I’m so sorry it’s late notice.”

It’s nearly ten in the morning on day fifteen when Louis realizes he’s not going to be able to see Harry. He’s in the middle of responding to an email about an evening lecture in Tribeca while on the phone with a designer who needs sketch-ups for her new label before five. Even if he could be Superman for a day, there’s no way for him to see Harry and get from Midtown to Tribeca in under an hour at rush hour.

“Louis, are you there?”

Lous has the top of his nose pinched between his fingers, his eyes blurring the email response he’s working on as Daphne, the fashion designer, echos in his year. “No, no, that’s fine,” he says, sitting up straight and keeping his voice even. “I’ll send you files by two and that’ll give us three hours to rework, yeah?” She trails off with a line of gratitude and compliments Louis barely hears as he says goodbye and finishes his email confirming his attendance for this evening’s lecture.
“Fuck,” he whispers as soon as he presses send on the e-mail. One of the girls on his design team pauses outside his door with raised eyebrows and he waves her off with complicated hand motions like he’s working on a difficult design. She smiles like she understands and keeps walking.

Reasonably, Louis knows Harry won’t be mad at him for admitting they can’t see each other. They’ve already filled two full weeks of seeing each other every day but something itches at admitting they can’t do it. Louis pushes a hand back through his hair and tries not to feel like an idiot. Somehow, Harry has managed to balance installing an entire exhibit with seeing Louis daily but Louis has lacked the foresight to realize his day is packed full. Now, he’s slated with the responsibility of telling Harry he can’t keep up their schedule because he’s terrible at time management.

“You didn’t actually think we’d see each other all forty days, did you?” Harry says when Louis calls to explain.

“Of course I did,” Louis says, a bit indignant, over Harry’s laughter. “We agreed we would.”

“But that’s nearly impossible,” Harry says right away, a smile coloring his words through the phone. “You had to have realized it was. I’m impressed at our fourteen day record, honestly.”

Louis sighs as he lets his arms collapse on his desk, his forehead landing on his forearm. “No, I didn’t realize. I felt like a dick for the last ten minutes because of it.”

Harry laughs, gleeful in the face of Louis’s agony. “Did you think I would end the whole thing because of one day?”

“No,” Louis says honestly. “I thought you’d be disappointed.”

“Of course not,” Harry says, more seriously now. “Of course not, Lou. I understand how busy you are.”

“You mean you don’t want someone waiting for you to get home each night and knocking down your door each morning?”

“No, that would scare me,” Harry says. “Listen, I do have to go because there’s a photoshoot from hell inside Hearst Tower - which I can’t wait to tell you about - and it’s starting to impede on my floor.”

“I can’t wait to hear about it,” Louis says, imagining lots of glitter, feathers and wind machines the way he imagine all photoshoots go.

“I have one embarrassing thing to say before I go,” Harry says.

“By all means,” Louis says, smirking as he re-opens the label series he’s been working on all morning.

“Even if I can’t see you today, I really like hearing your voice.”

Louis is struck quiet at Harry’s words, at the sincerity tucked between each vowel.

Harry laughs, very self aware in tone. “I know that’s odd. I guess I’ve just gotten used to seeing you now and the thought of not seeing you is weird.” He takes a deep breath, “But your voice has made me happy for today. If I can’t see you.” Him clearing his throat is the punctuation to the moment.
Before he can start backtracking - because Louis is sure that’s where he’s headed next - Louis chimes in. “Me too,” he says truthfully and then to lighten it: “I think I might be becoming dependent on our daily interaction. Not to alarm you.”

“Not alarmed,” Harry says, though his voice is a little higher.

Louis can feel his heartbeat pulsing an odd rhythm. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” he says before they can linger over the sentimentalities, “Big birthday and all.”

“Yep,” Harry says. “Meet you at Niall’s?”

“And Zayn’s,” Louis intones, “But mostly Niall’s.” He can practically see Harry rolling his eyes, “I’d say bring your birthday suit but that’s a different kind of night.”

Harry’s laughter is loud and there’s sudden crowd noise fluctuating around him. “See you tomorrow, Lou.”

After Louis hangs up he spends near thirty seconds smiling at the floor before he remembers the busy day in front of him and the deadlines hanging over his head. Thoughts of Harry fade to a low hum as he focuses back on his computer.

* * *

THURSDAY ~ Day 16

“Who died?”

Louis looks up from the mixing bowl as Zayn walks in the door, his tie loose and jacket unzipped. “What are you talking about?”

Niall laughs from the living room where he’s laying on the couch with a magazine. “Babe, why is Louis baking a cake in our kitchen?” Zayn calls slipping his jacket from his shoulders and hanging it on the rack. “Clearly, something terrible must have happened.”

Louis rolls his eyes as he pours his batter into the pan and makes it lay evenly. He’s already running late and he doesn’t have time to argue with Zayn about it.

“I don’t know, really,” Niall says, appearing in the kitchen beside Zayn. “He showed up with cake mix and asked if we had eggs.”

“Because I didn’t have eggs,” Louis says, slipping the pan in the preheated oven with a dull thud against the metal rack. When he looks up, it’s to find Zayn with his arms crossed and Niall looking between the two of them with an amused smile. “It’s Harry’s birthday,” he says feeling like Zayn is waiting for an explanation. “I finished work early and wanted to bake him a cake.”

“My birthday was less than a month ago,” Zayn says, unwavering, “Where’s my cake?”

Louis blinks, “You can have a piece of Harry’s cake. Happy Birthday.”

Zayn’s eyebrows raise and Niall’s smile widens, clearly enjoying the exchange. “Care to explain why you’re making Harry a cake? And, while you’re at it, why you both left early on Sunday?”

Louis shakes his head, lips pressed tight together. “Nope. Not right now.” Zayn’s eyes narrow and Louis laughs. “Calm down and go get ready for tonight. It’s going to be fun.”

Zayn sighs and shakes his head but doesn’t push any further. He turns to Niall with a quiet, “Hi,”
and they share a soft kiss right there in the kitchen that makes Louis’s heart twist just slightly. Sometimes the domesticity of their relationship leaves him wanting, other times it makes him want to gag - this is a toss up between the two. He clears his throat and pushes through the middle of them like a bull in the china shop.

“I’m going to change while my cake bakes,” he calls loudly over his shoulder and they both flip him off simultaneously.

* 

True to his usual baking skills, Louis frosts the cake too early - and while it’s still warm. Zayn watches with amused concern when the frosting starts to slip toward the edges, the entire thing looking a bit hungover. “I don’t think he’s going to be impressed,” Zayn says mildly, taking a beer from the fridge and popping off the top.

Louis rolls his eyes, “I’m not trying to impress him, I just want it to be edible.” He knows he already got Harry a gift he’ll love but he wanted to get something else to go with it. A sloppy cake wasn’t exactly what he envisioned.

“Your fancy outfit might impress him,” Niall adds, sitting down at the kitchen island and watching Louis finish the cake. It’s essentially a hopeless mission at this point but Louis adds a barrage of sprinkles to hopefully cover some of the worst spots.

“What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?” Louis asks without looking up. The trousers hit the center of his ankles, his black shoes are the same ones he always wears - this time without socks - and the herringbone polo in black was a gift from his mother for Christmas. None of it is especially fancy.

“Nothing,” Zayn says with a glance at Niall. “You’re just a bit more high fashion than usual.”

Louis laughs, “If you’re saying my bare ankles are high fashion, we’ve got a problem.” He looks up at Zayn, “Especially considering you work for a magazine that covers actual high fashion.”

“Zayn got me a mesh Gucci shirt from a shoot,” Niall says, capturing Louis and Zayn’s attention again. “If we’re going high fashion, should I wear that?”

“Absolutely not,” Louis says, while Zayn laughs like he wouldn’t mind.

Their conversation is interrupted by the bell from the lobby announcing Harry’s arrival. Louis tries to throw a few more sprinkles on the cake before Niall starts putting in the candles and interrupts him while Zayn buzzes Harry into the building.

They give it a good two minutes for Harry to get in the elevator before they light the candles and set the cake on the counter, waiting for Harry to appear in the doorway. There’s a brief argument over whether they should turn the lights off before deciding against it - Zayn pointing out Harry is more likely to eat shit if he can’t see where he’s going.

Louis gets the normal fluttering buzz of butterflies before a big surprise and then Harry is pushing the front door open, immediate confusion on his face moving to a grin as they sing a terrible rendition of “Happy Birthday”. Louis is the one to carefully lift the cake on the last verse and bring it over to him, both of them sharing a small smile as he rocks it back and forth slightly.

“Make a wish,” he says quietly as Niall and Zayn applaud their singing skills.

Harry’s dimple starts to curve as he holds Louis’s gaze and then he lets his eyes shut as he blows out the candles, the door still ajar behind him. “Happy Birthday,” Louis says once the candles are
fully out and Harry stands to his full height again.

“Lou made you a cake,” Zayn says, swooping in with an eye roll to give Harry a hug and kiss his cheek.

“We all did,” Louis says as he backtracks to the counter to set it down.

“Nope, that was all you,” Niall says, taking Zayn’s place to hug Harry tight.

Louis chooses not to respond when Harry looks at him over Niall’s shoulder. He tries not to smile at Harry’s inquisitive look but he doesn’t do it well. He covers his mouth with his hand as he shrugs.

“Are we eating cake before dinner?” Harry asks once Niall lets him go. “This is the birthday dream.”

“Might as well,” Zayn says, grabbing plates from the cupboard while Niall gets out a knife and forks. “As long as we’re aware Louis’s cooking skills may kill us.”

“I doubt it,” Harry says even as he laughs, winking at Louis.

Louis takes the moment to take a longer look at Harry - his pinstriped coat and black trousers with black shirt. He looks a little witchy but Louis likes it.

They eat their cake while standing around in the kitchen and Louis is rather pleased to find it tastes better than it looks. They harass Harry about his day and he obliges them with the details - facetiming his mom and sister, lunch with a few co-workers, the entire installation team singing “Happy Birthday” and bringing in cupcakes - as they finish eating and then put the rest of the cake in the fridge before they get ready to leave.

“Let’s just walk to Panno’s,” Zayn says as they go out in the hallway. “It’s close enough.”

“Fine with me,” Harry says, shoving his hands in his pockets. “I’ve been dreaming of their lamb ragu all day, if anyone cares to know.”

Zayn laughs, “I told Niall this morning I could already taste the garlic bread.”

“Well thank god someone had the foresight to make reservations last month,” Louis says with a grin as they all roll their eyes.

He’d called shortly after the New Year, remembering how they couldn’t get in on Harry’s birthday the year before and how obsessed Harry is with the place. At the time, he’d done it simply as a friend before they’d even suggested dating - but now with the experiment well on its way, it feels a bit sweeter.

They naturally split as they walk down the sidewalk, Niall and Zayn slightly in front, hands clasped low between them. The sky is a pretty blue and not yet dark, a whisper of spring yet to begin.

“Anything else happen today?” Louis asks Harry. “Any more birthday surprises?”

“I got an odd envelope from my doorman when I came home from work just now,” Harry says, keeping his voice low but not enough for Niall or Zayn to get suspicious.

“Did you?” Louis asks, his lips already twitching. “What was in it?”
“Two tickets to the Fleetwood Mac concert on Saturday.”

Louis gasps lightly, “No.”

Harry bites his lip as he looks over at him, “I can’t believe you did that.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Louis says. “Someone else in the agency did the logo for the benefit so we got comped some tickets.”

Harry raises his eyebrows, “Someone else did the logo? So how did you manage to get a pair?”

Louis clears his throat and glances away. “A bit of bribing, three instances of pulling seniority and one agreement to babysit someone’s children at a not yet determined date.”

Harry laughs, the smile taking over his face and his eyes going sparkly. “I thought as much.”

“You know the catch is you have to take me with you, right?”

Harry rolls his eyes, “Of course it is. That’s not a catch though, you know.”

“That’s good.”

Harry smiles. “I opened the envelope in the elevator and I legitimately screeched. Thank god I was alone.”

Louis tries to picture it while he muffles his laughter into his coat sleeve. “Do you think they’ll let me have the security footage?”

“No,” Harry says, slapping Louis’s arm lightly.

His hand trips down to meet Louis’s, their fingers twisting together briefly before they let go like a choreographed dance. Louis glances over to find Harry smiling at the ground and he can’t help but notice the way his stomach blooms at the sight - like Harry being happy is now his personal accomplishment.

* *

They get seated at a secluded table in the back of Panno’s with a small placard reading: Reserved for Mr. Tomlinson and Associates. Harry takes a picture of it while Zayn grills Louis about what exactly he said to get the reservation.

“I didn’t say anything,” Louis says as they take their seats. “You’re all looking at me like I’m lying but I promise you I’m not.”

“Maybe it’s your voice,” Harry says, thumbing through the wine list. “It just sounds like you’d call your friends associates.”

Niall shakes his head, “No, that’s more H’s voice. The first time Zayn introduced me to you I even said you sounded intimidating.”

“What? My voice?” Harry looks up in surprise as they all laugh. “What does that mean?”

“He did say that,” Zayn says, nodding. “I had to tell him you’re like, my most nice friend. Lou on the other hand.” He rolls his eyes and Louis lands a kick to his shin under the table.

“What is it about my voice?” Harry asks again, looking around.
“It’s just low,” Niall says, “And you talk kind of slow and methodical. I don’t know, really. It’s a good voice.”

Harry looks utterly perplexed as he glances to Louis. “Are you intimidated by my voice?”

Louis raises his eyebrows to say, As if. “I thought it was sexy when I first heard it,” he says. He smiles when Harry looks surprised, “I’m being honest.”

“It is sexy,” Zayn agrees. “It’s definitely that low, methodical thing. You can’t put a word to describe it.”

“Besides sexy?” Harry asks as a waiter approaches their table. “You’ve definitely given me a complex now.”

“Good evening,” the waiter says at the very next breath of conversation. “What can I get for you to drink?”

Louis smiles and nods his head toward Harry, “Birthday boy should choose.”

Harry shoots him a look that Louis ignores. They all know exactly which wine they’re going to order but there’s a certain joy in watching Harry try to alter his voice while he orders for them. It leaves them all in hysterics when the waiter turns away.

Dinner is largely uneventful from there - Harry gets his lamb ragu and Zayn gets his garlic bread - and they all finish three bottles of wine in the course of the ninety minute meal, their lips and teeth going on purple by the end of it.

It’s interesting, Louis thinks, how he and Harry have developed a certain closeness over the past couple of weeks - talking to a therapist and revealing their vulnerabilities. Alcohol added to the heightened level of their relationship, manifests itself in an interesting way. Namely, Louis freely taking a bite of Harry’s food without asking, Harry obviously staring at him when he speaks, their chairs moving closer as they pull the conversation from the group to just the two of them. It’s not that notably different than any other night - except, of course, until Zayn notices.

“I think we all need to talk,” Zayn says when they’re well into the fourth bottle of red, their plates cleared. His voice is light and a bit tipsy but Louis tenses anyway, looking away from the blush of Harry’s cheeks.

Niall glances at Zayn and then Louis. “About what?”

“Is something wrong?” Harry asks, leaning forward.

“I think I know where this is going,” Louis says, leaning back in his chair.

“Where?” Harry asks him directly, curious.

Louis can’t even respond before Zayn picks up his wine glass and leans back in his chair with a melodramatic sigh that has Louis rolling his eyes.

“I know what you’re doing,” Zayn says with a shrug. “I know you’re dating.”

All at once, Harry chokes, Niall snorts wine up his nose, and Louis crosses his legs with yet another eyeroll. “What makes you say that?” Louis asks, glancing at Harry to make sure he’s caught his breath.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Niall echoes, looking mostly at Zayn instead of accusing Louis or
Harry stays quiet, a nervous curve to his mouth.

“Last month you said Harry asked you out while we were at brunch,” Zayn says like he’s laying out the facts of a case. “You both tried to pretend like we hadn’t heard what you were saying but obviously Mr. Loudmouth,” he tilts his head at Louis, “is the one who brought it up.”

“Louis said no,” Harry says, scratching his jaw. “He told me no.” Louis nearly laughs at Harry’s continued strategy of denial. At least Louis knows when to fold his cards.

“Sure,” Zayn allows, “But at some point he must have said yes.”

“How do you know that?” Niall asks before Louis can.

“I have eyes,” Zayn says with a shrug. “The brunch thing was weird, but after that you both couldn’t hang out on the same days or at the same times, the night we met at Ace you were both being weird, you bailed on a dinner party together.” He shrugs, “Then, tonight, I came home to Louis Tomlinson baking a cake in my kitchen like fucking Betty Crocker.”

Niall actually gasps, Harry goes painfully still and Louis can’t bite his tongue as he starts to giggle and then fully laugh, his wine sloshing in the glass. Three pairs of eyes land on him as he tries to stop but there’s something about the complete hilarity of the way Zayn has laid out his case that isn’t helping. “You must be really, really good at Clue,” Louis settles on finally, laughter still bubbling under his lips. Zayn’s lips twitch as he lifts his wine glass in cheers before taking a sip.

“Wait a second, you’re actually dating, then?” Niall looks between them with narrowed eyes.

Louis soberes immediately at the moment of truth staring him down. Harry glances at him and they hold eyes, silently trying to figure out what to do next. Louis runs his tongue over his teeth and then faces their friends. “We’re giving it a shot,” he says. “Just for forty days.”

“For forty days?” Zayn is immediately dubious, his concern automatic.

“Forty days,” Louis confirms. There’s no way around the truth now, even half drunk at Harry’s birthday dinner.

“And then what happens?” Zayn’s voice is calm but his gaze is far more intense.

“We see what happens,” Harry says, possibly missing the minute hitch of Zayn’s eyebrows at his words.

“This is fucking fantastic,” Niall interrupts as Louis and Zayn have a silent staring contest. “Congratulations.”

“We’re just trying it,” Harry says quietly, though Louis hears his smile.

“Babe, we should do double dates,” Niall says to Zayn which is the only thing that pulls his laser burning eyes from Louis’s. Zayn turns his smile to Niall though the edges are tight.

For his part, Louis nearly jumps out of his skin when he feels a hand on his knee before he realizes it’s Harry. The reaction is enough for Harry to pull back with a quick, “Sorry,” as his cheeks turn pink.

“Just surprised me,” Louis says, immediately feeling guilty. He takes a deep breath and whispers to ask, “Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” Harry says, “Would be better if two of my best friends, one of whom is my quasi-partner,
wouldn’t try to kill each other on my birthday.”

Louis laughs and takes a sip of wine. “Quasi-partner. Sorry. I’ll contain it.” He winks at Harry and then turns back to the table to announce the bar is calling their name so they should wrap it up. He can immediately sense Harry’s relief next to him.

Zayn must choose to drop the subject for Harry’s sake as well, taking a full mouthful of wine and then swallowing. “Sure. Let’s get H wasted,” he says with a wink, nodding at the waiter for the check.

“Uh, H has to go to work tomorrow,” Harry says though the sentiment falls on deaf ears. Deaf beside Louis who gives him a reassuring look, something like a promise he’ll make it to work tomorrow.

There’s the usual scuffle over who pays the bill - the scuffle focused mainly on Harry insisting it should be divided in four and the other three ignoring him completely. Then they’re outside calling an Uber and piling inside to head to Waltz, purple teeth and all.

Harry ends up in the middle with Zayn on one side and Louis on the other, Niall sprawled out along the jump seat in the back. Louis doesn’t really think about it when he takes Harry’s hand in his and sets it in his lap, twisting their fingers together. They’ve already faced down telling Niall and Zayn the truth - he’s not sure there’s any harm in holding Harry’s hand in a dark car for nothing more than a reminder they’re still in this together.

*

All said, they do a pretty good job of getting Harry drunk. It starts out with a few rounds of shots at the bar and then word spreads quickly through the friendly crowd and suddenly birthday drinks are flowing. Louis, Niall, and Zayn all do their best to intercept drinks as necessary, finishing a few before Harry can but sometime near midnight Harry has flushed cheeks and a ridiculous smile as he climbs on a makeshift stage to do karaoke with a girl who is celebrating her twenty-first birthday.

“I had no idea this was a karaoke bar,” Niall says, gathering and moving their jackets to the same chair as they move up closer to the stage.

“It’s not,” Louis says as Zayn laughs into his drink. “But Harry’s about to make it one.”

Harry and his new friend sing their way through Ariana Grande’s “One Last Time”, and a spirited rendition (with dance moves) of Earth Wind and Fire’s “September” before the girl’s friends come to collect her and Louis decides it’s Harry’s time to get down also.

“I’m tired,” Harry announces as he climbs off the stage, one arm around Louis’s shoulders. “Clarice is going to another bar but I need to go to bed. I’m definitely not twenty-one anymore.”

“Is Clarice that girl?” Zayn asks, already getting out his card to settle their tab. Luckily Harry’s eyes are blinking too heavily to fight him on it.

Harry nods, “Such a pretty name.”

Niall shrugs and says, “It’s alright,” like his opinion is wholly necessary to Harry’s drunken rambling.

“Your boy’s a legend!” Louis looks up at the yelled words to find a guy who had bought Harry two drinks earlier and is now right next to them. Harry smiles dopily at him and Louis rolls his eyes. “Can I get his number?”
“Nope,” Louis and Niall answer simultaneously, steering Harry away as the guy is intercepted by his own friends.

“Three, two, eight, five,” Harry calls over his shoulder until Louis puts a hand over his mouth to stifle it.

“Is that your phone number?” He asks incredulously.

Harry laughs and drools on Louis’s hand in the process, “My locker combination from high school.”

Louis closes his eyes as he tries his best not to laugh, knowing he won’t be able to support Harry’s weight if he does. Harry smirks as he straightens himself, putting his jacket on even though his eyes aren’t exactly tracking his movements.

“You okay getting him home?” Niall asks as they make their way to the front of the bar. Harry waves to everyone as they leave like they’re his dear friends - and everyone waves back.

“We can help,” Zayn says, grabbing Harry’s wrist and pulling him when he starts to sit down at a table with a bachelorette party.

“No, we’ll be fine,” Louis says, holding the door open as they file out.

“We’ll be fine,” Harry echoes, putting his hands in his pockets and smacking his lips obnoxiously.

“It’s out of your way,” Louis says. “Sober Harry would be very upset if you backtracked all the way across the city just to tuck him into bed.”

“Tipsy Harry agrees,” Harry says with one arm around Louis’s shoulders again, a big smile on his face.

“Tipsy?” Niall scrunches his nose, “You’re drunk, darling.”

“You’re drunk, darling,” Harry mimics, poking Niall in the chest.

“Alright,” Louis says, “Let’s go.”

Niall and Zayn both give Harry squeezing hugs and tell him they love him as Louis tracks down a cab. “Text me when you’re home,” Zayn says just as Harry throws open the back door of the car and climbs in.

“Will do,” Louis says.

“Come on, quasi-partner,” Harry calls from inside the car, clearly thrilled with the nickname from earlier in the night, “Take me home.”

“I’m being called,” Louis says, laughing. He hugs Niall first and then Zayn.

Zayn holds his upper arms as he pulls back and looks right into his eyes. “You know I don’t like this, right?”

Louis smirks. “You’ve made yourself pretty clear.”

Zayn nods, solemn. “Please be careful. With yourself and with him.”

By the time he gets in the car and has the door shut, Harry is looking at him with soulful but sleepy eyes. Louis gives Harry’s address to the driver, despite how easy it would be to give his own address and have Harry sleep on his couch. He doesn’t want to confuse what they’re doing with what they usually do; their friendship and their quasi-partnership.

“Come here,” Louis says as the cab pulls away, moving his arm and tugging Harry in by the shoulders.

Harry falls easily, his head coming to rest right on top of Louis’s shoulder, his face dangerously close to his neck. He just lays there, breathing evenly, his eyelashes fluttering against Louis’s skin as he tries not to fall asleep. Louis just tries his best to keep breathing, to get him home, to ignore how much he likes Harry’s weight like this.

FRIDAY ~ Day 17

“I’ll just need one more minute,” Louis says, still staring at the back of the passenger seat.

“It’s fine,” the driver says, “My meter is still running.”

“Right.” Louis runs his sweaty palms over his jeans and looks out the window onto the bright street. He needs to get out of the car. Therapy is due to start in the next few minutes and he’s already seen Harry walk past his parked cab and into the building wearing a pair of oversized sunglasses and a scowl. He’s clearly hungover - he has to be considering his state last night.

Louis rubs his hands together, glancing toward his lap. Last night. His stomach is queasy at the thought and his hangover has already faded so it’s not that. It’s what happened after the drinking, what happened when he got to Harry’s apartment, when they stayed up for another hour sipping water until Louis felt better leaving Harry alone.

They’d gotten up from the couch, Harry in a pair of sweatpants and an oversized sweatshirt, Louis in the same clothes they’d gone out in. He remembers odd things about those next few moments: Harry’s quiet feet because of his slipper socks, the sound of rain on the window, the empty water glasses on the coffee table. He wishes that was where his memory cut off, where everything would just fade to blackness.

Instead, he can see it so clearly: they stood in the open doorway wishing each other a quiet goodnight and then Louis whispered, “Happy Birthday, H,” and Harry smiled, paused, and leaned in to kiss him. Louis, abruptly, had turned his head which left Harry’s lips colliding with his cheek.

Louis takes a sharp breath as he replays the moment again like it hasn’t already been on repeat all day. The quickest moment of the night but he can still see it all; Harry’s cheeks going pink and Louis coughing lightly as they parted. “Goodnight,” Harry had said and Louis hurried out into the hallway, a mumbled, “Bye,” before jumping headfirst into the elevator.

And now, this: Five minutes away from couples therapy with his best friend after having nearly kissed him and about to have a nervous breakdown in the back of a cab.

“Can I give you a piece of advice?”

Louis looks up at the driver’s voice and laughs lightly. “Sure.”

“Whatever you’re avoiding in that building is coming whether you like it or not. Best to face it.”
Louis nods like this is sage wisdom and perhaps it is. He just doesn’t know what it all means - the almost kiss, if Harry remembers, if he even meant it, why Louis turned away. “Right,” he says, grabbing the door handle. “Thanks.”

He holds his head high as he walks into the familiar therapy office, trying to regulate his breathing to not have a full on panic attack the second he sees Harry’s face.

Unfortunately, he barely gets the chance because Harry is standing just inside the lobby, his sunglasses still on, the scowl prominent on his lips. “I’m so hungover, I could die,” he says in a flat voice.

“Hello to you, too,” Louis says, studying his face for any sign of what he’s thinking.

“Let’s get this over with,” he says, spinning and heading toward Julia’s office.

“Alright, grumps,” Louis says, earning himself an almost smile. It releases just a bit of tension in his chest - maybe Harry doesn’t remember the moment, maybe it really was nothing.

Julia is rather happy to see them come in together though she gives a weary glance to Harry’s sunglasses until he pushes them up on his head to hold back his hair. His eyes are puffy and slightly red, his skin pale where it’s usually pink.

“Yesterday was my birthday,” he tells Julia, who wishes him an obligatory happy day. “But my body no longer recovers like when I was twenty,” he adds.

Julia nods politely, “Luckily today’s session is an easy one. You should both make it through safely.”

“We’ll see about that,” Louis murmurs with a glance at Harry. They share a smile and for a moment he remembers what it’s like to be on the same team. A little more pressure releases from his chest.

“Let’s start with something fun,” Julia says. “Harry tell me what you like about Louis.”

“What?” Harry rubs at his eyes, “What about him?”

“You tell me,” she says, smiling as she sits back in her chair.

“I like,” there’s a pause where Louis thinks he might be struggling to come up with something and then it’s like a hose has turned on full blast: “I like his sense of humor and the way we can understand each other with just a look. I like how hard he works and how passionate he is. I like his honesty and blatant questions. I like his laugh and the way he’s able to tease people without hurting them. I like how he drinks coffee black and will do anything for his family. I like his loyalty to his friends”

“That’s probably enough,” Louis interrupts, unable to tamper down on the embarrassment flowering in his stomach. It’s rather hard, he thinks, to listen to good things about himself when he can think of like, five, on any given day.

“You don’t like hearing Harry talk about you?”

Louis smiles, “I’m a bit of a narcissist but it’s kind of life altering when you start hearing things about yourself you didn’t know were likeable in the first place. Like, how I take my coffee,” he says with a nudge of his head in Harry’s direction which earns him another smile.

Julia nods, “It can be intense to humble yourself to hearing these things. Particularly when you
don’t see them in yourself. Would you take a stab at things you like about Harry?”

Louis nods and then pauses - the same way Harry did. He’s not sure if it’s the same reason but he’s struck by the enormity of the task of explaining why he likes Harry. Suddenly the list stretches too far and he’s unsure of the right words.

“It’s hard, isn’t it?” Harry asks, reading his mind. “Getting your words straight.”

“Yeah,” Louis says, huffing a laugh. “I hope you don’t think I’m struggling to think of things, I have too many.”

“Give us those off the top of your head,” Julia says, never impatient but intent to keep things moving.

“Right.” Louis nods and licks his lip, “I like Harry’s laugh, the way it explodes. I like how hard he works and the way he puts everything on the line in a professional and personal capacity.” Louis glances at Harry and finds him staring hard at the ground. He imagines that’s similar to how he looked when Harry was speaking.

“I like how he tells bad jokes and wears colorful socks. I like how he owns a full selection of floral pants and shirts, and how he listens with his whole face. I like how he listens to me, even when I’m rambling. Even when I’m full of shit.”

They share a smile and though Louis is sure he can go on, Julia ends the exercise with a quiet, “Good.”

“I like to have couples do this,” she says, “As a reminder your partner can see the good in you when you are unable to see it in yourself. It’s important to remind each other of what you like, to keep those thoughts especially if you come across things you don’t like in each other. That,” she says with a smile when they tense up, “is better suited for a different session, not a relationship so fresh.”

Louis relaxes, pushing the air from his lungs and he hears Harry do so as well. “How are things going with physical intimacy?” Julia asks and just like that, they both inhale sharply again.

“We haven’t done anything,” Harry says before Louis can.

Julia nods evenly. “Have you wanted to? Has there been desire?”

Louis immediately thinks to the Knicks game, and the night at the spa, and the night they left Niall and Zayn’s dinner party. All three nights he considered something happening next - unsure what next may entail. “I think so,” he says, coinciding with Harry’s, “Yes.”

“I think we’ve become increasingly intimate emotionally,” Louis says like an explanation and perhaps an excuse for turning his cheek last night. He’s not even positive if Harry remembers but he feels like he has to defend himself. “We’re very open with each other about our feelings and I think that has strengthened our bond.”

“But we’re pretty closed off when it comes to talking about physical intimacy,” Harry says with a glance at Louis but speaking to Julia. “The only thing we’ve talked about is whether we would kiss and how that could happen.”

“That’s good,” Julia says, “An open dialogue is good. What’s something you’re nervous about with physical intimacy?”

“Jeopardizing our friendship,” Harry says, clasping his hands in his laps. “It’s hard to come back
from going too far.”

Julia nods, “Granted you’ve jeopardized your whole friendship just by doing this. I wouldn’t say sex heightens that risk.” It’s a bit like cold water being tossed at them and Louis blinks quickly trying to remain composed. “Are you worried about hurting each other? Expecting too much physically? Finding out you don’t have chemistry in that way?”

They’re both quiet for a moment before Louis speaks. “This far along, I mostly worry about hurting him,” Louis says like Harry isn’t sitting right there. “I worry about hurting myself as well. Sex heightens a lot of emotions.”

“It’s always a risk though, isn’t it?” Harry looks right at Louis this time, ignoring Julia. “You can fuck up a relationship at any point whether you sleep together or not. Whether you kiss or not. You can’t choose how you protect people.”

“This feels different,” Louis says, shrugging. Harry’s mention of a kiss specifically has him feeling like he may remember more than he’s letting on. “It feels like an important decision for us to do something like that. Okay?”

Harry flutters his eyes as he blinks, almost like he’s trying not to roll his eyes, and then he looks back to Julia, his face set. Something spiky settles in Louis’s stomach, something like he’s said too much.

After their therapy session, Harry leaves rather quickly with the excuse of a headache as he puts his sunglasses back on. Louis lets him go without argument already feeling enough emotional exhaustion from the session. He can’t believe they’ve had an entire conversation about physical intimacy while ignoring the fact they almost kissed. He can’t believe his mind is still stuck on an almost kiss Harry may not even recall. For the first time in the last few days, he can’t believe they’re really doing this.

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Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

"I Like Me Better" - Lauv

"To be young and in love in New York City,
To not know who I am but still know that I'm good
Long as you're here with me.
To be drunk and in love in New York City,
Midnight into morning coffee
Burning through the hours talking."

*

SATURDAY ~ Day 18

“Is it going to be weird that we’re only kind of dating?”

“No.”

“It’s probably going to be weird.”

Louis pauses on the sidewalk in front of the Mandarin Oriental Hotel and turns to Harry. “Why’s it going to be weird?”

Harry licks his lip, palms pressed together. “These are your friends.”

“People I work with,” Louis corrects, “I wouldn’t go so far as to say friends.”

Harry narrows his eyes so Louis drops the semantics of it. It’s already busy on the streets for a Friday night and he’d prefer getting in the bar rather than arguing on the sidewalk. Besides, tonight is Fleetwood Mac - they shouldn’t be arguing over something dumb.

“These are people who know you and don’t know me,” Harry says. “They’re definitely going to think we’re nuts if we explain to them how we’re together but not really. I also don’t want to have to avoid you all night like we’re just friends.”

Louis laughs as he rolls his eyes and then keeps walking, holding the door to the lobby open. Granted, when he got the invite to go to M.O. Bar before the concert he’d hesitated, positive Harry wouldn’t even want to go. On the contrary, Harry had said it would be fun all the way until they were getting off the subway five minutes ago and he got cold feed.

“Then don’t avoid me,” Louis says with a shrug as they walk along the marble floor to the elevator, their shoes clicking quietly. Louis went for black jeans and brown boots, a black jacket, while Harry wears dark blue jeans with black boots, a chunky grey sweater on top.

“You really want us to just be friends tonight?” Harry asks as they get in the elevator to the bar.

Louis presses the button labeled ‘M.O.’. “What? When did I say that?”
Harry crosses his arms, a foot of distance between them as the elevator whisks them to the top floor. “You didn’t but that’s what you expect. You don’t want to confuse your friends with a forty-day boyfriend, I get it.”

If Louis hears it right, he hears a tinge of hurt in Harry’s voice. He sighs as the elevator bings to announce their arrival. In the moment before the doors slide open, he closes the distance between them and takes Harry’s hand, twisting their fingers together and squeezing once. “We’re not friends, we’re dating,” he says, lifting his chin as the doors part. “I don’t care about these people, I care about you. I didn’t want to put you in a weird spot but, if it’s all the same to you, I’d rather you were my date than friend tonight.”

Harry’s lips part in silence and then he squeezes Louis’s hand back. “Right. Okay.”

It turns out, no one in the group even questions their relationship once they see Harry and Louis holding hands. They just introduce themselves to Harry and then push them toward the bar to get their drinks. Harry leads the way, tightening his grip on Louis’s hand so they don’t get separated. He orders a tequila with lime and gets Louis a whiskey while trying to point out his co-workers and explain as much office gossip as he possibly can before they’re forced to go back to the group.

“Wait,” Harry whispers as they collect their drinks, “The blonde guy has slept with how many people in this room, then?”

“Three,” Louis says, taking a sip. “And, full disclosure, we went on one date together.”

“What?” Harry’s eyebrows crowd together.

“Over a year ago,” Louis says, trying not to smile at Harry’s disgruntled look. “We both agreed it wasn’t that great, and nothing happened.” Realizing their hands are still connected Louis squeezes Harry’s and runs his thumb once over his knuckles. It seems to soften him as he nods and then lets Louis take the lead back to the group.

Making the choice to hold hands in public seems to act as some sort of invitation for the evening; a tentative step toward something more. They end up holding hands throughout the hour they spend at the bar, though not constantly as they’re both a bit too social to be anchored to one spot. Even Harry who was nervous about it being weird, makes his rounds with casual conversation.

Louis does his best to be interested in the stories of the wives and husbands of his co-workers but sometimes Harry grabs his attention instead. The way he laughs or leans forward to speak into someone’s ear, the way he listens to people talk and nods along with their words. Louis thinks he’s so intent, so attentive, yet when Harry’s eyes find Louis he’ll wink, or make a face without pulling the distraction of the conversation he’s having. And when they float back toward each other, their hands join between them like a safety, like a quiet reassurance.

Just before the concert is set to start, the group piles into the elevator to walk over to the venue. Louis ends up squished back into a corner with Harry’s front pressed right to his, their faces inches apart. “Cozy,” Louis whispers, eyebrows raising as someone else gets in the elevator and pushes Harry closer.

He’s touched Harry plenty throughout their friendship but like this he can feel his knees, thighs, and hips all at once. Even his stomach is pressed to Louis’s; their ribs moving against each other with each breath. He can smell the tequila on Harry’s breath, the cologne he’s pressed into the skin of his neck. He can even see the tiny hairs on the side of his chin he’s missed while shaving. Harry realizes the closeness with a smile, his eyes walking up and down Louis’s face as the elevator rumbles down to the lobby. It stops with a jolt and Louis can’t be sure if it’s the jolt or
with intention when Harry’s lips press to his forehead.

They walk out of the elevator with a shared, sly smile and Louis reaches for Harry’s hand. He runs his thumb over his knuckles, already becoming his trademark for when their fingers hold like this.

*'

Louis isn’t positive he can pinpoint a better night than the one that follows - yelling some of his favorite songs at the top of his lungs, dancing with Harry in the aisles and swaying at their seats, drinking more beer than is probably advised; his face almost hurting from so much smiling.

Holding hands escalates to slightly more at the concert - spinning Harry and catching him with an arm around his waist, slotting two fingers in the front edge of the pocket of his jeans as they sway, Harry’s arm over his shoulders. It’s all casual and thoughtless - until Louis realizes it and starts to get nervous, wondering if they should be doing stuff like this. As if Harry can sense his budding unease, he drops his arm from Louis’s shoulder to capture his hand, squeezing once and not letting go, his eyes still stuck on the stage in front of them.

As soon as the band leaves the stage, there seems to be a buzz in the crowd, a feeling like champagne bubbles in everyone’s stomach as they try to figure out where to go next, how to prolong the high of a concert like this. “We’re going to 230 Fifth in Midtown,” one of the guys in their group says as they start to gather their jackets. “See you there?”

“Sure,” Harry says before Louis can even ask him if he wants to, his flushed cheeks accentuating his smile.

“It’s a rooftop bar,” he says when Louis asks, their hands brushing against each other as they navigate out of the venue. “We did a photoshoot there once in the summer and it was gorgeous. Not sure what February looks like.”

“Chilly, probably,” Louis says with a scrunched nose.

The crowd presses in on them out in the street so Louis reaches his hand out behind him, waiting for Harry’s fingers to connect with his before they continue toward Midtown, the champagne bubbles following after them.

*'

230 Fifth has, in fact, thought of a solution to the winter months or so they find once they arrive. The entire rooftop has been covered in giant, clear, plastic bubbles. Each one is heated and complete with a table and comfy bench seating. “They look like igloos,” Harry says as they synchronously tilt their heads for a better look.

“I think penguins could be a good addition,” Louis says seriously, smiling when Harry laughs.

It’s too cold to stay staring for long and they quickly locate the igloo/bubble/hut holding the other people from their group and slip inside. The interior is quite warm and Louis finds his entire body relaxing after clenching up during the cold walk over. He and Harry steal one of the seats on the back edge of the table, their thighs pressed tight together as more of their group arrives.

“I feel like I’m just going to end up in your lap,” Harry whispers right against Louis’s ear when they squeeze yet another couple in at the table and all shift to accommodate. Louis laughs and
hopes it covers up the chills trailing down his spine, his mind not fully made up if it was Harry’s voice or Harry’s words that caused it.

The group stays together for a couple rounds of drinks before the buzz from the concert starts to diffuse and exhaustion at the burst of energy starts to come out. Harry goes quieter as the night draws on, mostly listening to Louis’s conversation with the couple to their left, adding in comments and relaxing his weight into Louis’s side. His hand is on Louis’s knee beneath the table, his fingers tapping an uneven rhythm against the inside of his thigh. It feels so comfortable between them Louis forgets he should be expecting a spike of worry and lets himself relax into the comfort instead.

“Should we go?” Louis asks once parts of the group have peeled off and the remainders start plotting where to head next.

Harry meets Louis’s eyes, “I think if I stay here any longer, I’ll fall asleep.”

Louis laughs and shifts his shoulder so Harry sits up straight, “I’m not sure that’s permitted in the igloo bubbles.”

Harry sighs and stretches his neck to the side. “Best we go, then.”

They say goodbye to the group all at once though almost everyone stands to hug Harry goodbye, his charming presence leaving a lasting effect. Louis tries to tamper down on the pride starting to radiate behind his ribs. It’s not as though he’s had any hand in shaping Harry to be the magnetic way he is but there’s something about Harry choosing him as a friend, as a date, that has his ego starting to stretch its wings.

There are a line of cabs already out front and they both slip in the backseat with an unspoken agreement to share, all of the lights of Midtown fluttering through the windows like a rave.

“Hey,” Harry says as they pull away from the curb, his voice quiet.

Louis looks away from the window and meets his gaze with an equally quiet, “Hey.”

“Thanks for tonight,” Harry says. His hand rests on the center seat, just like their positions this time last week, their pinkies bumping subtly.

“Of course,” Louis says, moving his hand to rest over Harry’s. “Happy Birthday. Again.”

“Best birthday present ever,” Harry says. His voice is still quiet; like the conversation is only for them, not the cab driver. “My sister is pissed at you by the way.”

“What?” Louis laughs over the words, “What did I do?”

“She says no one will have a chance at beating Fleetwood Mac as a birthday gift.”

Louis presses his lips together and shrugs in an attempt to be smug, “Maybe if they try really, really hard.”

Harry laughs and Louis doesn’t miss the way his eyes drip to Louis’s mouth before meeting his eyes. It’s not the first time he’s done it tonight and, again, Louis wonders about Thursday night after his birthday. If the near kiss was intentional or if it was a mistake, if Harry is thinking about it right this moment the way Louis is.

“What would happen if we kissed?” Louis asks, out loud and without hesitation, his mind pushing the words on his tongue.
“The world would end,” Harry answers without skipping a single beat.

“I’m serious,” Louis says, swallowing.

Harry smiles, “I don’t know. Probably nothing.”

“Helpful,” Louis says lightly.

“Why?”

Louis shrugs this time and goes back to looking out the window. “I’m just wondering why we haven’t yet. What’s holding us back.”

There is silence that feels a bubble in the backseat and Louis expects for it to break under the pressure of the quiet before Harry does it himself. “I tried to kiss you,” he says, “And you turned away.”

Louis doesn’t act dumb or pretend he can’t pinpoint what Harry is referencing as if he hasn’t had the exact moment on repeat for two days. “Wasn’t sure you remembered that,” he says truthfully.

Harry doesn’t speak or move and when Louis finally looks away from the window he finds Harry’s gaze directed at his knees. Why, Louis wonders, is it always him who puts a sour note on the end of their perfect nights. It’s like he’s fighting the happy memory in an effort to keep him from getting too wrapped up, like he’s putting up walls to protect himself from something.

He tries his best not to say, “Oh my god,” out loud as the realization washes over him. He connects the dots of Harry’s same words from the night at the baths. Louis is the one resistant to letting him in, to letting himself admit he even likes Harry. He’s the one standing in their way at every turn.

Suddenly words like fear, abandonment, embarrassment, pulse in neon at the back of his mind. All the things he’ll risk by letting himself fall for Harry. He studies Harry’s side profile, the sweep of his eyelashes when he blinks and then he looks down at their hands overlapping, lets himself feel the cool metal of Harry’s rings on the underside of his fingers.

He takes a deep breath, let’s his chest puff at the pressure from his lungs and then says, “Hey,” on the next exhale. His “Hey” is louder than Harry’s was a moment earlier, the force of his breath raising the octave.

Harry glances over and his gaze is weary. Louis swallows, knowing his reputation for moments like this over the past eighteen days is not good; a blunt question to cast a spiky spell, a reality binding observation that sucks the magic out of their possibility.

This time Louis doesn’t have anything to say and even when he parts his lips, no words come flooding out. Instead, his body takes the lead, his fingers curving around the edge of Harry’s hand to hold him, his other hand crossing the distance between them and reaching for Harry’s jaw. Carefully, Harry watches him but stays unmoving as Louis finds a resting spot for the palm of his hand along Harry’s face, his thumb resting to the side of his mouth.

“Hey,” he says again, swallowing as he notices the hesitancy in Harry’s eyes.

“Hi,” Harry says and his voice holds each nerve and fear Louis is so afraid of.

Louis lets his tongue run over his bottom lip and then he leans in, his seatbelt pressing against his chest. Harry doesn’t move at first but closes the distance in the end, their lips pressing together in the backseat
Louis had wondered what it would be like to kiss Harry. If it would be uncomfortable and dry, if they wouldn’t be able to take it without laughing, if it would be sloppy and slick. His answer comes and then gets lost again as he presses further forward into another kiss.

It goes slow at first and then faster, Louis taking control as he opens Harry’s mouth to him, pressing his tongue against the back of Harry’s teeth until he can’t take a breath without stealing Harry’s. Then, like a song, they slow again, separating in slow motion, their lips making barely a sound. They hang in the moment, Louis’s hand on Harry’s face, their hands touching against the seat, their eyes searching each other for answers to questions Louis can’t articulate. It’s like the world stops besides their hearts beating - Louis’s pulsing in his chest like horse in a race, his lungs fighting against the walls of his body for air.

The cab driver’s voice comes like a pin against a balloon, a cleared throat and, “We’re here.”

Louis pulls away from Harry to look out the window, the familiar sidewalks and front steps of his apartment. “Right. Thanks,” he says, suddenly unsure how long the car has been stopped, his mind a puddle of mush filled mostly with thoughts of the way Harry’s mouth feels against his.

In a rush, he refuses to get out of the car without Harry, refuses to end the night on an exclamation point and a question mark back to back, a sea of **where do we go from here** already threatening to overrun his mind. “Come up for a drink?” He asks, ignoring the cab driver shifting in his seat. Harry looks hesitant, his eyes cautious. “Actually,” Louis amends, “Come with me to buy a bottle of wine and then come up for a drink?”

The amendment makes Harry smile, albeit small, and then he bites his lip and nods, “Yeah, okay.”

*They have a harmless fight in the wine aisle of the convenience store over what kind of wine to get but Harry wins when he walks away with his favorite Cabernet and pays before Louis can catch him. They laugh all through the checkout and then in the elevator in Louis’s building, poking fun at each other as they do.*

Louis’s apartment is ice cold when they walk in which is his own doing in an effort to save money by conserving heat. “Tell me how a plastic bubble on a rooftop was warmer than your fancy ass apartment,” Harry calls from the kitchen while Louis rolls his eyes and turns the heater on full blast.

“Calm down, I’m fixing it,” Louis calls back. He pushes the couch closer to the vent and that’s how Harry catches him when he reappears with the bottle of wine and two glasses.

“Oh no, I did not sign up for home improvement.” Harry notes, still wearing his puffy coat with furry hood.

“Shut up,” Louis says, laughing over his words and moving the couch just a bit more. For how tired he was at 230 Fifth, he feels re-energized now. It’s a compelling mix of nerves, confusion, sexual energy, and desire. A potent cocktail for midnight on a Saturday.

“Shut up,” Harry mimics like he’s feeling the same burst of energy.

Louis takes off his jacket and tosses it over the armchair and Harry follows - while making a scattering of comments about it being freezing. “Do you want a sweater?” Louis asks finally, though a smile breaks through his judgemental tone.

“No,” Harry says, smirking. “The heater will probably make me sweat before long.”
Louis rolls his eyes and kicks off his shoes as he sits, one knee pulled up and his foot flat on the couch. Harry mirrors his position until he realizes no one has poured the wine and then he makes a comment about having to do everything as he leans forward to open the bottle. Some of his bravado wears off when he hands Louis his glass with a smile before leaning back against the couch and sighing.

“So this is your favorite red,” Louis asks, swishing it in his glass and giving it a moment to breathe before he tries it. “It’s a twist off.”

Harry grins, “I like how you say that like it’s a flaw. It’s accessible.”

“A quality I look for in all my wines,” Louis says seriously. He takes a sip and while most of the nerve endings in his mouth seem to still be singing Harry’s name, he does manage to appreciate the dry taste and full bodied linger after he swallows. “I like it,” he says.

“Even though it’s a twist off?” Harry asks, not taking his eyes from Louis as he drinks.

“Even so,” he says, pressing his lips together.

He finds he doesn’t have anything further to say, his mind on one track he can’t seem to disrupt. Half of his mind is cynical, telling him he must have been over dramatic about kissing Harry, surely his blood was flooded with adrenaline and not some unknowable entity he can’t name. The other half won’t shut up about kissing Harry again, tasting his lips, breathing him in, finding out if it’s as good the second time as it was the first.

He realizes Harry has asked him a question too late for him to understand what it was, his eyes stuck on Harry’s mouth as it forms unknown words. “Sorry, what?” He asks, feeling color burst in his cheeks at making Harry repeat himself.

Harry smiles like he knows Louis is on a different plain of existence at the moment. “I was just asking what your favorite song from tonight was?”

Louis blinks twice trying to figure out what he’s talking about before he remembers the concert and then nearly gasps at the fact he forgot about it in the first place. “I think ‘Go Your Own Way’ was mine,” Louis says once he gets his brain back on the correct path. “It’s cliche but something about it felt so big tonight.”

Harry nods, “Mine was ‘Songbird’ because of how small if felt tonight. Like it was a whisper during a string of louder songs, you know? I love that.”

Louis smiles, remembering the way he and Harry had swayed to it, the way his thumb had pressed into the edge of Harry’s hip. He wonders if Harry remembers any of that or if he was more focused on the actual artist performing than the guy holding him. Not that Louis could blame him for that.

Silence lapses again as Louis realizes the obligation of continuing the conversation has fallen on him, and now passed. Harry shifts and takes another sip of wine, his eyes still on Louis. Louis swallows his own mouthful and twists the glass in his hand. Harry’s tongue curves over his lip and Louis studies his throat when he swallows, the pulse of his jaw as he presses his back teeth together.

In a rush, Louis feels like he can’t sit still. He tries his best to be statue-like, to hold his breath and count to ten, to not fling himself across the couch and into Harry’s lap. All of those neon words from the cab have seemed to gotten lost in the shuffle and now he just wants Harry’s mouth on his with no limitations, no lingering questions.
His efforts at being still are futile and he starts to feel as though he’s vibrating, every inch of his skin pulsing as he tries to show some sort of restraint. Harry is watching him like he knows, his lips slowly curving over the edge of his glass as he takes a sip, his eyes never leaving Louis’s. Louis takes a sip of wine that turns out to be more of a gulp. He swallows hard, opens his mouth to ask something - anything - but words never form.

Whatever he was going to say is eclipsed as Harry closes the distance on the couch and their wine glasses click together the same time their lips meet. The wine is forgotten as they kiss, the buzzing energy under Louis’s skin finding an easy match in the same buzz below Harry’s.

It’s new and exciting as their tongues press together, as Louis shifts his face for a better angle, as Harry exhales slowly against his lips. Louis’s mind can’t seem to capture the moment as a whole instead noticing the taste of wine on Harry’s tongue and then how he can cup his hand along Harry’s jaw and feel the strength in his mouth. Then a moment of clarity that he’s kissing his best friend but that’s quickly washed away when Harry bites so softly on his bottom lip it may well have been a mistake except for the way Louis’s blood surges in response.

The surge coincides with their wine glasses clinking again and they both pull away, gazes dropping to their laps. Louis does them the service of taking both glasses and putting them on the coffee table before turning back. He pulls his other leg up on the couch and scoots to the side before he tugs Harry in closer so Harry is taking up the space between his knees and thighs.

“Where were we?” Louis whispers, his hand running back through Harry’s hair, his mind a scattering of weirdness and want tying together oddly. Harry smiles, just a little thing and then they’re connected at the lips again and that seems to be all that matters.

In all the ways they’ve never touched like this, they seem to learn fast - their teeth clicking awkwardly only to be covered by their smiles as they curve in again with an effort to do it better. This time they match perfectly, Louis finding himself humming into the kiss. He likes the way Harry’s weight presses to his front, Harry’s arms caging him in and holding himself up on the arm of the couch. He likes the way Harry makes small sounds as they kiss; little things he would miss if they weren’t in the silence; sighs and gasps.

There’s something about it that feels utterly comfortable in the newness. Like their teeth clicking is a joke and not a faux pas, Harry kneeling Louis’s thigh as he tries to get more comfortable leaving room for laughter instead of awkward adjustment. Despite never knowing each other in this way, Louis feels his ease holding hands with the fireworks in his belly.

Louis gets back to his lips like it’s home base, easing into another gentle kiss as he lets his hand press against the back of Harry’s neck, curl his fingers in the longer hair there. It’s dull fireworks and fizzy champagne as they slow until they’ve stopped, their noses slotting together as they try to catch their breath.
“I should go,” Harry says first.

Louis feels fear like a white hot flash as he leans back to make eye contact with Harry. His eyes go elsewhere first, the reddened skin of Harry’s jaw and all around his mouth from the press of Louis’s skin, the scruff he tends to have while Harry clean shaves. “You okay?” Louis asks, the two words he always seems to use with him.

Harry smiles, nothing forced in it as the corners of his eyes turn up at the edges. “Yes.” He swallows and moves his hands from the couch to the sides of Louis’s neck, his thumbs resting at the back hinges of Louis’s jaw. Louis’s eyes meet Harry’s cautiously, the tinge of nerves this whole things is going to break still bubbling. Then Harry ducks in and kisses him, soft and slow - again, so new in the scheme of experiences from the last hour. “I am,” Harry says when he pulls back.

“Good,” Louis says, his tongue pressing against his bottom lip as if for a second taste.

“I just know I should leave now while everything is perfect,” Harry says evenly, “At the risk of us doing something we shouldn’t.”

Louis nods as Harry sits back to create some distance between them. “That’s probably best.”

“I know,” Harry says, swallowing. “I’m very clever like that.”

Louis rolls his eyes but can’t help his smile as Harry reaches for his wine glass and finishes it with one gulp. He sets it down carefully next to Louis’s and then stands. “See you tomorrow?”

Louis watches him with mild amusement from the couch. There’s something giddy in his demeanor and Louis feels it too as he nods, pressing his lips together. “We’re meeting at Brix for brunch with Niall and Zayn, yeah?” He stands up and stretches his arms over his head.

Harry nods as he takes a step toward the door. “At eleven.”

“I’ll be there,” Louis says with a smile.

“Goodnight,” Harry says, putting on the coat he’s carried from the couch.

“Goodnight,” Louis reciprocates easily. He pulls Harry in to kiss him again because he can, gentle and lingering until Harry finally steps back to separate them.

Harry is smiling as he leaves, the door shutting softly behind him. Louis lets his forehead fall against the seam of the door, his smile widening. There’s a nerve buzzing between his ribs but there’s excitement fizzing there too - a risky dance but one that feels right.

He’s dumping the leftover wine in the sink when his phone buzzes in his back pocket. He checks it to find a text from Harry - one of my favorite nights ever xx - waiting for him. He can’t help his smile then, either.

*SUNDAY ~ Day 19*

Louis lays in bed for far too long replaying the night before. It feels as though he dims the magic each time he remembers the way they kissed on the couch - the couch he can see from his bed. There’s a wash of nerves in his chest and a tinge of anxiety about seeing Harry this morning, so soon after last night. He needs to see him, though; needs to make sure everything is still okay - make sure they didn’t get swept up in the moment and ruin everything.
He doesn’t bother with a shower as he pulls on a pair of black plants and a jean jacket. He runs his hands through his hair until it looks semi-decent and then calls a car. Only after he’s on the way does he realize this will also be their first time seeing Niall and Zayn since telling them the truth. The realization does nothing for the pressure mounting in his chest.

Louis is the last to arrive at Brix though it doesn’t take him long to spot the three people he’s looking for at a center table with mimosas already in hand. “Starting without me?” He asks as he approaches. They all look up in slight confusion and then smile.

“Good morning,” Niall says brightly with a little cheers of his glass.

“Morning,” Louis says, his lips twitching into a smile as he glances toward Zayn. His eyes land on Harry’s last and he feels a spike of tension like an unexpected knife as he says, “Hi,” and holds Harry’s eyes for a full moment. He breaks it when he abruptly pulls out a chair next to Harry to sit down. He knows Harry felt it - the spike just then. What made sense last night now seems startling in the bright morning with their friends at a restaurant.

When he finally gets brave enough to look up at Zayn and Niall again, to see if they felt it too, all he finds is Niall scrolling on his phone and Zayn consulting the menu. He lets out a deep breath and then sneaks a glance at Harry who is studying him intently. He looks surprised to meet Louis’s eyes and smiles quickly before looking down. Suddenly Louis wants nothing more than to rewind to last night when they were kissing lazily and ignoring the world; that reality is preferable to the stilted unease of this morning.

“So, who wants to brag about the Fleetwood Mac concert first?” Niall asks, turning his phone face down on the table. “I know you’re both too humble to want to talk about it but please, dear god, give me some details.”

Louis and Harry share another quick glance, this time with small smiles, before Harry gives Niall exactly what he wants: an entire play by play of the concert and as much of the setlist as he can manage to remember. Niall eats it up and Louis tries his best not to stare at Harry while smiling fondly.

They order a plate of donuts and salted caramel as an appetizer to brunch before each ordering different kinds of eggs benedict for their main course. Louis gets crab on the condition Harry gets classic so they can swap to try both. The conversation seems to flow through the four of them as usual despite the very big elephant sitting squarely on top of Louis and Harry. Niall is most ordinary but Louis catches Zayn giving him a couple of strange looks from across the table. Louis brushes it off without reciprocating though he feels like he’s under surveillance each time he catches Zayn looking.

Louis doesn’t get a chance to talk much to Harry on his own and when they get ready to leave, Harry announces he’s heading to Hearst Tower for the editor’s only grand opening of the rooms. Zayn and Niall nod knowingly thought Louis isn’t sure they understand just how pivotal Harry is to the whole project. He hardly restrains himself from making them all sit back down just so Harry can talk about his work a while more.

In front of the restaurant there’s hesitation as Niall calls for a taxi and Harry glances around for the nearest subway station. Logically, Louis knows he needs to get in a car back to his apartment and not take the subway in the opposite direction with Harry but he feels like there are still spikes between him and Harry - something making last night feel dreamy and delicate when he wants to cement it in reality.

His decision is made for him when a car pulls up in front of them. “Did you call a car, Lou?” Niall
asks. “Just share with us, we’ll drop you off.”

Louis still can’t think of one viable excuse to just go with Harry and get on the subway so he nods, “Yeah, sure.”

Harry smiles and waves at all of them as he starts backing away and Louis has to battle down the intense urge to run up and kiss him again, to stomp his foot and announce to the world they have now swapped spit and enjoyed it. His inner adult wins out, though, and he waves at Harry with a mouthed, “Bye,” as Niall and Zayn slip inside the car.

As the car pulls away he watches Harry out the window but Harry isn’t looking at him, his eyes cast down to his phone. Louis swallows and looks forward again just as his phone vibrates in his lap. He slides his finger across the message and tries his best not to smile when he realizes Harry has sent him the kiss emoji with nothing else. He must not do a very good job of not smiling as Niall leans forward to look at him.

“Texting a cute boy, Lou?”

Zayn answers for him, not necessarily bitter but dry. “My money is on the boy we just left.”

Louis can’t help his blush but he can help his voice as he glances at Zayn, “Did you just call Harry cute? He’ll be so flattered.” He nudges his head at Niall, “Better look out. Ni.”

Zayn rolls his eyes and Niall laughs along with Louis as the cab speeds through the heart of the city. At least Louis waits until he gets out of the car to text two of the same emoji back to Harry. He follows up with good luck today before he locks his phone.

* 

**MONDAY ~ Day 20**

Louis wakes up too early on Monday - too early as in it’s still dark outside his window and his phone says four a.m. He tries to read a couple pages of the book on his nightstand and focus on the yoga relaxation techniques he learned a few years ago but neither work. He ends up pulling on a sweatshirt and getting out of bed. He stares out the window at the empty street below as greyness starts to break on the far edge of the city.

With a few sudden hours to burn, he opens a blank InDesign document and starts pulling random designs together. He uses Harry as a muse and ends up with a graphic to celebrate the halfway mark of their experiment - day twenty. The piece is a calendar with line art for each date, one representative illustration in each square. There’s a paint brush for art therapy, a gumball machine and cheesecake for the art show, the newly updated Knicks logo from last Saturday, a phone cord twirling around for day fifteen and all of the lyrics to “Songbird” to fill up Friday.

He’s quite proud of it once he’s done, the sun having risen while he was working and his eight a.m. breakfast date with Harry bustling closer. He prints the graphic on some cardstock and carefully puts it in a folder before slipping it inside his work bag. He has to scurry for a shower and to get dressed afterward, his early morning culminating in a quick rush.

He meets Harry midway between Hearst Tower and Louis’s office at a little bakery with a pink awning over the front door. It’s sunny and cold, the sky a perfect ice blue - Louis’s favorite kind of February day. Harry is standing outside of the bakery as Louis approaches, doing something on his phone with his back up against the front wall while he waits. Almost like a sixth sense, he looks up as Louis gets closer, shoving his phone in the pocket of his jacket as he smiles. The smile moves to more of a frown as Louis comes to stand in front of him. “You look terrible.”
“Good morning,” Louis says with wide eyes. “Thank you for such a sweet compliment.”

“Sorry. I meant it to sound like I was worried.” He cringes and smiles crookedly, “I mean I am worried. Are you okay?”

Louis can’t help but smile over Harry’s fumbled words. “Tired,” he says. “I slept for about three hours last night.”

Harry gets a concerned crease between his eyebrows, “Why’s that?”

“I couldn’t sleep,” Louis says with a shrug. “I got up at four and by the time I started to feel tired, it was time to come meet you.” He takes a step as if to go inside the bakery but Harry stays unmoving.

“Why didn’t you tell me? We could reschedule.”

Louis’s smile gets a bit bigger at the petulance in Harry’s voice like he’s offended Louis kept their date. “Because I want to be here,” Louis says. “Is that a crime?”

“No,” Harry says after a pause. “I just don’t want you to get sick from like, not sleeping enough.”

“I appreciate the concern but I could really just go for some coffee and something sweet right now.”

Harry tries not to smile and it fails anyway, something Louis has become increasingly fond of watching happen to his face.

Harry refuses to let Louis stand in line at the counter and directs him to the back corner table while he places their order. Louis rolls his eyes but does appreciate the extra moment to get the card he spent all morning creating out of his bag. He sets it carefully at Harry’s empty spot across from him then lets his eyes wander around the bakery - tiled walls, white paper cups with black lids, endless pastries behind glass - until his gaze falls on Harry at the counter.

There should be studies done in Harry’s effect on the general public, Louis thinks. He’s well aware of the way Harry influences the world around him just by moving through it but the past couple of weeks have got Louis staring a little harder, appreciating it a bit more. Harry is easy, is what it is. He’s not always an open book but it’s not what anyone wants from him - not in a coffee shop at least. They want his easy smile and his slow drawl, the way he listens like they’re important even if they’re perfect strangers.

Louis, though, he finds himself waiting for when Harry turns from the counter and glances at him, their eyes meeting for a brief moment as they both smile before Harry turns back to finish paying. He likes the way Harry’s smile is different than the one he’s given to the barista. The one he gives Louis is shared secrets and quiet moments, a history spanning years; just for him. Yesterday he felt like they had to hide the way they feel, today is the ideal juxtaposition.

He ignores the fluttering in his stomach as Harry crosses the bakery with that same smile again, now with two cups of coffee in his hands and two paper bags tucked in the crook of his arm. Harry doesn’t look away from Louis once and that is enough to make Louis break eye contact first, glancing away.

“What’s this?” Harry asks when he arrives at the edge of the table, eyes locked on the paper set in his spot. Louis reaches to take the cups from him as Harry puts down the pastry bags.

“The way I passed the time when I couldn’t sleep.” He takes a slow sip of coffee while Harry’s eyes devour the card in front of him. “Happy twenty days, H.”
Harry looks up with his lips parted, eyes soft. “You made this for me?”

Louis nods, “Yeah. A good way to remember this whole thing by, yeah?”

Harry bites his lip as he squints at the calendar again, studying it. “Is that Fage yogurt?”

“Two-percent,” he says with a smile. Harry shakes his head as he keeps looking, his coffee and scone untouched as Louis takes his slice of coffee cake from the bag. “You like it?”

“Very much,” Harry says when he looks up again, his words quiet like a secret. “Twenty days. I can’t believe it.”

“Halfway through,” Louis says. “There are some days a realization like that would give me a rash. Right now, I’m okay.”

Harry looks like he’s going to sneeze just before he bursts into laughter. “Do you realize you just said that out loud?”

Louis tries to replay his words and though he thinks he gets it right, Harry’s silent giggles freak him out. “I think so. Why?”

“You admitted the thought of dating me gives you a rash,” Harry says, his voice going high with incredulity.

“Okay, that’s not it,” Louis says, trying to contain his own smile. “I mean the thought of this ending. Sometimes it freaks me out.” Now he’s said those words, he’s not sure he should have. Though, to be fair, honesty typically wins out between the two of them.

“Oh, that’s different,” Harry says, his smile fading to more of a smirk. “I’m flattered?”

Louis tenses his jaw and shakes his head, “I’m going to stop talking. I’ll learn sign language instead and then where will we be?”

“Obviously I’d learn sign language too,” Harry says like it’s the obvious answer. He reaches for his coffee, eyes still stuck on Louis’s graphic in front of him.

They stay for an hour and two cups of coffee, a slow morning of talking with the occasional edge of flirtation, bumping knees under the table and shared smiles. When they get up to leave, Harry holds their coffees while Louis throws away their trash and then they meet outside the front door, already planning for tomorrow’s lunch date at Trailer Park.

“Everyone says they have really good tater tots,” Harry says, slipping his free hand inside the pocket of his jacket.

“That’s exactly what I’ve heard,” Louis says, grinning. “Although it is hard to fuck up tater tots.”

“A valid point,” Harry says with an astute nod. “Take it easy today and get some rest tonight, okay? Don’t operate any heavy machinery.”

Louis sighs, “Alright, I won’t drive the company bulldozer today.”

Harry rolls his eyes, both of them laughing quietly. Then the moment pauses, less than a foot of space between the toes of their shoes as they stand on the sidewalk. Louis feels odd pressure on his shoulders, a hook under his stomach as his eyes trace the green of Harry’s. He closes his eyes on a slow blink and when he opens them, he finds the city is quiet; nothing but Harry’s open face
and clear eyes, pink lips carefully pressed together. It’s a bit surreal as they stare at each other, Harry blinking slowly while Louis forgets to blink at all.

Slowly, impossibly slow, Louis swallows and then leans forward to close the distance between their mouths for the first time in over twenty-four hours. Louis’s lips press to Harry’s for merely a hair of a moment before he’s pulling back quickly like he’s been electrocuted. He feels like a kid testing the edges of a pond with his feet, trying to feel where it will hold his weight and where it will collapse. He swallows again as he straightens, his eyes hesitant to meet Harry’s. When he does, he doesn’t find any sign of collapse but a gentleness that makes his stomach feel warm.

“Happy twenty days, Lou,” Harry says quietly and Louis nods, words scattered in his brain but unable to find their way to his mouth.

They share one last smile and then turn away to head to their jobs; the last thing Louis sees is Harry pressing his fingers to his own lips.

TUESDAY ~ Day 21

“And then, as if I hadn’t been waiting for our meeting for two hours already, he just texts me to cancel.”

The waiter sets down a red basket of tater tots and two burgers and marks a momentary pause as Louis and Harry both say, “Thank you”.

“What was his excuse?” Louis smirks as he tilts his head.

Harry pinches the bridge of his nose as another waiter refills their water glasses, “He said he was taking his cat to the massage parlor.”

“That’s a thing?”

“Fuck if I know,” Harry says, clearly exasperated. “I just feel like I wasted the entire morning when I could have been getting ready for the public opening and ended up with nothing out of it. Now I know I’ll need to stay late tonight and I feel like I might start screaming at any moment.”

Harry takes a deep breath, his eyes closing briefly. “And that’s how my day has been.”

Louis had asked the question fifteen minutes ago when they walked in and Harry has been catching him up, only pausing to order their food at the counter and now at the end of the story. “Aren’t you glad you asked?” Harry smiles tightly and lifts his water glass, annoyance still ebbing in waves.

“Of course I am,” Louis says. “You’re a great dramatic storyteller.”

Harry huffs a laugh and rubs at his eyes before dragging his hands back through his hair. There’s stress tucked in with the annoyance, Louis reads it easily and wants to help. He’s just unsure how.

“I feel like one of those rubber bands that’s about to snap in half and I hate being like that.” He exhales slowly and picks up a tater tot, squishes it with his fingers before putting it in his mouth. “I told myself I wouldn’t be one of those project managers who just starts yelling at everyone for so much as moving near me but I felt like I might become one. I hate that feeling.”

“You’re not though,” Louis says. “You’re frustrated by one flaky guy you’re supposed to work with which is altering your perspective of your whole team. And you have every right to be frustrated, the guy’s a dick who has been leading you on about a project for like, six weeks. What
a fucking asshole.” Harry smiles for the first time since Louis first saw him pacing in front of Trailer Park with a concerned scowl. “Fuck that guy,” Louis says, finally picking up a tater tot from the basket and popping it in his mouth.

“I know,” Harry says with a sigh. “Fuck him. And fuck me, these are good.”

This time Louis laughs as he chews, his eyes turning into happy moons. “May that fuckwad never know the happiness of a Trailer Park tater tot,” Louis says as he grabs another one.

“Amen,” Harry says, doing the sign of the cross.

“I can’t believe these actually lived up to the hype,” Louis says. “I haven’t even touched my burger.”

“I’m obsessed,” Harry says, and Louis notes how the stress in his eyes is starting to dissipate slowly. “How’s your day so far, by the way? Sorry I hijacked the conversation to bitch for twenty minutes.”

“Not at all,” Louis says, shaking his head and ignoring the question posed for him. “You’re more than allowed to bitch to me for however long you need.”

Harry smiles, “I was thinking about that during the first hour of waiting for that twat. Like, I can’t wait to tell Louis about how funny this is. And then it only got worse from there to the point where I knew I was just getting angry.” He takes a deep breath and exhales slowly, “And even then, I wanted to tell you because I’m pretty sure you’re the only person who would possibly listen to me and not think I’m an asshole in the end.”

Louis laughs. “Well, you thought correctly,” he says.

Harry smirks as he chews the first bite of his burger. He’s looking at Louis expectantly and it takes a moment for Louis to realize Harry is waiting for his answer. “Good,” Louis says with a jolt as he remembers why Harry is staring. “My day has been good. I had morning meetings and then a consultation. I was just looking forward to seeing you, honestly.”

Harry tilts his head, “Really?” He smiles over the word, “Why’s that?”

“I don’t know,” Louis says. “I can’t figure it out but all morning I was just thinking about meeting you here and how it couldn’t come soon enough.”

“Maybe it’s the tots,” Harry says even as the tips of his cheeks go pink.

“Maybe it’s the company,” Louis says, evidently inspired to lay it on thick.

“Stop it,” Harry says with wide eyes. “You’re freaking me out.” Louis chews his bite of burger slowly and smiles over it. “Stop it,” Harry says again, a bit more emphatic.

“Why are we not sick of each other?” Louis asks, swallowing. “Why do I see you everyday and I’m still looking forward to it?”

“Speak for yourself,” Harry says flippantly and then smiles like the mush Louis knows him to be.

“You like me,” Louis says. “Twenty-one days in and you still like me.”

Harry smiles. “And you like me.”

Louis takes a sip of water and takes his time swallowing before he smiles. “Maybe.”
Admittedly, Louis is out of his depth with this whole thing - he’s well past the point of denying that. He and Harry are one step out of the bounds of friendship and maybe two steps on the edge of falling into something very different. The bridge between the two is thin and rocky but they’re managing it so far; staying upright.

The tots disappear first but they eventually make their way through their burgers talking about anything besides work; the book Harry is reading and Louis’s goal to watch all of the Oscar nominated movies before the award ceremony. “You can come watch with me,” Louis says. “We could have that lazy weekend we were talking about. We can do nothing but watch movies and eat take out.”

“Why does that sound like a fever dream and not something realistic?” Harry asks, his head resting on his fist as they chat.

Louis wipes his mouth then crumples the napkin and puts it on his burger basket. “We’ll do it. I promise you. We just need to figure out a Saturday or Sunday we’re not working.” They both laugh at that, gathering their coats to get ready to leave.

“I was so upset before this,” Harry says. “Like, proper mad, planning to throw a pencil holder across the room.”

“A pencil holder,” Louis repeats, nodding like it’s a threat. “Very intense and scary.”

“Shut up,” Harry says without venom as they stand to face each other. “I’m just trying to thank you for lunch. For being such good company.”

Louis is caught off guard by the genuineness and he stumbles over his words when he says, “You’re welcome.”

There’s no pause this time, no hanging moment; there’s just Harry taking a step, his hands falling right to Louis’s hips. Then they’re kissing right in the middle of Trailer Park. Where yesterday was sweet there’s something in the undercurrent of this that has Louis pressing in closer, one hand sweeping over Harry’s neck and cupping his face as the kiss goes deeper. When they pull back, Harry goes for nonchalant but Louis sees the chaos in his eyes. “Thanks again,” he says, putting his coat on.

Louis misses a beat and then puts his coat on as well. “Is this how we’re saying thank you now?” He raises his eyebrows.

“Shut up,” Harry says, ducking his head to leave a tip on the table. The tops of his ears are red and Louis is impossibly endeared.

Out front they kiss again, a bit more tame for the sidewalk with Louis’s hands on the sides of Harry’s neck then sliding over the backs of his shoulders to his waist, squeezing gently before letting go. It feels like they’re testing out sea legs, kissing in the broad daylight and figuring out how it works. Louis kisses Harry’s cheek once more and then they share a lingering glance just before they turn insync to walk to the subway. It’s nearly without thinking that Louis takes Harry’s hand in his as they cross at the next intersection. He can’t be sure what the fuck they’re doing but he knows right here, right now, Harry’s hand fits in his like it’s meant to be there.

**WEDNESDAY ~ Day 22**

“And how’s the boyfriend?”
Louis levels his gaze across the table. “Zayn.”

Zayn’s stern face moves to something kinder, his eyes flashing. “What? Are you not official?”

Louis rolls his eyes, his shoulders still holding a tense line. “No, we’re not. We’re dating.”

“With the intent to become boyfriends?”

Louis reaches for his untouched beer and takes a slow sip. He thought it would be a good idea to grab a drink with Zayn before meeting Harry but it’s causing him more stress than is wholly needed. “Why are you doing this?” He asks on a sigh. “Can we not have a normal conversation anymore?”

Zayn settles back in his chair. “I just don’t get it, Lou. Not to turn the question again but why are you doing this? Why did you decide you and Harry need to date?”

Louis narrows his eyes, “Why is it such a problem?”

“Are you actually going to answer one of my questions or are we just going to go back and forth like this?” Zayn’s eyebrow curves up and Louis tries to release some of the tension in his body with a brief smile.

“I just wanted to have a beer with a friend,” Louis says. “Not be interrogated.”

Zayn seems slightly softened as he takes a sip from his drink. “I’m just trying to understand, I guess. Have you been interested in H all this time? Or, why now?”

Louis runs his hand along his jaw, trying to decide how to answer. Clearly, Zayn isn’t planning to initiate a change in subject anytime soon. “I think it came out of nowhere. I guess I must have been interested in some way to not just say no to the idea completely.” He shrugs and runs his lip under his teeth. “It’s been a really good experience. I’m glad we’re doing it.”

“A really good experience?” Zayn tilts his head, “Really? That’s what you’re going to call this?”

“Yes,” Louis says, lifting his chin slightly. “What’s wrong with that?”

“You’re playing with fire,” Zayn says without hesitating. “You’re going to run your friendship into the ground and, before you ask why I care, whatever happens between you two is going to affect me.” Louis tries not to roll his eyes but he fails miserably. “I know that’s selfish to say but it’s true,” he continues. “You’re my best friends and if you guys fuck it up for an experience together, I’m gonna be pretty pissed.”

Louis raises his eyebrows, “Did you ever stop for one second to think we might not mess this up?”

Zayn actually pauses with his beer halfway to his mouth. “You think this might work?”

“Maybe,” Louis says.

Zayn sets the glass down without taking a drink. “You’re serious?”

“Yeah,” Louis says, shrugging. “I can’t say one way or another at this point. We’re having a really good time together.”

“You mean this isn’t an elaborate scheme to be fuck buddies?” Zayn’s words coincide with Louis taking a drink and the result is a spray of beer back across the table, and Zayn shielding his face
with his hands.

“We’re not fucking,” Louis says loudly and then lowers his voice to repeat himself, “We’re not fucking, Z.”

“Then what are you doing?” Zayn asks, narrowing his eyes.

Louis’s eyebrows arch so hard his skin pulls. “We’re dating, Zayn. Legitimately dating.” Zayn nods like he’s processing it while Louis uses a napkin to dry up his fountain display. “Is that harder to believe or something?” Louis asks, his pulse settling from the shock of Zayn’s assumption.

“I guess I’ve never pictured you as dating before.” Zayn says dating like it’s a foreign word.

“Us either,” Louis says, “But we’re doing it and we’re enjoying it. I’d appreciate your support on the matter.”

Zayn presses his lips together, “I’m supportive. Skeptical but supportive.”

“Unless we start fucking?” Louis asks, raising an eyebrow.

“If that happens, please never tell me about it,” Zayn says seriously.

“Why? Because the first time you and Niall did it, you were so courteous to us?” Zayn glances away, “I forgot you were coming over.”

“I was your birthday party,” Louis says, still incredulous two years later. “And you asked us to come over early to set up.”

“Details,” Zayn says fluttering his hand. “Can we talk about something else now?”

Louis smirks, “Oh, now that it’s getting personal, you want to change the subject. I see how it is.”

“Considering how comfortable you were when we discussed you and Harry fucking?” At Louis’s cringe, Zayn smirks.

“Why can’t we talk about normal things?” Louis groans, “Like why you have a lightsaber tattooed on the side of your finger?”

Zayn flips him off, displaying the new ink perfectly. “Sick, yeah?” Louis laughs as he takes another drink. They all have questionable tattoos - the main difference being Zayn never sees his tattoos as questionable.

They get through another beer before Louis is replaced by Niall and he leaves to meet Harry for a late snack at Bluebell Cafe. As he walks away, he hears Zayn say, “Did you realize Louis and Harry are actually dating?” He laughs to himself as he leaves the bar.

Harry had known it was going to be another late night with the rooms opening and arranged for a nine p.m. meet up to be sure he’d been done. Despite the planning, Louis gets to the cafe before Harry and picks out a table along the wall, placing an order for their usual hummus and pita while he waits. He scrolls through Instagram for a bit and right as he’s about to refresh, Harry sweeps through the door with flushed cheeks and wild eyes, his gaze darting around.

Louis may be biased to say Harry’s face lights up when he sees him but, then again, there are few
other ways to describe Harry’s smile as he comes up the two steps to where Louis is seated and makes a beeline right for him.

“I’m in Vogue,” he says as his greeting.

“What?” Louis leans forward, Harry’s infectious smile catching on him.

“Fucking Vogue,” Harry says, sitting down quickly with his bag on his lap. He undoes the clasp and yanks out three copies of the magazine, his hands vibrating. “They did a preview of the room installation before it opens to the public,” he says, his fingers making quick work as he turns the pages of the top most magazine.

“You’re kidding.”

Harry takes a deep breath and then sets the magazine on the table. There, in stunning color, are a few images of the installation - Louis recognizes the room right out of the elevator covered in grass and daisies first. “H,” he says looking up to meet Harry’s eyes. “That’s incredible.”

“There’s more,” Harry says and the way he sounds, Louis almost wonders if he’ll need his inhaler soon. He moves his hand from the bottom of the page to reveal a quarter page write up with the headline “Wonder Boy Styles” and a photo of him from the press preview last weekend wearing a black suit and a smirk, a drink in his hand.

“What is this?” Louis says, leaning in to let his eyes catch some of the words in the article - aesthetic innovator, well-educated, politely charming. Admittedly, he finds the page to be a bit hard to read because Harry has started vibrating again. “Harry,” he says, “You’re in Vogue.”

“I know,” he says, his eyes sparkling like some sort of Disney prince and not a human man. “My boss called to tell me when I was walking over here so I ran to the magazine stand to see for myself and I almost fainted.”

“And you bought all the copies they had?” Louis teases, gesturing down at the three other magazines on the table.

Harry laughs and there’s no shame in his smile. “What the fuck else was I supposed to do?”

“I don’t know,” Louis says, he bites his lip as he looks at Harry’s face. There’s such light in his eyes and it’s a stark contrast to the way he looked yesterday - like he was about to tear at the seams. “This is amazing.”

“I know,” Harry says again, and then bites his lips together like he’s said too much.

“I’m so proud of you,” Louis says, genuine awe coloring his voice as he shakes his head. “I can’t believe it.”

“I’m so proud of me too,” Harry says, another grin taking over his face.

Louis gives it only a beat before he leans across the table and kisses Harry right on his smiling lips - a hello and a congratulations all in one. Harry makes a soft sound against his mouth and his smile fizzes to something softer as Louis pulls back, his cheeks still pink. Louis matches his smile and holds out his hand, “Let me see again. I couldn’t even read it last time.”

Harry hands it over as the waitress brings their order of hummus. Harry orders cocktails while Louis flips through the magazine, the page Harry is on already earmarked with a bent corner. He reads the article in full - maybe one hundred words at most - his smile pulling at the edges of his lips again.
“You sound famous,” Louis says. “You sound too cool to be my friend.” He looks up to find Harry watching him, Harry’s coat still on and his bag in his lap.

“I’ll make an exception,” he says, trying not to smile. Louis rolls his eyes. “Tell me about your day,” Harry says as he carefully puts the magazines back in his bag and sets it on the empty chair next to him. He wiggles out of his coat and lets it slump on his chair.

It’s so like him, Louis thinks. For Harry to find out he’s been written about in fucking Vogue but then to tuck that away and ask how Louis’s day has been, to look at him like he actually cares about his answer. If Louis’s not careful, the overwhelm of it all might be enough to send him into a panic spiral. He grabs a piece of pita and swipes it through the hummus.

“I definitely didn’t get written up in Vogue. But work was fine and then I grabbed a beer with Zayn before meeting you. Which, actually, was a fascinating conversation.”

“Yeah?” Harry splits a pita in half and drags part through the hummus.

“He thought we were sleeping together. That this whole thing is a ruse for us to fuck.”

In hindsight, Louis should have learned from his own reaction and chose not tell Harry about Zayn’s thought while he’s eating but, alas, he’s too late and Harry is coughing into his hand to clear his throat. “What?”

Louis pushes a glass of water closer to Harry, waiting for him to take a sip as his eyes tear. “That was my general reaction as well.”

“Why did he think that?”

Louis pauses as the waitress sets down their drinks. “I guess he couldn’t think of any other reason why we’d be doing this.”

Harry looks like he smells something bad while he rips off a piece of pita with his teeth. “He’s the second person who’s cared if we’re fucking.” At Louis’s head tilt, Harry swallows. “That girl from my work was wondering at the beginning, remember? She said we weren’t being genuine unless we had sex.”

Louis remembers the night at Ace Hotel in a rush, Harry’s bad mood and their first almost fight. “I can’t believe how popular we are.” Harry smirks, prodding his straw through his drink, “Still,” Louis says, “No part of my day involved a world famous magazine so, I think you win.”

Harry tries to look neutral and then he bites his lip over another smile, “Can we look at it again?”

Louis laughs and nods, laughing harder as Harry lugs his messenger bag into his lap again. “Of course,” he says, indulging Harry. He’ll indulge him all night if he can; he tries not to let that thought simmer for too long.

THURSDAY ~ Day 23

Thursday drags and despite it being a clear day, a storm cloud hangs over Louis starting when he wakes up. There’s anxiety and overwhelm tucked in with something like nausea and he’s can’t figure out why.

Last night had been lovely by all accounts. He stayed at Bluebell with Harry until nearly closing
time and then they took the subway home, their fingers intertwined easily. At the corner where they usually split to go separate ways, Harry kissed Louis with one hand in his hair, tongue teasing his lips. Louis had kissed his jaw softly and called him Mr. Vogue before heading to his building, bubbles in his chest the whole walk home.

Except now, today, he’s got a stone sinking in his stomach, a sour taste itching the back of his throat. The more he thinks about it, the more it hits him. The long and short of it is the realization of just how much he likes Harry, how scary that suddenly seems. Louis doesn’t have a good track record with being good for the people he likes and all he can think is the more he ties himself to Harry, the more he lets Harry twine around him, the worse this is all going to be when it crashes and burns.

By the time Louis walks up the steps to their therapy appointment in the afternoon, his thoughts are at a fever pitch, a headache blooming at his temples. Harry arrives at the same time with one of those soft smiles he saves just for Louis but Louis barely returns it, nausea getting the better of him as they file into Julia’s office.

Harry’s concern is evident throughout the session, his eyes constantly drifting to Louis, his answers slow to come. It’s better than Louis whose answers seem to lag at best and dissipate to only a few words at worst. Slowly, Louis’s lackluster effort starts to create a tension he can feel, a confusion Harry certainly doesn’t deserve.

If Julia can tell something is up, she doesn’t let it on. She pushes through questions about last week and then first relationships and first heartbreaks. It’s all stuff Louis knows about Harry and vice versa, nothing to get them out of their comfort zones. Still, when Julia ends the session, Louis feels relief like an exhale, gathering his things and making a straight cut for the door. He knows he’s going to have to face Harry outside and he dreads it like a flu shot.

“What was that in there?” Harry asks as soon as they’re out front of the building, the sidewalk empty as they descend the stairs. “Is something wrong?”

Louis presses his fists to his eyes, bites his tongue over the prospect of lying and then pushes out the truth. “Are we making a mistake?”

Harry blinks like he’s spoken a different language. “A mistake?”

“This,” Louis says motioning between them. “What we’re doing.”

Where Harry is usually patient in the face of Louis’s blunt questions, he rolls his eyes. “Twenty-three days in and you think this is a mistake?”

Louis shrugs, his jaw tense. “Yeah, maybe.”

“Are you fucking with me, Louis? Why?” Harry’s nostrils flare, his breath coming out in puffs against the cold afternoon. “What’s happened that you’ve just decided this? What fucking minute detail have you overthought now?”

There’s a soft lump in Louis’s throat at the truth of Harry’s words but he swallows against it. “I’m just not sure this is a good idea.”

“Okay. Why?” Harry crosses his arms, defiant and clearly not letting Louis slip out of it with silence.

A few people pass by them on the street while Louis studies the pavement, building up the courage to look at Harry again. “Something is starting to happen with us, H, right? I’m not the only one who feels like there’s something between us. Something bigger than just being friends.”
Harry nods, his eyes so laser focused on Louis it makes him wilt under the attention. “What’s wrong with that?” Harry asks. “Wasn’t that the point of this? To see what was here?”

“Yeah,” Louis says. He takes a deep breath and lifts his chin, “But I don’t know if we should keep going when we both know neither of us can sustain it. You know I’m not good at taking care of relationships, of actually being a decent boyfriend. Why would you put yourself through this only to end up hurt?”

Harry’s arms drop to his sides, his breath leaving in a whoosh from his lips. “You think I’m not scared of getting hurt? You think I don’t know the risks of us doing this?”

Louis is the one to cross his arms this time. Harry ignores the motion and reaches for Louis’s hand, hooking their fingers and steering them over toward the empty patch of wall nearest them for a hint of privacy.

Louis stares at where their fingers are clasped, refusing to meet Harry’s eyes when he speaks. “I just think this has all been good and fun but it’s starting to mean something. And that scares the shit out of me.” He looks up and shrugs, “I don’t want to be the one to hurt you but I don’t trust myself not to.” There it is. The truth underlined and out loud after lingering under Louis’s tongue all day.

Harry’s jaw pulses scarily and then he sighs. “Someone is going to hurt me,” he says, a smile pulling at his lips though Louis’s frown is pulling his lips opposite. “Whether it’s you or the next person who comes along who I decide to date.”

Louis feels his lips curl at that and Harry must see it, his thumb coming up to smooth over Louis’s bottom lip and then dropping again. “I get to decide who I want to risk it for,” he says. “Just like you get to decide if I’m worth it. I’m not the shining example of committed success either, by the way. So as much as you want to be the bad guy, in the end it could just as easily be me.”

Louis extricates his hand to rub over his face as Harry’s words process through his worried mind. Yet again, he’s the one standing in their way. “I’ve blown this all out of proportion again, haven’t I?”

“Yes, you have,” Harry says. He runs his tongue over his lips, “You’re starting to make a habit out of this.”

Louis smiles, a bit raw. “I’m sorry.”

Harry shakes his head over Louis’s words, their pinkies linking down near their hips. “Don’t be. I’d rather you tell me than say nothing.”

“Even if it’s to tell you I think we should stop this whole thing?” Louis’s voice sounds miserable and he feels it in his stomach, an ache almost.

“Yes.” Harry says, “So I can tell you to calm down, we’re in this together, and we’re seeing this thing through. For better or for worse.”

“Still,” Louis says softly, “You don’t deserve to have me question every turn.”

Harry scratches at his jaw, “We’re getting to know each other, yeah? We know each other as friends but this is a different ball game. We’re figuring it out. We’re questioning it. We’re trying.”

“How do you do that?” Louis tilts his head, “How do you talk me off of every ledge I walk out on?”
“Because you put a voice to all the things I’m thinking and allow me to sound rational when I talk about them.” Harry smiles, “You’re a lot braver than I am when it comes to your mouth.”

Louis pauses, narrows his eyes over a possible connotation and then smiles. “Sure.”

He presses forward to kiss Harry, their hands squeezing as their lips meet. Harry takes a step back and lands right up against the brick wall. Louis deepens the kiss, tracing his tongue over Harry’s teeth and inhaling against his mouth, probably doing too much for the sidewalk outside their therapist’s office. When Louis pulls back, he keeps only a breath of space between them. Slowly, he runs his hand back through Harry’s hair, nails scratching softly over his scalp. “Have I told you lately that I’m glad we’re doing this?”

Harry’s huff of laughter is soft and Louis kisses the side of his jaw to keep his own smiling from bursting off his face. “Is that what this afternoon was about? You being happy?”

Louis pulls back to meet Harry’s eyes, “No. It was you reminding me why I should be.” He seals his words with another kiss; the overwhelm, anxiety and nausea hiding back beneath his stomach - at least for the moment.
FRIDAY ~ Day 24

Louis shows up outside Harry’s apartment Friday evening with his hands clasped behind his back. Harry opens the door in the midst of buttoning his shirt and pauses. “Why are you standing like that?”

Louis rolls his eyes and takes a step inside. “Says the guy with fucked up buttons.”

Harry looks down and groans as he realizes his buttons are aligning with the wrong holes on the opposite side. Quickly he sets about undoing them and then starting again from the bottom. Louis watches, amused at the whole event and slightly enchanted by Harry’s firm stomach and toned chest moving as he flexes his arms. Soon enough his skin is back to being covered and Louis has to force his eyes back up. “Hi,” he says, smiling. “Lovely to see you. Happy Friday.”

Harry narrows his eyes, “What’s going on? Why are you still standing like that?”

Louis laughs, pulling his hands from behind his back and keeping one in a fist. “Nothing is going on.”

Harry raises an eyebrow with a pointed look at Louis’s left hand clenched in a ball. “Yeah?”

“I mean, something is going on but it’s nothing to look so concerned about.”

Harry crosses his arms and sticks out his hip like he’s waiting. The blue shirt and black jeans do nothing to dim the purple socks he’s chosen and though he tries to look menacing, Louis finds himself still smiling.

“I wanted us to do something fun tonight, yeah? So I made a game out of it.”

It’s a credit to Harry’s personality he actually looks slightly enthused by the idea. It’s more than Louis can say - considering he changed his mind roughly twelve times about whether to do it all or if he’d look stupid. He holds up his left hand. “I wrote down a decade on each of my fingers. You pick one at random and that will decide what we do tonight.”

Harry scrunches his nose, “That’s creative.”
“Why do you sound so shocked?”

“I’m not,” Harry says, too quickly, followed by a slower, “I’m not.”

Louis smirks, “I’m working on a graphic using a hand as a bird and writing in different strategies for public speaking. It’s a whole thing,” he says with a wave of his hand, not wanting to go into explanations. “So I thought it would be fun for us, too.”

Harry nods once. “Right. I just pick a finger?”

“Any finger,” Louis confirms, holding out his fist.

Harry take the fist between his warm hands, his thumb smoothing over the top of Louis’s knuckles in a ridiculously pleasing way. He closes his eyes like he’s taking the whole thing very seriously which makes Louis very conscious of the way his hand looks and whether Harry will end up liking whichever decade he picks. He holds his breath until Harry stops his fingers over his pointer finger with a smile. “This one.”

Louis already knows what it says but he lets Harry unfold the finger for himself to read out loud the scrawled “1920’s” in black ink. “Sick. Do we have to find a twenties themed bar?”

“I already did,” Louis says. “We’re going to dinner at a place where there’s a speakeasy in the basement. Secret entrance, live band, the whole thing.”

“Really?” Harry’s eyes light up, still holding Louis’s hand in his.

“Yes, really. I had something prepared for each finger,” he says. He spreads his hand to show the other ones - sixties, seventies, eighties, nineties.

“When are we going to do the other ones?” Harry asks, running his fingers over the decades and making Louis’s whole hand tickle.

“Eventually,” Louis says as he pulls his hand back, “Let’s focus on one at a time, yeah?”

“Right,” Harry says with another nod. “Do I look okay? Is this appropriate?”

Louis’s lets his eyes drop for a cursory glance over his thin waist and hips, over his thighs and down to his socks. “Might want some shoes.”

Harry glances down at his feet, wiggling his toes. “Yeah, maybe.”

They make it to the lobby a quick ten minutes later, Harry’s feet carefully shrouded with some Gucci boots. He wears a black pea coat that matches well with Louis’s dark jacket and, fittingly, makes them both look like members of the mafia.

*D*

Dinner is fairly standard in a dimly lit restaurant with an American selection of food and wines. They take their time eating and talking, lingering over quiet conversation and shared jokes. By the end of dinner and their second glass of wine, their ankles are linked under the table and Harry is tracing Louis’s fingers with his own, seemingly mindless as he talks about a book he’s been reading about the gay scene in the seventies only to find Louis has already read it.

“Really?” Harry asks, not pausing in his mindless tracing of the top of Louis’s hand.

“By Andrew Holleran?” Louis says, “Yes, totally. I read it at the end of last year.”
“You should have told me about it,” Harry says. “I’m obsessed.”

“I’m pretty sure I did tell you about it,” Louis says, “Or I meant to. The main character reminds me of you.”

“Sutherland?” Harry crinkles his nose and Louis laughs. “He’s flamboyant and greedy.”


“The one who sleeps with every Puerto Rican man who looks at him?”

Louis laughs as he shakes his head. “Yes him, but no not that. There’s a whole passage about how effervescent he is. How the party starts and ends when he arrives and leaves.” He taps his toe on the ground and shrugs, “I can’t remember all of it now but I remember thinking of you. You’re like that.”

“It’s funny I know exactly what you’re talking about. It’s the first time the narrator sees him. And, actually,” Harry goes a little shy, his smile small, “It made me think of you.”

Louis is stunned into a hesitant silence, his eyes squinting as he tries to figure out if Harry is serious.

“It’s a compliment,” Harry says, misreading the silence

“No, I know,” Louis says, “That’s why I told you it reminded me of you. I’ve just never been told I make anyone feel like that before.”

Harry’s hand goes still over Louis’s. “Well, I’m telling you.”

Louis is pushed into another silence not by force but for lack of anything to say, his mind a quiet buzz. “Should we go check out the basement bar?”

It seems like a lame excuse next to what Harry’s just said but he smiles, leaves his hand over Louis’s and nods, “I would love that.”

Despite the speakeasy supposedly being below the restaurant, they’re led back outside and directed down a dark alleyway adjacent to the building. The hostess says to look for a small red light on the wall and to press the button which sounds much easier than it proves to be.

“I swear to god I’ve read horror stories that start like this,” Harry says as they get halfway down the alley, the busy road fading to a hum behind them.

Louis feels a little misled himself but doesn’t let it show, slipping Harry’s hand in his and squeezing gently, “We’re fine.”

“Yeah, as if that’s not a classic line from every scary movie ever.”

Before Louis can laugh they see the small blinking red light the hostess had mentioned inside. “See? No worries,” Louis says, pressing it.

Nothing happens immediately but then a door on the opposite wall opens up and someone calls out a brief, “Good evening.” The man waiting when they turn around is dressed in a beige trench coat with a wide brimmed hat, effectively confirming they’re in the right place. They’re led into a smaller room and then down a tunnel before being left alone in front of a set of intimidating black doors.
“I promise it didn’t sound this weird online,” Louis says.

“Wow, you’re full of lines pulled from terrible movies aren’t you?”

Louis is still laughing as he opens the final door, light and music hitting them simultaneously. They stand still to take it in - a band on a low stage wearing slacks and suspenders with brass instruments, two pianos dueling in the corner, a haze of artificial smoke and wooden fixtures, the staff dressed like they’ve come straight out of every twenties movie Louis has ever seen.

“So, this is fucking cool,” Harry says, as he looks around.

“Duh,” Louis says like he hasn’t been doubting his idea for the last five minutes. “Of course it is.” He slips one hand inside Harry’s jacket to rest on his waist as he kisses him quickly, and then presses his fingertips against the muscle of Harry’s back to let him walk in first.

There’s a coat check just inside the door and then they make their way to the bar for drinks, eyes slowly trying to take in everything around them. Even the drinks are themed according to the time and they both order Sidecars after careful consultation of the menu. Before their drinks are served, the bartender pours two shots of tequila and pushes them across the bar. “Cheers to the end of prohibition boys,” he says with a voice almost on the bizarre edge of lascivious. “On the house.” They take the shots with a quick glance at each other. When they finish, their Sidecars are ready and they accept them with smiles and a wink from the bartender.

“Wasn’t prohibition the end of the twenties?” Harry asks as they walk away.

“And why would we be in a speakeasy if prohibition was over?” Louis asks, pressing his lips together in the picture of unimpressed.

Harry sighs, “I can’t believe you brought me to a historically inaccurate bar.”

Louis laughs as he sips his drink, “You win some, you lose some, I guess.”

They watch the band while they finish their first drinks, the bar filling up pleasantly without turning them into sardines inside a can. The music is lively but they still manage to talk - mostly focused on people watching and trying not to laugh when the couple next to them gets in such an intense fight, they both throw their drinks at each other simultaneously.

Another drink down and Harry starts eyeing the dance floor, a curious smile on his lips. At first Louis thinks he’s watching someone but when he follows his gaze he realizes the appeal. It’s not a writhing mass of people like a club but rather like a scene from a movie with people dancing on their own or in small groups, and couples dancing to elaborate routines, spinning each other around. When Harry glances at him, Louis thinks he’s going to ask to dance but he just smiles and goes back to his drink.

Louis is not dancer. For that matter, Harry isn’t either. Louis likes to think he’s self aware and, as for Harry, he’s seen him at one too many clubs in the past four years to give him the benefit of doubt about possibly being Justin Timberlake in disguise. Still, there’s something pressing under Louis’s ribs at the way Harry keeps looking over to the dance floor. Something that makes him say, “Hey, should we dance?”

Harry laughs at first and then nods, his smile pressing his dimple in. “Sure.”

Louis grabs his drink from the table and Harry does the same, his eyes cautious like he’s not sure Louis is serious. Louis wraps their fingers loosely together as they weave through the onlookers. He finishes his drink in one strong pull and sets the glass down on a table they pass; he knows he’s going to need the liquid courage.
His earlier thoughts are confirmed a few songs later - they really can’t dance. It doesn’t mean he’s found the time to stop laughing, though. It’s partly at himself but mostly at Harry who seems to shed inhibitions with each passing moment until he’s essentially glowing, his drink in one hand and his feet not quite standing still. Where Louis feels like he rides each beat, Harry is a diversion - catching the ones no one else hears and laughing all the while.

When he finishes his drink, Harry reaches out for Louis’s hands and then they’re moving together, twirling and disrupting everyone as they take turns spinning each other. Louis loses himself in the moment and then finds himself watching Harry, the way he lights up when they do something right, the curve in his neck as he laughs when Louis steps on his toes.

For the first time, Louis realizes what people mean when they say everything stops when I look at you. The room is a blur, the music goes soft, and Harry fills his vision; his smile widening as he spins toward Louis. Louis’s feet seem to have stopped beneath him and Harry’s momentum propels him right into Louis, their chests pressing together as Louis catches Harry around the waist.

“Okay?” Harry asks.

“Okay,” Louis says though his mouth feels dry. His mind is a sudden rage of questions, doubts, general concerns over what-the-fuck is happening between them but he lets it all go quiet when Harry kisses him, soft and sweet, lingering. “Another drink?” He asks when they separate, his hands still on Harry’s waist. Harry nods and then comes in for another kiss, this time smiling right up against Louis’s mouth. They take their second drinks closer to the dance floor, standing at a high top table and moving to the band casually, watching some of the sloppier dancing as the night moves forward.

At one point Louis has to abandon Harry to use the restroom and then finds himself wrapped up in some sort of group dance as he tries to make his way back. He doesn’t even realize he’s in a dance circle until someone grabs his hand but as he tries to pull away, he ends up twirling to the other side of the group and a girl with curly blonde hair catches him. She spins away a moment later, and a guy with a red plaid shirt takes Louis’s hands next.

He tries to catch Harry’s eye for help but finds him laughing back at their table, shrugging at Louis’s pleading eyes. Louis sighs and then decides to go for it on Harry’s behalf, joining in the group the best he can, shuffling partners for quick dances and finding himself laughing through it.

He ends up with a guy about his age after a couple of songs, black glasses and a pretty smile. It’s not until the song ends and the guy has one hand pressing a little too low on his waist, he realizes the group has dispersed and now he’s dancing with someone unrelated to the whole thing, someone who seems far too interested in him.

“Oh shit,” he says, taking a step back as another song kicks in. “Sorry, my -” he glances over at Harry who is suddenly engrossed in his phone where he was bubbling with laughter what seems like only a minute ago. “My person,” he mumbles without further explanation. He thinks the guy is amicable to the split but he’s not exactly sure, not looking back as he twists his way through the growing mob of people to get back to Harry.

Harry looks up when he’s close, something in his eyes weary; it sends a new prickling behind Louis’s ribs. “Did I look like Patrick Swayze in Dirty Dancing?” Louis asks, smiling.

Harry’s straight face quirks into a smile but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “Looks like you even found your Baby.”
It takes Louis a beat too long to catch the reference and then Harry’s smile fades at the corners and Louis feels like a dick in a wash of realization of why Harry stopped watching him dance. “Hey,” Louis says quickly, coming in right up close so the toes of their shoes touch. “No.” Harry meets his eyes, a tinge of caution there. “Not at all. I’m here with you,” Louis says, keeping his voice as quiet as the atmosphere will allow. “Only you.”

Harry nods and swallows but there’s still something blocking his face. Louis wants to press a button and see Harry’s thoughts written out verbatim to find out if he’s jealous or nervous, if he’s breaking the trance of the fever dream they’ve been in tonight, if there’s something else going on Louis doesn’t know about.

“All you,” Louis repeats and hopes he’s the only one who hears desperation in his words. He kisses Harry then, and there’s something like fire where there’s been sugar all night. Like Louis is trying to say something with his lips he can’t do with words, his tongue pressing into Harry’s mouth as Harry’s hand presses into his lower back and urges him forward.

“More dancing?” Harry asks in the space between their lips just before another kiss, their noses bumping.

“You and all this dancing,” Louis says, pulling back slightly. “If I’d known, we would have gone to the eighties bar in Tribeca.”

“What eighties bar in Tribeca?” Harry asks immediately and Louis kisses him quiet on a laugh, pulling him onto the dance floor.

Later, he thinks. Later they’ll go dancing at the new bar but tonight they’re dancing here. Tonight, they’re getting steadily closer, stealing kisses instead of laughing, hands wandering over waists and hips as opposed to only holding each other by the fingers. He kisses the side of Harry’s neck during one of the slower songs and doesn’t worry about anything but right now.

They finish a couple more drinks and dance until their skin is tacky and faces are flushed, Louis’s neck warm and Harry’s shirt coming unbuttoned at the top. They share a glance and then decide to go, collecting their coats at the door and making their way back through the tunnel that led them in earlier. It’s not nearly as long or as dark as they’d previously thought, something that makes them both laugh considering they have far more alcohol in their bodies now than just the few glasses of wine from dinner.

“I’m not even drunk,” Harry says when Louis mentions it. “I feel like we just drank for five hours straight and I should be on the ground right now.”

Louis looks pointedly at Harry’s feet as they step back into the alley, a few other speakeasy attendees scattered around. “But you’re not.”

“Correct,” Harry says. He links their fingers together and Louis is reminded how much he likes holding Harry’s hand. He has a strong grip but he never squeezes unless to get Louis’s attention and his hands are never slimy or sweaty - though, Louis fears, his own might be both of those things from time to time.

When Harry disconnects their hands and holds Louis by the wrist, he thinks this may be one of those sweaty hands times until he realizes Harry is studying at the black ink on his fingers, only slightly faded from when the night started. “You really wrote that in permanent marker, didn’t you?” He says with a gleeful smile as he rearranges their hands to be holding again.

“I wanted it to stay on by the time I got to you,” Louis says. “It would have been terrible for me to show up with a casual black hand and illegible words.”
“Terrible,” Harry repeats, pausing at one of the crosswalks.

Louis can’t be sure where they’re walking only that it’s the general direction of their neighborhood. He likes the way the night air bites at his ears, how empty the streets start to become the further away they get. “This looks like a movie set,” he comments down one particular side street.

“Like La La Land,” Harry says, looking around.

“Wrong coast, babe,” Louis says.

It is like a movie, though. The only cars are parked and no one is out on the sidewalks this time of night in the more residential parts of town. There are pools of gold from the streetlights and the dark sky seems to sparkle overhead because of it. Louis’s favorite thing about the city that never sleeps is to find the corners and places where people are sleeping, places to make the city feel as though it belongs to him for a moment.

“Dance with me,” he says to Harry, reaching his hand out with a smile. Harry is hesitant for only a beat and then lets Louis pulls him under the streetlight.

Their dancing is more ballroom style than anything, no sound but the quiet scuffs of their shoes on the pavement; quiet giggles when they miss a step. It’s as ridiculous as it is romantic and Louis is struck by the thought there are few people who he’d ever think to dance with on the streets of New York City. He pulls Harry in close to kiss him, a silent thank you for being one of them.

The quiet kiss turns to smiles again as they keep walking, their east coast La La Land left behind. Louis finds it funny - the way they sometimes kiss like they always have mixed with the times they both go quiet like it’s the first time all over again. He laughs at the thought and Harry looks over, his face open and curious. “I was just thinking about kissing you,” Louis says before Harry can ask.

“Yeah? And it made you laugh?” Harry doesn’t look impressed and Louis’s smile only gets bigger.

“I mean, a month ago me kissing you would have led to a meltdown,” he says. “By you and by me. And now it’s fine to do it.” He leans over to kiss Harry right then like he’s proving a point.

“I don’t think it would have caused a meltdown,” Harry says, swinging their hands a little as they keep walking. This time Louis is the one to look over curiously. Harry smiles. “What?”

“How long have you been waiting to kiss me, H?”

Harry’s lips twitch, his gaze straight ahead. “You realize I was the one to ask you on a date and that’s what started all this, yeah?”

Louis’s response is slow as he tries to figure out where Harry is going. “Yeah.”

“That wasn’t an idea that came into my head that night.”

Louis doesn’t miss a step because it’s obvious; even if this is the first time he’s realizing it, it’s been there all along. “How long?” Louis asks, “How long had you been thinking about asking me?”

“A couple of months,” Harry says, a gentle shrug of his shoulders as he glances over.

A couple of months.
Louis wonders about how he decided it - what he had been doing or saying at the time to make Harry think he wanted to ask him out, what made Harry get up the nerve to do it. When Harry doesn’t offer any further explanation, he decides not to pry and just squeezes Harry’s hand in his.

It’s only a moment later Harry comes to a stop and when Louis looks up, he realizes they’re in front of Harry’s building. The walk from downtown must have been at least half an hour but it’s swirled right by them without their realizing.

“Thank you for tonight,” Harry says. “It was amazing.” He bites his lip and then releases it as he smiles and Louis thinks he may be a goner as he tracks the movement with his eyes. Slowly, he reaches up and traces his finger along Harry’s lip. Harry lets him, staying perfectly still. Louis meets his eyes and then takes a step forward, replacing his finger with his lips.

Just like the night in the cab, it starts slow and then moves fast, hands in hair and under jackets all in a rush as they scramble to touch each other. Louis backs Harry right up against his building to kiss him harder, to taste every part of his mouth and to do it twice. Harry makes the softest sounds as their tongues move together, a broken gasp when Louis goes for his neck instead.

“Louis,” Harry whispers as Louis catches his hands and presses their knuckles against the wall, his teeth scraping against Harry’s neck.

Louis doesn’t respond, his mind shooting off white hot bolts with nowhere to land except for his heart to keep thudding in his chest to the beat of more, more, more. There’s too much and not enough all at once and he’s losing track. It’s when he tugs Harry’s earlobe with his teeth that everything changes. Harry presses his hips forward and all at once he realizes two things: He’s hard and Harry is too. Harry must realize the same thing in the moment as they both look at each other, lips kissed red, clothes askew. Louis’s eyes trace Harry’s face for answers and when he doesn’t find any, he kisses him anyway. Perhaps an answer in itself.

“Do you want to come upstairs?” Harry asks, leaning back to speak.

Louis takes another moment to breathe, his thoughts ricocheting off of each other in a hurry. “I do,” he says.

Harry kisses him first this time, his hands under Louis’s jacket and around his back to press closer, tongue begging for attention and then slipping between Louis’s lips.

“Upstairs,” Louis says when Harry starts to kiss along his neck, “Upstairs, H.”

Things cool off in the elevator, their hands the only parts of their bodies touching as they stare straight forward. Louis starts to feel the edge of nerves, the prickly sensation of reaching the point of no return.

“Are we really doing this?” Harry asks as the elevator doors slide open on his floor.

Louis smiles, his heart still thudding. “Hey, you stole what I was going to say.”

Harry laughs and it slows Louis’s heart as they walk down the hallway. Harry fishes his keys out of his pocket, staying quiet. The apartment is dark at first and then Harry flips on a light as he takes off his shoes. Louis swallows and takes off his own shoes, the nerves coming back again.

“We don’t have to do anything,” Harry says. He’s twirling his rings around his fingers, the way he does when he’s nervous or confused while Louis’s stomach shakes with the same emotions.

“We’re being stupid,” Louis says, throwing his hands up. “Why are we acting like we’re about to
“Make a baby?”

Harry’s laughter bubbles like even he’s surprised by it. “What are you talking about?”

“I don’t know,” Louis says, scrunching his nose. “But you asked me to come up here, and I said yes. Let’s stop doubting everything, yeah? Don’t overthink it.”

“Right,” Harry says on an exhale. Then he laughs, “Easier said than done, I think.”

“Come here,” Louis says. Kissing seems to be the one thing they can do right at the moment so Louis takes what he can as he pulls Harry in. “We’re fine.”

“We’re fine,” Harry repeats and then they’re kissing again.

They take off their jackets and hang them up, laughing at just how bizarre they’ve managed to make everything between them. “Do you want to go upstairs?” Harry asks. He laughs almost immediately after asking the question. “I feel like a blushing virgin right now and I assure you I am not.”

“Let’s go upstairs,” Louis says, already walking away. “God only knows how much weirder we can make this but we might as well find out.” Harry laughs at that too, and then turns the lock on the front door with a quiet click as he follows Louis.

Upstairs isn’t a common feature of studio apartments though Harry is the exception with his lofted bed. The metal stairs curve up to it, a gallery of pictures along the wall. Louis has been obsessed with the place since Harry moved in - as evident by his proposal they move in together when they were talking about whose place they would keep. The memory comes in a flash and sends warmth up the back of his neck.

Louis sprawls on Harry’s bed as soon as he sees it, throwing his hands behind his head as he says, “I’m all yours, baby.” Harry laughs so hard that Louis has to sit up and reach out for him in fear he’s going to fall backwards down the stairs.

For what it’s worth, this part of Harry’s apartment is really only good for holding the bed and a lamp with a small nightstand. That being said, the second Harry leaves the top stair, he’s right on the bed with Louis, kneeing his way to lay just opposite him.

Despite the overhead light downstairs, it’s darker on the bed, their silhouettes cast in shadow. They both lay on their backs for a moment and then Louis rolls to his side, propping his head up on his hand. He watches Harry’s chest rise and fall - too quickly considering they’re just laying there. He rests his hand on Harry’s chest and watches it move with each of his breaths. “Nervous?” Louis asks quietly, not moving his hand.

“Kind of,” Harry says.

“We don’t have to do anything, babe,” he says, echoing Harry from downstairs. He lifts each of his fingers and taps them down gently in turn, meeting Harry’s eyes.

“I know,” Harry says, “But I want to.”

Louis kisses him then, his hand sliding slowly over his stomach as he does. He can feel the way Harry inhales as they kiss, his hand running a short circuit back to the top of Harry’s shirt. Harry arches just slightly at the movement and then hums as Louis undoes the second button - the first undone by their chaotic dancing earlier. Slowly, Louis undoes another two buttons and then pauses, pulling back to look at Harry’s face.
Harry raises his eyebrows, “Would you stop acting like is the precursor to soft core porn?”

Louis actually sputters when he laughs and hurries to cover his mouth before he spits on Harry. “I didn’t want to go too fast,” he says.

“It’s a shirt, Lou,” Harry says, sitting up. “Not a chastity belt.” He proceeds to undo the rest of the buttons at lightning speed and then let the shirt fall off his shoulders while Louis watches dumbstruck.

“You did that ridiculously fast,” Louis says, half in awe as Harry tosses the shirt to the foot of the bed.

“Thanks, can I have a reward?” He pairs the request with a shit eating grin and Louis rolls his eyes, kissing him until he falls back against the pillows with a quiet groan.

With a bit of adjusting and quiet prodding from Harry, Louis eventually ends up on top of him, his knees on either side of Harry’s hips. He likes kissing Harry from this angle, more in control of the pace and pressing him back whenever he arches up. He tries his best not to let the power trip go to his head.

Louis presses his lips along Harry’s jaw and his neck, paying special attention to the soft spot below his ear before he continues down slowly. He’s a bit hesitant when he goes further than they’ve gone before but Harry urges him on with quiet sounds of affirmation and adjustments of his hips. Louis ducks low to drag his tongue over the birds on Harry’s collarbone and then down the center of his stomach as his fingers trace his sides and make goosebumps appear on his skin. Just before Louis gets to the lowest curve of his belly, he starts to kiss back up, slowly circling Harry’s nipples with his tongue and pulling a pleased, low groan out of him.

Harry moves his hips up again, something of a demand and so Louis slowly lowers his hand to palm over the very center of his jeans. He swallows as he does, looking up for Harry’s reaction when his hand comes in contact where his cock is straining against his pants. He puts light pressure and Harry keens high in his throat, his hands gripping the cover of the bed beneath him.

He’s never seen Harry like this, breaking apart in front of him. To know he’s the one responsible for it is a heady feeling and leaves him only wanting more. He sits up to take his shirt off and Harry’s eyes open again, heavy lidded and bright green even in the waning light.

“So this is going good,” Louis muses, pulling his shirt up over his head.

He feels the vibration under him when Harry laughs, “I would give you a four star review if this was Yelp.”

“Four?” Louis raises his eyebrows as he comes out the other side of his shirt. He flings it down somewhere by Harry’s discarded one. “Why’s that?”

Harry shrugs, nonchalant but given away by the redness in his cheeks. “Incomplete job.”

Louis shakes his head as he narrows his eyes, trying not to laugh. He’s not sure he’s ever laughed so much in anyone’s bed and they’ve only been here for ten minutes. “Incomplete?” Louis squawks over the world, flicking Harry’s nipple lightly. It’s made worse by Harry hissing at the contact, his left leg kicking out haphazardly. “Incomplete,” Louis mutters again, sliding down until he’s flat over Harry. He kisses his lips quickly and then starts a steady descent, this time with no plans to slow down. He lathes his tongue around Harry’s stomach, tiny bites and then small sucks over the thin skin just above his jeans.

There’s a part of him that can’t believe this is Harry beneath him, Harry’s hips pressing up at his
touch, Harry who has clearly spritzed aftershave over the thin trail of hair leading into his jeans. He pauses with his fingertips on the top of Harry’s pants. “Can I take these off?” Harry has given him more than enough signals to continue but Louis still hesitates. They’re walking a thin line over a relationship he holds sacred; he refuses to do something they’re not both sure about.

Harry holds his eyes when he nods, no joke to go along with it this time. Louis knows at once, they’re on the same page. He scoots himself down a bit more as he unhooks Harry’s belt and then tugs the button at the front of his jeans. At the same time this feels monumental and like it’s shaking the world, as Louis licks over the skin exposed at the top of Harry’s boxers, it also feels hot, sticky, heavy. Like there is fire curling in his stomach at the act itself, a thick desire.

From there, Louis tries not to think and focuses, instead, on blowing Harry’s mind. He tugs his jeans down to the middle of his thighs and mouths over the front of Harry’s boxers, tongue lathing over the shape of Harry’s cock. Harry, for his part, kicks his legs and wiggles like he’s feeling every sensation all at once; an ego boost for Louis, admittedly.

He hooks his fingers in the sides of Harry’s boxers and tugs them down when he’s teased Harry just enough and when his own impatience gets the better of him. He watches as Harry’s cock presses up against his hip, pink and thick, already getting wet. It’s enough to make his stomach heat up all over again - until he looks up at Harry watching him with heavy eyes. Louis raises his eyebrows and Harry starts to smile, blinking slowly.

“Good?” Louis asks.

“Very,” Harry says with a pointed look at his dick and a sly smile.

Louis grins. “Is this weird?”

Harry flops his head back on the pillow, his smile staying in place. “You’re making it weird by asking, honestly.”

“Noted,” Louis says. “I’ll get back to doing my job now.” He gives Harry a quick salute and then reaches for his cock, effectively cutting off anything Harry might want to say next.

Louis forms a loose circle around Harry’s cock with his hand and runs it up and down slowly, studying the way the skin moves against the friction, the way precome sluices from his slit. There’s a flutter of butterflies in his stomach but he presses it down as he wraps his lips around the tip of Harry’s cock.

Harry groans low, the sound coming from the center of his chest as Louis tightens his lips. He starts slow as he gets used to Harry’s girth and then he gets down to what he knows works best, using the tight suction of his lips and his hands for what he can’t quite take. Harry is a symphony and a rock show all at once; one moan arching into the other, the muscles of his stomach jumping as he tries to keep still, his legs shaking against the sides of Louis’s body.

Louis uses his free hand to trace up Harry’s stomach and press against his nipples before completing the circle again in a smooth motion. He’s surprised when Harry links their fingers together, letting them loosely fall to the bed. All told, it makes everything hotter too - being able to feel Harry’s reactions immediately when he squeezes his hand or when his fingers start to twitch under Louis’s grip.

Harry is loud - something Louis hadn’t exactly expected. Harry’s usually the quieter one in the group but he doesn’t bite his tongue like this, low moans and high whines, little oh god and yes litanies aimed right at the ceiling. Louis slows down when Harry’s hand starts squeezing his to the
point of being numb. He lifts so his tongue is circling Harry’s tip as he tugs his hand free. “Need this back, love,” he says lightly.

Harry grits his teeth, his hand immediately scrambling to hold onto the bed. “I am so close right now, Lou,” he forces out. “Embarrassingly, so.”

Louis smiles, something wicked in it as he meets Harry’s eyes. “That’s the point, baby.”

Where baby has gotten a laugh from Harry before, now he bites the side of his free hand as he lays back against the pillows, his chest shiny with sweat and his legs fighting against the constraints of his jeans and boxers around his thighs. Louis bites his lip as his eyes drag over his body, his own cock giving a subtle twitch in his jeans.

He swallows and tugs Harry’s elbow to get his hand off his mouth. “Be loud, H,” he says. “I like it.” Harry manages to roll his eyes just before Louis takes him down again and gets him groaning loudly, his legs tightening as he points his toes. Louis smiles around his cock.

He doubles down this time, both hands at his disposal along with his mouth. He circles the base, twists his tongue and sneaks his other hand down under Harry’s balls, teasing the thin skin with his fingertips. Harry’s sounds start to link together without pause so Louis does the one thing he always knows as a sure thing and presses his fingers up just behind Harry’s balls. It’s his go to move but he doesn’t expect Harry’s reaction, his lips lifting up off the bed as he comes right into Louis’s mouth, a drawn out moan followed by a gasp for air.

Louis moves slowly as he sucks Harry through the aftershocks, swallowing smoothly. He runs his hands over Harry’s hips, his thumbs slotting along the curves there. He pulls back, his mind flashing with a new neon sign: Nothing is ever going to be the same. The thought disappears like a soap bubble as he drags his eyes up over Harry’s sweaty torso, the long lean lines of his arms thrown over his head, the fucked out smile playing on his lips. Louis kisses his hip and then slides up over him to meet his eyes.

“Five,” Harry says, smiling when Louis settles with their chests pressed together.

“What?” Louis asks. He can’t take his eyes off Harry’s red lips, the bite marks there from Harry’s teeth - Louis being the reason for it all.

“Five stars,” Harry says, grinning so hard his dimple curves in. “Five stars on Yelp.”

Louis groans and then he’s laughing, kissing Harry’s lips and letting Harry lick into his mouth, taste himself on Louis’s tongue. It’s quiet save for the sound their lips make as they click together, the ruffle of the bed covers as they make adjustments.

“Your mouth is like a shot of morphine,” Harry says at one point.

Louis immediately rises up on his hands to look at him. “Say what now?” Harry is some kind of pretty like this, flushed and a bit haphazard, his softening cock pressed under the lowest curve of Louis’s stomach.

“I don’t know exactly,” Harry says and then his lips split as he yawns, his eyes turning to happy moons.

“You’re one of those guys aren’t you?” Louis says, smiling as Harry smacks his lips. “The guy who orgasms and then becomes useless.”

Harry smiles, “I’m not but you may have turned me into one.”
Louis laughs and then kisses him, one hand scratching back through his hair. Admittedly, Louis’s cock has gone half soft in the last fifteen minutes or so, his mind more focused on bringing Harry off. He tongues Harry lazily and thinks he could probably make himself fall asleep by the time he got back to his apartment after a cab ride. Sure, he’s turned on enough he could scream and would like an orgasm of his own but he’ll figure out how to make do if Harry falls asleep under him right now.

“Tired?” Louis asks quietly like they haven’t already established that.

“Mm,” Harry hums, his fingers scratching gently up Louis’s back. It makes goosebumps rise on his skin, his legs squirming happily at the sensation. “Not quite yet.”

With those three words he rises up and then Louis is the one on his back, Harry hovering over him with a smile touching one side of his lips, a determined look in his eyes. “Yeah?” Louis asks, the fire he just convinced himself was out already reigniting in his stomach at full force.

Harry nods, kissing him slowly. “Need to get my five star review now.”

He’s nothing if not efficient as he kicks off his jeans and boxers while he kisses Louis, their bare chests pressing together as they trade breaths. Louis lets his eyes slip closed as Harry kisses along his neck and then exhales on a soft breath as Harry licks along the words along his collarbones with his tongue.

His cock is stirring while Harry works his way down the front of his body in no particular hurry. He takes his time with his teeth and tongue, turning Louis into a bit of a mess, his hips and his hands twitching against the bed. Harry doesn’t pause as he pulls at the button on Louis’s jeans and then works them over his thighs, his mouth drawing a sloppy line over the top of his boxers.

Louis helps the best he can, moving his legs to help get his jeans moving, laughing guiltily when he knees Harry in the stomach. He gets lost in watching Harry’s eyes, the slow way they move from his ankles to his knees, up his thighs and over his stomach to his chest, finally meeting Louis’s gaze. There’s a heated weight to the way Harry seems to be taking him in. Louis does his best not to shiver under the attention.

“Hi,” Harry whispers, sitting back on his knees gloriously naked.

“Hi,” Louis says just the same.

He can see the muscle of Harry’s thighs like this, the way his stomach balloons with each breath. There’s a pause of a moment when Louis wonders about the other beds Harry has been in naked, the other people who have got to see him like this, gotten to see this look in his eyes. The moment ends in a blink as Harry starts crawling up over him again; a stark reminder that regardless of who else has had Harry like this - Louis is the one who gets him, has him, now.

Harry kisses him like he’s read his mind, his hips dropping low to press up against Louis. Harry smiles against his mouth as his hand curves over the front of Louis’s body and then presses right where Louis needs him most; much needed pressure against his aching cock through his boxers.

Louis’s response is anything but elegant as he presses his head back into the pillow with a groan, his eyes rolling back. Harry alternates each kiss with a squeeze or press of his hand, and it makes Louis’s mind go fizzy as he tries to figure out what is happening.

“H,” Louis whispers out like a prayer as Harry moves to his neck again. This time the movement of his tongue against his skin matches with his hand slipping under the waistband of Louis’s boxers. He swears he sees stars as Harry wraps his hand around him. His toes point and his
muscles contract when Harry moves his hand steadily, his mouth sucking a focused mark on the side of his neck.

“Baby,” Louis manages when it feels like his senses are being pulled in every direction and he maywell burst in the middle at any moment.

Harry leaves one lingering bite and then he’s back to looking at Louis’s face with smiling eyes. “Good?” He asks, kissing Louis instead of waiting for an answer. Louis’s nod is disrupted by the perfect pressure of Harry’s hand, a twisting motion that sends his stomach twisting in the best way as his mouth goes slack.

His vision is blurry as seemingly every molecule in his body is focused on the hand on his cock. Fire collects in his stomach in a molten haze, his spine a mess of fizzing sensations. He clenches his back teeth as Harry picks up his pace, his head dropped down as he watches his hand moving between them.

Louis arches into another kiss against Harry’s plush mouth and then Harry is gone in a hurry, moving down between Louis’s legs without letting up the pressure of his hand. Louis lifts his head to watch as Harry pulls his boxers down his thighs with one hand to get Louis’s cock out fully. He licks his lips and Louis loses it for a moment, his eyes squeezed tight. He’s never thought about having his cock between Harry’s lips and now it’s all he really wants - that and the orgasm pulsing right up against the walls of his abdomen.

His chest heaves as his lungs fight for air, his eyes darting between Harry’s hand working against him and Harry’s concentrated face as he watches Louis’s cock like it’s a particularly interesting species of animal. Louis’s stomach tightens as his legs shoot straight, the fizz in his spine and fire in his belly preparing to meet in the middle as Harry thumbs over the head of his cock. Harry licks the precome his thumb has collected and then makes Louis’s dreams come true as he traces the head of Louis’s cock with the broadside of his tongue.

Immediately Louis wants to be buried in the heat of Harry’s mouth, to press inside until he touches the back of Harry’s throat. He never gets the chance, though, as Harry takes him into his mouth slowly with his eyes cast up and Louis absolutely loses it. The fire and the fizz converge in a heady mix, his entire body tightening as comes, his heels pressing into the bed and his heart taking a drumstick to the walls of his chest.

If Harry is surprised by the suddenness, he certainly doesn’t show it, his hand keeping a steady but lighter pace, his lips staying tight. The fizz settles into a pleasant haze as Harry finally lets Louis drop from his mouth. He kisses a line straight up the center of his stomach and chest to his lips, letting his tongue dip into Louis’s mouth as they kiss. “How was that?” Harry asks after a quiet moment of kisses.

“Eh,” Louis says, keeping a perfectly straight face. “Alright, I guess.”

Harry actually looks offended and then Louis starts laughing, the post-orgasm cloud fluttering around them. He pulls Harry down to him, one hand in his hair, and whispers just before he kisses him, “It was a five, you loser.”

Eventually their laughter between kisses goes quiet and their lazy makeout turns to sleepy pecks, sweat drying tacky on their bodies. They’ve ended up on their sides, facing each other with their ankles hooked together. “I should go,” Louis says as he feels a yawn blooming at the back of his throat. He covers his mouth with his hand.

Harry has been tracing Louis’s tattoos on his arm without quite looking at them. “You’re not staying?” he asks, nothing accusing in his voice only curious.
Louis actually pauses, his eyes stuck right on Harry’s. The thought of staying hadn’t even crossed his mind. “I wasn’t planning to,” he says. At least he’s honest. It’s the one thing he’s got going for him at the moment.

“Well, you’re welcome to,” Harry says with an abrupt smile that leaves Louis’s stomach feeling funny.

He lets himself sit in the uncomfortableness as his eyes trace Harry’s face then he flops onto his back and rubs his face with his hands. He turns his head to look at Harry and finds his eyes already closed, his lips parted as he starts to doze.

“Just stay,” Harry says, opening his eyes slowly like he can tell Louis is watching him. “Please.”

Louis isn’t sure if it’s the exhaustion or the please that does it but he finds himself nodding with a quiet, “Okay.”

“One condition,” he adds as Harry smiles. “I need a phone charger.”

Harry sighs loudly when he opens his eyes. “You mean I have to get up to get you a phone charger.” Louis raises his eyebrows and Harry caves, hauling himself up off the bed to fish an extra charger out of his nightstand.

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**SATURDAY ~ Day 25**

Louis’s phone wakes him up in a hurry, vibrating on the bed where he left it when he fell asleep. He opens his eyes once he realizes what’s causing the ruckus, blinking and taking stock of his body. His legs are twisted with Harry’s, and Harry has ended up with his face pressed to the front of Louis’s neck. Louis swallows drily and reaches behind himself for his phone, turning off the alarm he can’t remember setting. He’s not sure how they’ve ended up like this, Harry’s stomach pressing against his with each breath, Harry’s soft mouth pressed up against jaw.

He doesn’t get much time to wonder as his phone vibrates in his hand again. He squints at the screen as three consecutive texts pop up. He slides his finger to read them and then says, “Oh fuck,” loud enough Harry sits up immediately while Louis falls backward.

“What is it?” Harry asks, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands.

Louis doesn’t know if he should be impressed by the suddenness of Harry’s alertness or concerned at how lightly he sleeps. As it is, there’s really no time to decide. “I’m going to Boston for a pitch,” Louis says, already crawling to the end of the bed and grabbing the first pair of boxers he finds.

“Oh,” Harry repeats, holding the word out longer. “Those are my jeans.”

Louis looks down at the jeans he’s starting to pull over his thighs and groans, kicking them back onto the ground. “Where are mine?” He asks even as he finds them and shakes them out.

He’s buttoning them when he makes the mistake of glancing at Harry on the bed. He looks like something out of a magazine, the sheet draped lazily over half his body, one bare leg bent at the
knee, his torso endless as he reaches his hands over his head to stretch, his head tipping back
against the pillow. Louis wants to crawl back into bed with him, he wants to kiss his skin all over
and spend a full day figuring out everything he didn’t get to learn last night. They’ve thrown the
door to intimacy wide open and he wants to revel in it - but, always but, he really has a train to
catch.

“Do you already have a bag packed?” Harry asks, sitting up again slowly and spurring Louis back
into motion.

“Nope,” Louis says, throwing his shirt over his head and struggling to get his arms in the correct
holes. He sits on the edge of the bed and grabs for his socks, incredibly aware of Harry’s eyes
watching him.

“Sorry,” Harry says quietly. “For asking you to stay.”

Louis pauses with the sock halfway over his foot. “Seriously?” He looks over his shoulder, a
question in his smirk. Harry swallows but stays still and Louis feels it somewhere near his heart.
He laughs lightly as he pulls his sock the rest of the way on and then he flips over onto his knees.
He crawls to Harry on all fours, pausing right in front of him. “Me not packing a bag earlier is my
fault, not yours. And, for the record,” he smiles, pushing his fingers through the front of Harry’s
hair, “I don’t regret last night at all.”

Harry arches slightly as Louis kisses him and Louis wonders how he’s supposed to be able to
leave him naked in bed and remotely focus for the rest of the day. “You gotta go,” Harry says,
pulling back like he’s read his mind.

“I gotta go,” Louis repeats scurrying off the bed and down the stairs without pausing. He only gets
a few steps down before he has to go back for his phone, grabbing it off the bed while Harry
watches him with an amused smile.

He races down the stairs again, shoving his phone in his pocket. He yanks his coat from the rack
and puts it on, shoves his foot in one shoe before realizing he’s still only got one sock on. “Fuck
me,” he whispers, already turning to run back up the stairs.

Harry has beat him to it, standing at the bottom of the stairs with a pair of sweats low on his hips,
Louis’s missing sock dangling from his finger. Louis flashes him a smile as he grabs it and slips it
over his bare foot. He jams his foot in the second shoe and then pulls open the door with a quick,
“Bye,” before he shuts it after him.

He presses the button for the elevator twice, impatient but not enough to actually take the stairs.
The doors slide open right as he realizes how he’s just left Harry after, perhaps, one of the biggest
nights of their relationship. He slaps the side of the elevator and runs back to Harry’s door,
pounding on it like there’s a fire licking his heels, the sound echoing around the hallway.

Harry opens the door with his lips parted like he’s going to complain but Louis doesn’t let him.
Closing the distance between them, his hands on Harry’s waist, he kisses him as hard as he can
until he can’t quite breathe and then he pulls back. “I’ll call you when I get to Boston,” he says.
One more kiss to Harry’s stunned mouth and then he’s back out the door and slamming his finger
into the elevator call button again.

He hears the click of a door and then Harry is in the hallway, his arms crossed over his bare chest.
“You are so weird,” he calls just loud enough for Louis and a few neighbors to hear him.

He glances over at Harry as the elevator arrives to find him with his bottom lip caught between his teeth and his eyes bright. “I think I do,” he says, quieter. Louis smiles as he steps in the elevator.

SUNDAY ~ Day 26

Louis wakes up somewhere in southern Connecticut after a brief nap on the afternoon train home to the city. His face has been pressed to the window and he has to nearly peel his cheek off the glass. Liz and Michael, his co-workers, are in the seats across from him and still dozing as he stretches out his neck and checks his watch.

Yesterday, the pitch had been successful - as had the celebration after. He still has the tinge of a hangover even though he’s drank every bottle of water he’s touched since waking up this morning. There wasn’t time to shower before their train, though and now he keeps getting a gentle whiff of tequila whenever he breathes.

He’d managed to call Harry last night from the hotel - on the sloppy side of drunk - as he got ready for bed. Waking up this morning, he couldn’t remember what exactly they’d talked about other than he’s almost positive he fell asleep before disconnecting the call.

Now he sends Harry a text to find out his evening plans. Louis already knows his own evening plans involve getting Shake Shack and staying horizontal; he’s hoping Harry will be game. Harry responds with a picture of his lower half stretched out on his couch with a simple “this” and Louis quite nearly pumps his fist in celebration. Instead he responds, “don’t move. be there in two hours”.

Of course two hours turns to three because traffic is terrible and no one in New York knows how to operate a vehicle in the rain but eventually Louis shows up in Harry’s lobby with two cheeseburgers and two orders of fries. The doorman waves him past without a word and Louis is mostly concerned for Harry’s safety but slightly curious what the doorman thinks of him.

When Harry answers his door, Louis can tell he’s surprised to find him there, a pillow crease on the skin of his cheek and sleepy eyes. “Napping?” Louis asks with a smile.

Harry shrugs, “You told me to stay put. I was bound to fall asleep.”

“Valid,” Louis says with a nod of his head. They both stand there in a quiet moment that lingers just looking at each other. It’s been just over twenty-four hours since Louis left him in this very same spot but it feels like it could have been much longer.

“Hi,” Harry says quietly, smiling softly.

“Hey, you.” Louis matches his smile and then leans forward to kiss him - soft and quiet. “Can I come in?”

Harry slides to the side as his cheeks dust the lightest pink. “Of course.”

“I brought dinner,” Louis says, lifting up the bag in his hands.

“You’re an angel,” he says. “I was just considering ordering something but I didn’t want to get off the couch.”

Louis laughs lightly as he steps out of his shoes and Harry takes the bag from him, already heading for the couch. “But you got off the couch to let me in?”
“I thought maybe god was answering my prayers and delivering food to me on accident,” Harry calls over his shoulder.

“He kind of did,” Louis says, following after him.

“The delivery guy isn’t so bad either,” he says with a smirk.

“Isn’t so bad?” Louis scrunches his nose, “The compliments just roll off your tongue don’t they?”

Harry doesn’t respond as he arranges himself in the corner of the couch, pulling his feet up under him. He takes a hamburger out and places the bag on the center cushion. Louis watches with an amused smirk as Harry unfolds the paper wrapper and takes a huge bite of his burger, barely containing it all as he starts to chew. “Are you gonna sit?” He asks when he looks up, mouth full, still in the process of chewing. He looks the picture of curious, his eyebrows raised.

“Oh, wow, am I allowed?” Louis says. “First you say I’m not so bad then you start eating the food I bought without waiting for me. What kind of date is this?”

Harry swallows and smiles. “Not a date. I’m just giving you a preview of me as a boyfriend. You know, if you’re interested.” His voice is light but there’s a flash of something in his eyes; something like take it or leave it.

Louis grins and crosses the floor, takes the empty spot on the other side of the couch. He grabs the second burger out of the bag and leans back as he looks at the paused television screen. “What are we watching?”

He feels Harry’s eyes on him and when he glances over he finds him smiling as he chews, something unreadable in his eyes. “Peaky Blinders,” he says grabbing the remote and pushing play. “Season two.”

“That’s my boy,” Louis says, unwrapping his burger. He doesn’t realize the weight of the words until he takes his first bite.

Over the course of the next episode, they make clean work of the burgers and the fries, the empty bag and greasy napkins left on the coffee table. “I need a fucking shower,” Louis says, stretching his arms over his head as the credits roll. “I think there’s tequila coming out of my pores.”

Harry smiles, “Shower here. What? Is that weird?” He asks when Louis raises his eyebrows. He’s never showered at Harry’s before not that it’s an innately intimate thing to do but it’s a first. Still, he knows he’ll feel better once he does and he’s not exactly ready to leave Harry after half of a Peaky Blinders episode spent quietly shoving their faces. “You don’t mind?” He asks, dropping his hands to his lap.

“Of course not,” Harry says. “Just grab clothes from my stuff. I know where you live so I’m sure I’ll get it back.”

Louis laughs as he stands, “Good insurance, babe.”

“I’m going to start the next episode while you’re gone,” Harry says, yawning. “That okay?”

“Considering you’re six months behind me already?” Louis smirks, “Go for it.” He runs his fingers back through Harry’s hair as he passes, scratching and smiling at Harry’s answering hum.

By the time Louis finishes the shower, he’s not sure if it’s the hot water or Harry’s rose salt scrub that has him feeling like his life has changed and his soul has healed. Perhaps it’s the ridiculously
fluffy towels Harry has or the soft grey sweats Louis finds to wear, a crewneck sweatshirt with UCLA printed across the front that envelopes him in warmth. Any of that, or the magical powers of a hamburger and fries after a night of drinking are kicking in.

There’s no strange uncertainty of wondering where everything is located as he gets dressed. Louis putters around the bathroom putting on moisturizer and stealing Harry’s deodorant and then wanders to the kitchen for a glass of water. He grabs a second glass for Harry and makes his way back toward the familiar Peaky Blinders sounds of gunshots and blood splatter on the television. Frankly, he’s surprised Harry has made it two seasons of the show considering his distaste for all things resembling anything like violence.

As he approaches the couch, he’s pretty sure he finds out why. Harry is lying lengthwise on the couch with one hand shielding his eyes. With each successive gunshot he drops his hand to cover his eyes and then lifts it to watch the dialogue. “I can see you,” Louis sings as he rounds the corner.

“Busted,” Harry whispers, looking up at Louis with wide eyes. He scratches his eyebrow, eyes tracking as Louis sets down the glasses of water.

“I was literally just wondering how you’d made it this far with so much violence.”

“I like it,” Harry protests lightly. “I just wish they’d stop taking people’s eyes out of their sockets like that.”

Louis chokes on a sip of water. “That’s a valid complaint.”

“Good shower?”

“Very.” Louis sizes up Harry taking up the whole couch versus the chair on the other side of the room and decides on the former being the most comfortable. He lifts Harry’s legs at the ankles and sits down before replacing them easily in his lap. He lets his hand rest on Harry’s ankle absently as he relaxes back. “That rose salt scrub is incredible, by the way.”

“I know,” Harry says, exiting Netflix and letting the news run. He turns it down a couple of levels so they can hear each other. “Gemma got me a peppermint one too and I swear to god it clears your sinuses.”

“Magic.”

“Magic,” Harry echoes. “Hey, tell me about yesterday.”

“I thought I did,” Louis says, looking over. His thumb traces Harry’s ankle bone in the space between the end of his sweats and where his sock starts; his skin smooth and warm. “I called you last night, yeah?”

“You did,” Harry allows. “But you didn’t tell me how everything went. If you were celebrating or commiserating.”

Louis licks his lip suddenly curious. He can only see the motions of his call with Harry last night: holding his phone up while laying on the bed, climbing under the covers and dropping the phone, finally getting it set on the pillow opposite him. He can’t hear the words he was saying when he pictures it - for better or for worse. “Definitely celebrating,” he says. “We got the campaign.”

“Congratulations,” Harry says, wiggling his toes in Louis’s lap. “What’s this one for?”

“The Grammy museum up there is doing a Prince exhibit and needs graphics.”
Harry’s eyes go wide, “No fucking way.”

“I’ll invite you to the opening as long as you don’t jizz your pants when you walk in.”

“Rude,” Harry protests, laughing.

“I don’t even know what I’m talking about. I still have to actually do all the sketches and get those approved, all the rendering—”

“Hey,” Harry cuts him off, “You’re not following the rules.”

“What rules?”

“Lazy Sunday rules. No work talk.”

Louis laughs, “Is this the lazy Sunday we’re always talking about?”

Harry smiles, “Yes. Kind of. It’s a preview of what a lazy Sunday could be.”

“Okay, well you’re the one asked me about work, so you’re not following the rules either.”

Harry presses his lips together. “Only because I wanted to congratulate you for being so good at your job.”

“Except going into the conversation, you weren’t sure if I had gotten the deal or lost it.” Louis smirks like they’re in a courtroom and Harry’s on the stand.

Harry smiles, “I was gauging your mood before I tell you what you told me last night.”

Louis stops his light touches on Harry’s ankles, holding his hands still. “And what is that?” Harry shrugs the best he can while laying down. “What? Would you have told me if I said I lost the pitch?”

Harry grins, “To make you feel better, maybe.”

“Harry Styles,” Louis says, squeezing his ankles. “What kind of secret are you keeping?”

“Nothing,” Harry says. Though he tries not to, he smiles through the word.

Louis can’t help the smile he matches with. “Nothing?” He smooths his hand down to Harry’s feet, moving his fingers lightly.

“Fuck you,” Harry says seriously, “do not tickle me.”

“Are you saying if I tickle you, I’ll get something out of it?”

“No,” Harry says. Then, louder, “No,” as Louis wiggles his fingers more. Harry starts kicking as he laughs and Louis lets his feet go to dive for his stomach instead, his fingers slipping under Harry’s shirt and tickling along his warm skin. The kicking grows more voracious as Louis fights to get on top of him, pinning him to the couch as he squirms, his laughter loud and echoing around the apartment.

“Mercy,” Harry yells when Louis nearly makes it to his armpits with his fingers. “Mercy,” he says again, gasping for air as Louis stills. Their hips are pressed together and their legs have gotten all twisted up in the short span of their battle.
“I never knew you were ticklish,” Louis says, sliding his hands to the curve of Harry’s waist but leaving them under his shirt. He can feel Harry’s stomach ballooning as he catches his breath. “How did I not know?”

“Not a topic in friendly conversation, yeah?”

“Guess not,” Louis says, drumming his fingers along Harry’s skin lightly. Reveling in the warmth and smoothness of his best friend’s skin is probably not a normal topic in friendly conversation either.

As if Harry can sense Louis’s mind twisting over something dark he curves his neck up to kiss him. Louis deepens the kiss easily, his hands sliding under the dip of Harry’s back to hold him closer. “What’d I tell you last night?” He asks when he pulls back.

“Nothing,” Harry says, pressing a quick kiss against Louis’s neck before laying his head back on the pillow.

Louis starts to move his fingertips around Harry’s lower back in soothing circles. “Why won’t you tell me?”

“Why don’t you remember is the better question.”

“I was drunk,” Louis says blandly like it should be obvious. “Very, very drunk.”

“I know,” Harry says, huffing a quiet puff of air through his nose. “I was honored you called me, honestly.”

Louis isn’t sure what to say next; particularly because he doesn’t remember calling Harry or the reasoning other than that he did. What triggered it and what happened during the call remain a mystery.

“I think you’re becoming my default,” Louis says, studying the curve of Harry’s top lip, the freckle hidden there. “The person I call when I have news or want to talk. When I’m drunk, apparently. I don’t even remember what it’s like to make plans with anyone else.” With their bodies pressed together he feels the way Harry’s body tenses under his. “I like it.” He whispers the final three words and it feels heavy but it also feels honest.

Harry’s smile grows slowly, but something about it is hesitant. Louis can’t quite read it but then he feels Harry’s muscles relax and wonders if that is answer enough.

“What did I say last night?” Louis asks again. “Why won’t you tell me?”

Harry presses his lips together and blinks a couple times before answering. “I kind of like having the secret for myself. I wasn’t sure if you’d remember or not. But,” he grins, “You were really fucking drunk so I figured you might not.”

Louis narrows his eyes and bites the edge of Harry’s jaw lightly, growling like a feral cat. It makes Harry try to squirm away so Louis links his fingers beneath his back to keep him still. “Tell me,” he whispers against Harry’s jaw and then kisses the same spot. “Please.”

“You said you had a crush on me.”

Louis laughs, confused. “What gave me away? The fact I had your dick in my mouth twenty-four hours before that or me laying on top of you right now?”

Harry rolls his eyes and flicks Louis’s cheek lightly. “You said you’d had a crush on me since we
met, you idiot.”

Louis raises his eyebrows, “I did?”

“Yes. You said it was the only way to explain the way you feel about me now. If you had felt it all along.”

Louis faceplants right into Harry’s chest, breathing in through his nose and inhaling Harry’s fabric softener. He feels Harry’s laugh when it bumps in his chest, his cheeks flooding with heat as Harry twists his fingers in the top of his hair gently. He can’t ever remember having those thoughts soberly so he can’t imagine how they were articulated to Harry via a telephone call while intoxicated.

“Yikes,” he says finally, lifting his head from Harry’s chest to look at him.

“Why is that yikes?” Harry asks, his hand smoothing over Louis’s hair to cup his face, his thumb swaying under his eye.

“I’m embarrassed,” Louis says. “I can’t believe I said that.”

“Because it’s not true?” Harry doesn’t sound judgemental, only curious, but the weight of Louis’s answer rests on his tongue.

“Not necessarily,” he says slowly. “But because the first time I said something like that, it shouldn’t have been while I was drunk. I certainly shouldn’t have forgotten I said it.”

Harry lifts his eyebrows, “So it is true?”

Louis takes a deep breath. “Honestly, I’m not sure.” He smiles at Harry’s snort. “I think drunk me may have been trying to figure out an explanation.”

“For what?”

“For the reason this feels so right,” is what he lands on.

Harry’s hand smoothes down Louis’s neck to his chest, resting over his heart. “Do we need a reason?”

Louis feels like they do. He feels like they need a way to explain why this is working, why they didn’t do it before. They need a reason, he needs a reason, as to why he feels like he could start falling in love with his best friend at any moment.

For now he only answers with a kiss, squishing Harry’s hand between their chests. He slips his hands lower over Harry’s back so his fingertips tease the top of Harry’s sweatpants as he kisses him deeper, sealing their bodies together so nothing can come between. Harry opens his mouth to him and sighs the sweetest sound that has Louis forgetting about everything else altogether in an effort to hear the same sigh twice.

*
"ILYSB (Stripped)" - LANY

"Mad cool in all my clothes
Mad warm when you get close to me
Slow dance these summer nights
Our disco ball's my kitchen light."

* 

MONDAY ~ Day 27

Monday goes as Mondays typically do: like walking up a hill and never quite getting to the top. Louis wakes up later than he wants and then the subway is delayed by twenty minutes anyway. His office is a wreck when he finally arrives - his team running around like actual chickens with no heads because a deadline has been moved up by a week. He’s forced to call a team meeting before he’s even had a cup of coffee to tell everyone to calm the fuck down while pretending he isn’t fighting a mild anxiety attack at the thought of an earlier deadline.

At lunch he shuts his door and eats a powerbar as he tries to catch up on emails from the weekend and then spends the afternoon sketching a plan for the new account they pitched on Saturday. Usually sketching soothes him but this time it just stresses him out further, nothing looking the way he wants it to. By the time he leaves the office at night, he’s over caffeinated from distracting himself with coffee all afternoon and his stomach keeps growingl at random intervals. The subway is crowded and too warm, the damp smell of wet rain jackets infiltrating every corner. All Louis can think about is getting home, cooking pasta, and sharing an entire bottle of wine with himself.

On the walk from the subway station, he realizes he needs to call Harry but he’s unsure what to say other than to state the fact they just can’t see each other tonight. He’s in a bad mood and he’s not positive Harry’s sweet disposition will do anything to quell it. More so, he’s worried he’ll end up picking a meaningless fight just for something to do with his restless energy.

When his phone lights up with Harry’s photo, he actually jolts at the incoming call. He isn’t particularly religious but it seems like a glaring sign from god to not avoid the inevitable. He clears his throat as he answers, turning the final corner to his apartment.

“I’m at the grocery store,” Harry says without much else of a greeting. “How do you feel about salmon with mango salsa and roasted asparagus?”

Louis nearly groans at the mental image his brain conjures up for him. “I love all three of those things,” he says even though he wouldn’t normally consider mango salsa going anywhere near salmon. His stomach thinks otherwise at the moment.

“Can I make it for you?”
“What?”

“I want to cook you dinner. Tonight.”

Louis can count two other times anyone has ever offered to make him dinner - once in exchange for the answers to a math test in college and once when an ex wanted to discuss how she was breaking up with him - while they ate the dinner she made. “What’s the catch?” Louis asks. He’s touched but not moved, the dark cloud of today still hovering over the back of his mind.

“No catch,” Harry says. “I wanted it to be a surprise but then I didn’t know if you liked salmon or mango or asparagus and I wasn’t sure how to break into your apartment without also going to jail—”

Unwittingly, a smile has bloomed on Louis’s lips just listening to Harry ramble. The grey cloud lift just slightly from its perch over his head. “H, stop it,” he says. “You can come cook me dinner. I’d love it.”

“Really?”

Harry sounds doubtful and Louis’s smile widens as he tries to get his key from his bag, approaching his apartment. It’s easy to forget in the scheme of all this, how well Harry knows him outside of this dating dynamic they’ve cooked up. He knows when Louis is doing favors to be nice and when he’s genuine. And, he knows when to question either as being false. “Yes, really,” Louis says. “Call me when you’re here, I’ll buzz you up.”

“Checking out now,” Harry says as a dull beeping of the cash register covers his voice. “Do I need to bring wine?”

“I have some,” Louis says. “I’ll play nice and share.”

He can almost hear Harry’s smile when he says, “Yeah, yeah, see you soon.”

In the elevator, Louis looks at himself in the mirror along the wall as it climbs. He’s worn out and a bit moody but he can’t help but notice the brightness in his eyes, the pinkness in his cheeks. He reaches out with his hand and presses his palm to the mirror and chuckles. “This is what you get for dating Harry Styles,” he says only to himself. “A fucking glow.”

Yesterday evening with Harry had been sweet though their make out session had been shortened right when it started to turn the corner to something hot. They had shifted from kissing to essentially dry humping on the couch, moans pressed against mouths as Louis pushed his hips down against Harry’s. Then Harry had thrown his head back and pushed Louis up with both hands on his shoulders. Louis, confused, had folded back easily even as he tried to catch his breath. “This can’t just be sex,” Harry said, running his hand back through his hair; his face covered with a light sheen of sweat.

“Okay,” Louis said, putting his hands on his thighs as his breath returned to normal. He adjusted his sweats to cover the boner clearly not accepting of Harry’s terms.

“I just—” Harry frowned, “I want there to be sex. With you. But I don’t want us to lose everything else we want to be trying because we just decide to fuck for the next twenty days. If we have sex everytime we see each other, it’s not going to be about anything else. I don’t want that.”

Louis blinked over each word, his blood flow returning to a more regular pattern away from his cock. “Okay,” he repeated, understanding then. It’s a bit of a compliment, if he squints. “Okay, H,” he said again, nodding. With a few more kisses, and Louis physically pulling himself away, he’d finally left.
Leaving had done little to quell the want curling in his stomach then, the same that emerges now as he steps from the elevator. Now he’s gotten a taste of Harry in that way, of them together, and he already wants another one. He shakes his head as he lets himself in the apartment. The menu tonight is salmon, mango salsa and asparagus; he won’t let his hopes go any scope above that.

Just in case, though, he throws his bed in some semblance of being made and puts his dirty laundry in the hamper. He lights a couple of candles and then blows them out with an eye roll. When Harry calls to say he’s in the lobby, Louis buzzes him up and gets the lighter again. He re-lights the two candles he’s just blown out and a third one just because. He takes a deep breath as Harry knocks. Twenty-seven days in and he’s still able to stress himself out about something as simple as a dinner date.

Harry is the picture of a boyfriend when Louis opens the door; black jeans and red button down shirt, a soft smile on his lips. He has a grocery bag in the crook of his arm and he’s holding a small bouquet of flowers. It’s a miracle Louis doesn’t pass out on the spot; not for anything bad but because he swears he’s just seen his future flash before his eyes and Harry fits right in.

“If it isn’t Prince Charming,” Louis says, pulling open the door fully. “Offering to cook me dinner and now you show up with flowers?”

Harry smiles, sheepish. “I like having fresh flowers in my apartment during the week. I thought you might too.”

Louis presses his lips together to stop himself from asking, Who are you? For every part of Harry he already knows, there seems to be more pieces hidden and waiting to emerge. “Thank you,” he says, stepping forward to kiss Harry softly and taking the flowers into his arms.

Harry gets started in the kitchen while Louis fumbles through his cupboards to find a vase. He’s pretty positive he doesn’t own a vase in the first place but he refuses to give up. Harry watches, clearly amused, as he preheats the oven and gets started with snapping the ends off the asparagus. He’s found a cutting board, a knife, a baking sheet, and olive oil while Louis carries his bouquet around in circles.

“You don’t have a vase, do you?” Harry asks, smirking as he collects the asparagus into a bowl. He starts to drip olive oil on them and glances up at Louis.

“Yeah, no, I don’t.”

“Just put them in a big cup,” Harry says. He uses his hands to coat the asparagus in the oil. “Promise I won’t judge you.”

Louis gets a glass from the cupboard and waits to fill it with water as Harry rinses his hands at the sink. “This is the fundamental difference between us,” Louis says. He checks the temperature of the water to make sure it’s cool before filling the glass. He switches it off with his wrist and moves to the island in the center of the space.

“That you don’t have a vase?”

“Yes. And you probably have multiple,” Louis says. He fishes out a pair of scissors and cuts the paper from around the flowers before trimming their ends. He feels Harry’s eyes as he pours the flower vitamin mix into the water.

“Is that some sort of deal breaker? You can borrow one of my vases next time.”

“No. Just pointing it out.” Louis arranges the flowers and then puts his hands on his hips,
“Thoughts?”

“They look pretty with or without a vase,” Harry says confidently. “Now, I think I was promised a glass of wine?”

Louis turns away from his flowers. “You don’t need me to help cook?”

Even as he says it, Harry is already dumping the asparagus on the wax paper covering the baking sheet, two salmon fillets sitting at his elbow wrapped in butcher paper. “Nope,” he says. “This should all be done in like twenty minutes. I just have to make the salsa.”

“Fine,” Louis says with a sigh, “I’ll get the wine, then.” Harry grins at him.

They finish the first glass while the salmon and asparagus bake, and Harry works on the mango salsa. Louis sits at the kitchen island being completely unhelpful but mesmerized by how quickly Harry works, chopping and mixing without measuring a thing. If he’s honest about it, Louis is a little turned on by Harry’s knife skills but he definitely doesn’t admit that out loud.

While Harry plates the food once it finishes cooking, Louis refills their glasses and relocates one of the candles to the kitchen table. It looks properly romantic which isn’t usually his style but Harry seems pleased as he brings the plates over. “Looks incredible,” Louis says, stopping him to slip a hand on his waist and kiss the side of his jaw.

“Let’s hope the taste test goes well,” he says. He leaves a sweeping kiss on Louis’s lips and then sets the plates in their spots with a cliche, “Bon Appetit,” thrown in for good measure.

By now, dinners together are comfortable - even in the silence they fall into every once in awhile. Louis thinks it’s always been this way between them but there’s something new in the way he rests his bare feet over Harry’s socked ones, and the way Harry constructs the perfect bite of salmon, asparagus and salsa then feeds it to Louis off his fork. They both laugh as Harry ends up using his fingers to keep the food from falling out of Louis’s mouth before he can close his lips around the bite.

Louis tells Harry about his day, the way nothing seemed to fit together correctly and everything was in his way. Harry’s easy laughter leaves Louis forgetting why it was so terrible in an effort just to make Harry laugh again. He can hardly believe he thought he hadn’t wanted to see Harry tonight. Not when Harry has become his balm against a bad day; the one person capable of making things right.

Harry keeps his Prince Charming title slightly longer after dinner as Louis clears the table, announcing he’s brought cheesecake for dessert. “I hid it in the fridge when you were looking for a vase,” he says, smiling.

“Sneaky,” Louis says. Then, he has to hip check Harry away from the sink so he can do the dishes telling him to go sit down and relax considering he’s done most of the work already.

“Fine,” Harry huffs, spinning on his heel and going for the couch.

Louis isn’t wholly surprised when he hears his record player flip on and the early scratches of a record beginning to be played. He smiles to himself as “Born to Run” starts to filter through the not so great speaker. He looks up as Harry comes back into the kitchen, “Remember this?”

*Tramps like us, baby we were born to run.*

Louis smiles, “How could I not?”
It’d been one of the first nights they went out just the two of them because Zayn was busy. They’d gotten fantastically drunk on cheap tequila at a gay club and then dragged themselves to Louis’s apartment where they proceeded to play Bruce Springsteen’s Greatest Hits on repeat into the morning, singing along and telling each other stories, trying to keep their eyes open as three a.m. had turned to four.

“This is a fucking good song,” Harry says pointing toward the record player for emphasis.

“I agreed with you on that,” Louis says, putting a plate in the dishwasher and standing up. “We disagreed on Atlantic City.”

“Because it’s depressing.”

“It’s romantic,” Louis says, smiling over the familiar argument. “Tragically romantic. The sax makes it heartbreaking but he promises to stay forever.”

Harry curls his lip, “I don’t like tragic romance. Where’d we land on that one anyway?” He asks, crossing his ankles and leaning against the wall.

“Agreed to disagree,” Louis says. “Only because we were too exhausted to keep the argument going.”

Harry smiles, “Yeah, that sounds about right.”

Louis finishes the dishes and only then does he lets Harry back in the kitchen to prepare the cheesecake as Born to Run moves to Thunder Road in the background. They eat dessert in the same place they had dinner, the candle burning dangerously low between them. Eventually they move with their wine to the couch, sitting on opposite sides with their ankles and feet slotted together.

“I’ve been thinking about the weekend trip,” Harry says, wiggling his toes.

_The weekend trip._ In all honesty, the words don’t trigger anything for Louis. He takes a sip of his wine to cover the moment as his memory folds back together; back to the beginning of this thing when they said they’d take a weekend trip together - a standard test for a normal couple. “What about it?” Louis asks as he swallows.

Harry’s eyebrows move infinitesimally like he knows it’s taking a moment for Louis to catch up. “What if we went upstate? I was comped a stay at a ski lodge for a photoshoot we had there and I haven’t used it.”

“Really?” Louis grins, “That’d be perfect.”

Harry smiles, clearly happy with himself for suggesting it. “Cool. I’m thinking the last weekend before forty days is up. But I’ll check availability this week.”

“God, can we go tomorrow?” Louis asks, his head falling against the back of the couch. “I’d kill for a mini vacation right now.”

“Same,” Harry agrees. “My room installation officially ends in a couple days and then I might just hibernate.”

“We’ll have to celebrate,” Louis says. “Don’t think I forgot that Vogue feature, Mr. Styles. We’ll flash it at the door to all the clubs and make them give us bottle service.”

“I would die,” Harry says seriously. “Quite literally, I would die of embarrassment.”
Louis clicks his tongue, “We can’t have that. Our experiment will be ruined.”

“Yes,” Harry says, “That’s the main concern with that plan.”

Louis laughs as he takes another sip of wine. He’s on the best side of tipsy, feeling like they could sit here all night talking. Harry parts his lips like he’s going to say something and then thinks better of it and finishes his wine in a gulp. He teeters on the edge of the couch as he sets the glass down and then laughs when he lands it properly on the coffee table. “Impressive,” Louis comments.

“I need one more bite of cheesecake,” Harry announces, untangling his feet to stand up.

“I thought you were stuffed?”

Harry rubs a hand over his stomach, “I made room.” Louis isn’t sure how that happened but he laughs at Harry’s retreating figure. His wine is nearly gone now too and he thinks he should probably wrap things up in favor of going to bed soon. It is a Monday after all.

This time, however, Harry doesn’t read his thoughts. He comes back from the kitchen, chewing with his lips pressed together in a smirk. Louis sets his glass on the tall table running behind the couch, a question in his eyes. The record stops and the silence lays flat over them, both of them unmoving as their eyes catch. Louis swallows, suddenly nervous as Harry starts moving again. He stays perfectly still as Harry puts one knee between his feet on the couch and then adjusts so he’s on all fours, hovering over Louis’s legs.

“What’s this?” Louis asks, unable to help his smile as Harry crawls slowly up the couch until their faces meet.

“Just wanted to kiss you,” Harry whispers. He tilts his head and closes the distance between their lips, his mouth sweet like a bite of cheesecake.

“Well, alright,” Louis says in the next gap between their mouths before he’s silenced again with Harry’s tongue.

It takes some maneuvering and then Harry’s knees are on either side of Louis’s hips, his weight resting on Louis’s lap as they kiss. As Louis is getting used to, this feels like a spark plug when they let it. Harry holds his face between his hands and Louis can’t stop touching. His hands skim Harry’s sides to his shoulders and then back to his hips to squeeze their fullness and then under his shirt where his skin is warmest.

He scratches lightly over Harry’s back as their tongues play together, pausing when Harry takes his mouth to Louis’s neck, tiny bites enough to make him shift his hips. He slots his fingers in the indents of Harry’s ribs, his toes curling at Harry’s tongue and lips. His thumbs brush Harry’s nipples and he gets a satisfying buck of Harry’s hips against his. He does it again and is rewarded with a cut off groan that sends his blood storming through his body in a heated race.

With a nudge of his head, he gets Harry back to his mouth for a drawing kiss. He bites Harry’s bottom lip as he pinches one of his nipples again and he smiles at Harry’s eyes rolling toward the ceiling, his whole body going lax. Louis wants to replace his fingers with his mouth but there is not enough time and too much time all at once as he starts to lose his breath in another of Harry’s kisses.

His hands slip down under Harry’s the waist of his jeans, under the top of boxers until there’s nothing between his hands and Harry’s skin. He presses Harry’s hips forward and he goes easily, rolling his hips down as Louis thrusts up, a delicate dance with the heat between them skyrocketing. They separate from the kiss with a slick sound, their foreheads pressed together as
they watch where their hips roll together.

For once, Louis forgets to hesitate over Harry being his best friend and when he says, “Do you want to move to the bed?” he’s only thinking with the butterflies in his stomach and the heater behind his heart - all the things telling him to not let this moment pass by in a quiet fizz.

Harry’s answering kiss is confirmation; the whispered, “Yes,” an iron clad agreement.

They don’t make it to the bed for awhile after that, their hips pressing together in a learned rhythm, their tongues familiarizing themselves with each other after twenty four hours apart. Eventually, they get it right; Harry stands and Louis follows, pulling him into another kiss - soft and sweet like a promise. Louis ends up walking backward with Harry kissing him steadily, neither one pausing to actually see where they’re going. An absolute trust - perhaps blinded by lust - Louis will get them there in the end.

Despite Harry’s confidence, Louis doesn’t quite have eyes in the back of his head and ends up falling backwards onto his bed before he realizes a quiet, “Umph,” pressed against Harry’s lips. Somehow Harry stays standing as Louis flops, a quiet laugh between them.

Harry tugs his shirt over his head and Louis only takes a moment to stare before slipping out of his sweater, too. He undoes the button on his pants and then gets distracted as Harry moves his hips from side to side to pull off his jeans and briefs all at once leaving him there naked. He’s so unabashed with it, almost cocky as he smiles and crawls on the bed, his cock halfway to hard and pink between his thighs. He crowds low over Louis as he kisses him and Louis thinks he may just combust on the spot, too turned on by Harry’s bravado to even see straight. At least until he feels Harry’s feet against his.

“Do you have your socks on?” Louis sits up to look as Harry falls to the bed on the stomach. Just as he suspects, Harry’s bare legs are interrupted by black socks with tiny green polka dots. “You took off everything but your socks?”

Harry has his face pressed into the pillow but he tries to twist his feet together to get the socks off, much to Louis’s entertainment. “Stop it,” Louis says over his laughter. He gets ahold of one of Harry’s flailing calves and holds him still as he pulls off the sock. It drops to the floor as he repeats the same thing on the other foot, a careful kiss pressed to the knob of his ankle once they’re both bare.

Harry turns his face to look at him over his shoulder, his eyes bright as he smiles. “Do you have a thing for feet we should discuss?”

Louis narrows his eyes as he shakes his head and then he pinches the back of Harry’s bare thigh earning him a squeak and a near kick in the stomach. “No foot thing,” he says, sliding his knees outside of Harry’s to sit on the back of his thighs. “You have funny toes though.”

“Hey,” Harry says with a pout. He lifts his head to try and see what Louis is doing but lets it drop as Louis curves to press his lips on the lowest knob of his spine, smoothing his hands up over his ass.

Louis takes his time on Harry’s back, detouring with kisses to freckles before he comes back to the center line. His kisses connect with each other across Harry’s shoulders and up the back of his neck as Harry sighs quietly. Louis bites gently on his ear and whispers, “Turn over for me, lovely.”

Harry goes easily and Louis kisses him again, one hand tangling in the back of his hair. They kiss for awhile like that as Harry’s hands trace over Louis’s back. Eventually, his hands finish the job
Louis started; pulling the zip on his jeans and tugging them over his hips. Louis has to get off the bed to get the jeans off fully and he watches Harry get a hand around himself, squeezing as though to take the edge off. Louis has to palm himself for the same reason before getting back on the bed.

He takes a lazy route down Harry’s chest and belly, dropping kisses and dragging his teeth as he goes. He follows through on his earlier plan to suck at Harry’s nipple until he squirms, his hands squeezing Louis’s comforter under him. When Louis finally takes his cock into his mouth, he gets a keening echo from low in Harry’s chest, his hips lifting up. Louis presses him back down with his hands, swallowing around his length to take him deeper. He relaxes his throat to keep from gagging, tightening his lips and twirling his tongue in practiced motions.

When Harry starts to make cut off sounds, Louis lets him fall from his lips and he uses the back of his hand to wipe away the spit on his mouth. Barely pausing, he goes for Harry’s thighs, pushing his legs apart for better access. “Fuck,” Harry says, followed by a lower and more drawn out repeat when Louis kisses a line from his knee to the highest peak of his thigh.

Louis smiles along his skin as he repeats the motion, this time nipping the skin and sucking a blooming red mark along the muscle. He does the same to the other side, his hand lazily jacking Harry and never taking him close to the edge; only dangling him above it. There’s sweat and sex in the air, Harry’s precome a near steady stream over Louis’s knuckles as he works. His mouth is tired, lips worn out but he doesn’t want to stop. He kisses along Harry’s groin and over the curve of his belly. “Can I keep going?” He asks, lifting his mouth from Harry’s skin to look up at him.

“Keep going?” Harry’s eyes are wide, pupils blown out, hair a complete mess. “Where else do you want to go?”

Louis smiles, crawling on his elbows to look Harry in the eyes. “I want to eat you out.” The result is a vibrating moan and Harry’s teeth clamped together, his eyes closing momentarily.

“You like that?” Louis asks, smirking but not teasing as he waits for Harry to meet his eyes again. Harry arches up to kiss him and Louis complies, dipping his tongue between Harry’s lips to let him taste the sweat from his body. It’s dirty hot and Harry sucking on Louis’s tongue appears to be his agreeance.

Harry lifts his hands to cup Louis’s face and it only takes a heartbeat for Louis to realize he’s shaking. It feels like a record skid as he pulls back, his hands going immediately to hold Harry’s wrists. “Hey, you okay?” He kisses the inside of Harry’s arm to find his pulse pounding beneath his lips. Harry nods but his hands are still vibrating and it makes the sweat cool on Louis’s body as he twists their fingers together. “What’s going on?” His eyes search Harry’s for an answer he’s starting to be desperate for.

“This is a lot,” Harry says finally. Louis feels his stomach sinking steadily as he swallows. “Not too much,” Harry says quickly, reading Louis. “Like, it’s everything I could dream of.” He takes a deep breath, “It’s just - this is you and I’m me. And this is a lot.” He smiles, small. “Does that make sense?”

“It does,” Louis says, nodding and somehow understanding everything Harry is saying without actually saying it. “Are you nervous about it? That it’s us?”

“No,” Harry says, voice confident. “I’m trying not to fucking come from the very idea of you eating me out, honestly.”

Louis laughs, a warm huff of air over Harry’s face. “I’ve never wanted to eat someone out who has wanted to have a civil conversation about it beforehand.”
“I’ve never said eat or out this many times in my life,” Harry says grinning.

Louis kisses him because he can’t help it. Through all of the doubt and fear of the past twenty-seven days - going through it with his best friend has been the best part. That seems like a statement he needs to unpack a bit more so he pushes it to the back of his mind for the moment. “No matter what, I’ll still be me and you’ll still be you, yeah? After tonight,” he licks his lip and takes a deep breath, “And at the end of forty days. We’re in this together.”

Harry nods, his hands squeezing Louis’s. “You reminded me a bit of Zac Efron, there,” he says. “We’re all in this together,” he sings lightly until Louis cuts him off with a burning kiss.

Louis draws back and pulls on Harry’s bottom lip with his teeth. “One more time: can I eat you out, sweetheart?”

Harry’s hands squeeze Louis’s again and this time he says, “Yes, fucking, please.”

Louis rolls his eyes and kisses him quick before turning to the important task at hand. He doesn’t particularly take his time as he slips down Harry’s body for the third time tonight. He leaves a kiss on the crown of his cock and one at the base and then he’s back between his thighs, his new favorite place to be. He rubs the rough, day-old growth of his beard against the marks he’s already left and Harry’s breathy moan goes straight to his cock. He has to take a moment to catch his breath.

“Love these legs,” he says, sitting up to run his fingers over Harry’s calves lightly. He presses Harry’s ankles toward his thighs and his knees bend to accommodate, his stomach rising a bit quicker as he watches Louis work. “This is what I noticed first about you,” he says, running his hands up to Harry’s knees. “Your long legs in those black jeans. Your thighs.” He presses Harry’s knees apart to make room for himself with a murmured, “There we go,” as he slips back onto his stomach.

It’s been awhile since he’s been between someone’s legs like this, has had someone spread out for his taking. He drags his lips against the back of Harry’s thigh gently and then smooths his fingertips in the same path until he can spread Harry with his hands, a perfect fit.

He starts slow, smaller licks over his hole, the warm furl of skin twitching under his tongue. It’s the dirtiest french kiss he can manage as he gets closer, opening his mouth and licking gently. He massages the ring of muscle with his tongue and smiles as he feels Harry loosen under him, borderline boneless. He digs his fingernails into the curve of Harry’s ass as he slips his tongue inside his heat, warm and pulsing. He repeats the same circuit again, getting lost in the motions, the smell and the taste.

Harry’s chorus of groans is only background music as Louis focuses on splitting him on his tongue. He loves the way Harry’s hips press closer to his mouth with each extended moan, the way his left foot rests on his lower back to keep him there. When his mouth gets tired, he catches his breath and lets his finger circle Harry’s hole. It clenches under his press, pink and spit slick. “Louis,” Harry says to the ceiling like it’s a curse word. Louis can’t remember the last time his name sounded so sweet.

“Yes, darling?” He asks, lifting his head with a smirk.

“Come up here,” Harry says, voice fucked out and impatient.

Louis presses his finger gently against Harry’s hole. “Right now?”

“Let me clarify,” Harry says, swallowing. His chest rabbits as he tries to breathe. “Bring your
cock up here.”

“Bossy,” Louis mutters without heat. If Harry wants to suck him while he brings him off with his fingers, he doesn’t much mind. He must move too slowly, though, because Harry grabs his ankle and abruptly pulls him into the correct position without much warning.

Harry pulls his boxers down to his thighs and takes him in his mouth in one swift movement and Louis loses track of time as he grips his thighs to absorb the shocks of Harry’s wicked tongue. He mouths at the muscle of Harry’s legs before Harry wiggles his hips pointedly and Louis is reminded why he’s upside down on top of him. He sucks one finger into his mouth to wet it and then reaches between Harry’s legs to press at his hole again.

He can’t see as well from this angle but he can feel what he did earlier, the way Harry is still pulsing under his touch. He keeps his finger light as he takes Harry’s cock in his mouth doing double duty all at once. Harry’s precome is salty but Louis hardly notices, already at the part of the night where he’d quite like to devour Harry entirely. He keeps one hand on top of Harry’s thigh, one finger running a circle from his hole to his perineum and back again, his mouth full of Harry’s cock. He loses focus when Harry starts twisting his tongue so he tries to give back as good as he’s getting, tightening his lips. He moves his hand from the top of Harry’s thigh to the inside, pressing the bruises from earlier. The cherry on top is pressing the very tip of his finger inside Harry, not enough to even stretch but enough to make him feel it and all at once Harry comes, a yell Louis hears even though his haze.

He massages his finger softly as he sucks Harry through his orgasm, swallowing around him and helping him come back down. He lets Harry fall from his mouth once he’s stopped twitching, a line of spit still keeping them connected. He presses gently against Harry’s hole where it’s still spasming and then Harry makes a small sound so he leaves him alone, resting his hands on his thighs again.

Harry seems to have lost his focus during his orgasm but he gets it back quickly. He pulls Louis further up his body, holding his hips as he sucks him, holding him still and swallowing around him. The angle is perfect when Louis presses his hips down to fuck his mouth, the muffled sound of Harry humming only making it hotter. He presses his face against Harry’s groin, the downy hair there, as he tries to keep from bursting to pieces. His orgasm comes in a rush, every muscle tightening as once as he presses his hips right into Harry’s mouth with a low, drawn out groan. Harry takes it all, swallowing around him and then sucking lightly until Louis jerks away with sensitivity. They both lay there catching their breath - Louis consumed with a fountain of fuzz clouding his vision, his brain, his lungs. “Shit,” Harry says, speaking first.

“I know,” Louis says, peeling his cheek from the stickiness of Harry’s skin. “I feel like I’m covered in come and sweat.” Harry makes a gagging noise then they both start laughing at once, their bodies slipping against each other until Louis falls off Harry altogether. He ends up face level with Harry’s ankle so he presses a kiss there before letting his head fall to the mattress. “We should shower,” he says.

Harry sighs, “Does that involve getting up?”

“I’m not giving you a sponge bath if that’s what you’re asking,” Louis says, smiling through the words. Harry starts laughing and Louis follows, grinning against the blanket under his head. “Come on,” he says finally, rolling to his back and sitting up. “Up, up.” He pats Harry’s belly with each word. Harry sits up with a long, drawn out groan - completely dramatic and unnecessary - but managing to make Louis smile. “He’s alive,” he cheers quietly.

Harry rolls his eyes and leans over for a kiss. Louis keeps his lips pressed together for it considering his mouth has been a variety of places in the past hour. Harry doesn’t seem to mind as
he presses his tongue against the seam of Louis’s mouth anyway, coaxing his lips open. It’s dirty hot all over again and Louis feels a stirring somewhere in his stomach just at the implication. “Shower time,” he whispers, bumping their noses together.

The shower isn’t really big enough for both of them so they take turns. Louis, a gracious host, lets Harry go first while he blows out the various candles still burning and turns off the record player - putting Bruce back in his cardboard covered home. He laughs as he sees his wine glass tipped over on the table behind the couch - the only victim of the night it appears. He swipes up the puddle of red easily and deposits both glasses in the sink as the shower shuts off.

He finds Harry in the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist, drops of water playing slip and slide over his chest. Louis lets his eyes take a leisurely stroll up and down his body, a smile playing at his lips. Silently, Louis slips past him with one fleeting kiss as he heads for the shower. The warm water makes him sleepy and he ends up standing under the spray far longer than necessary then has to convince himself to get out of the shower at all. He takes his time drying off then folds the towel around his waist as he glances into his bedroom.

The lights are off save for a lamp on his side table and the window is open letting in a cool breeze with dull city sounds from below. Harry is a shadowed figure on the edge of the bed, his feet flat and hands clasped in his lap. The only thing bizarre besides his stance are the black jeans hugging his legs, still unbuttoned at the top.

“Are you sleeping in those?” Louis asks as his head tilts in confusion.

Harry looks up, half a smile on his lips. “Wasn’t sure if I should stay.”

In six words, Harry manages to underline the constant confusion between them - trying to figure out what’s right and what’s crossing the line. What they would do as a real couple, what they shouldn’t do as friends. On Friday night, Harry had made it easy for Louis by telling him to stay but now Harry is unsure if the rules still apply.

“Of course you should stay,” Louis says. “Wanna cuddle you.” The last three words weren’t supposed to slip out but since he can’t bring them back, he presses his lips together instead. “Just set an alarm to give yourself time before work in the morning.”

Harry yawns and stands up to take his jeans off again. “Thank god. The idea of going back to my apartment right now sounds miserable.”

Louis laughs, turning back toward the bathroom. “I’m going to finish getting ready for bed and then I’ll join you.” Harry stays quiet and when Louis looks over his shoulder he sees him standing in just his underwear with both hands on his hips. “Yes?” He asks.

“How do you have moisturizer?”

Louis actually laughs at the way he asks it - like he’s risking total shame. As if Louis doesn’t already know his meticulous skin routine that includes a weekly charcoal face mask. “I do,” he says. “I have a toothbrush for you, too.” Harry follows him into the bathroom with a smile.

It’s oddly domestic as they go about their routines together - quietly exchanging the tub of moisturizer, flossing their teeth. Louis shows Harry a lip scrub he bought and they both laugh as they rub it on their mouths, Harry cackling because he says it tickles. He leaves the bathroom still laughing, his huffed giggles making Louis smile unreasonably big. Louis finishes up quickly, putting lotion on his hands and rubbing it in as he leaves, clicking off the light with his elbow.

The bed looks the same as earlier but now Harry is horizontal in it, his arms hugging a pillow and
his eyes closed. He’s taken the left side of the bed and Louis debates whether it’s an accident or kismet considering Louis’s side has always been the right. He smiles as he drops his towel to the ground and pulls on a pair of boxers to sleep in. He turns out the lamp and slips under the covers on his side, Harry’s warmth acting like the preheat function on an oven. Harry has his back to him so Louis traces a nameless shape to connect his freckles punctuated by a gentle kiss at the center of his shoulder blades before rearranging himself on his own pillow and drifting to sleep.

* *

**TUESDAY ~ Day 28**

Like magnets in the dark, they seem to find each other over night again. Louis wakes up with his chin on Harry’s shoulder and his hand draped over his waist - a position he has rarely ever found himself in. He’s always been a bit of an anti-clinger when it comes to sleeping after a hook-up; clinging to the edge of the bed rather than the person he’s with. Somehow, the opposite has happened both times he’s slept in a bed with Harry.

The timing is perfect as Harry’s alarm goes off barely a breath later - a Joni Mitchell song Louis can’t place. While Louis tends to Snooze his alarm for at least an hour and then gets out of bed begrudgingly, Harry wakes and turns off his alarm smoothly. He takes a deep breath and then rolls to his back, pushing Louis in the process so their heads share a pillow. With his hand flat on Harry’s stomach, he can feel his breaths beneath his palm as he studies Harry’s sleepy face: heavy eyes, syrupy smile, hair that’s dried funny over night.

“Good morning,” Harry says, voice slow and broken.

“Morning,” Louis whispers, kissing him. It’s a contrast to the last time they woke up together when Louis reacted like a starting gun had been shot in the air. Their kisses turn lazy and then stop as they lay there looking at each other. For once, Louis’s mind is quiet - no questions or flashing neon lights to distract him.

Their reverie can only last so long considering it’s a Tuesday and responsibilities are calling. Harry gets dressed in the clothes he wore over the night before while Louis throws the bed back together and then starts the daily routine of staring at his closet for an outfit to wear. He lands on a pair of trousers and a white button up shirt - not all that different from every other weekday. He finds Harry in the kitchen pulling a mug of coffee from the Keurig and then inserting a new pod to make a cup for Louis.

“Feel free to grab something to eat,” Louis says. “No idea what I have in there considering I don’t usually participate in breakfast.”

“Participate in breakfast,” Harry repeats, laughing lightly. He opens the fridge anyway while Louis grabs the fresh mug of coffee. “What’s this?”

“What?” Louis asks, turning.

Harry is holding up a blue and white yogurt cup, Fage two-percent in bold lettering across the front. “You like this stuff too?”

Louis debates lying and then shakes his head, “No.”

Harry raises his eyebrows, “Care to explain why you have two of them?”

Louis lifts his chin slightly. “I may have grabbed a couple on my grocery run last week.”

“To try?”
“For you,” Louis says, not fighting it. “I just figured if you were ever here and wanted some yogurt.” He clears his throat, not adding anything else.

“Thank you,” Harry says quietly, glancing down at the yogurt again like it’s something worth way more than a few dollars. Louis nods and then hurries to grab a banana, peeling it without looking at Harry to force himself through the moment without making it awkward; although he’s not sure he’s done it right.

Harry ends up having to take the unopened yogurt with him when he goes, not enough time to eat it and still get home to get ready for work. “Are you sure it’s okay if I take it?” He asks for the third time as he’s putting on his shoes, the yogurt next to his foot along with one of Louis’s travel mugs of coffee.

“They’re meant for you, H. I will literally never eat it. Not even on my deathbed.”

Harry scoffs, “It’s not even bad.”

“The texture is like come, babe. I can’t happily eat that.”

Harry grabs the cup and stands up, “Cheers, then. I’ll be on my way with my cold come.”

Louis gags, “You’re not supposed to embrace it.”

Harry grins, “Sorry.” He kisses Louis and then opens the door, kissing him once more, slow, before he steps out into the hallway. “See you?”

Louis nods, the familiar butterflies in his stomach shaking out their wings. “See you.”

As soon as the door closes, he lets his forehead fall forward to rest. He knows they’ve agreed nothing will change - he said it last night in so many words - but he can’t help the feeling that there’s been a door unlocked over the past few days. He’s scared to open his eyes and find out what lies behind the door, what part of “nothing has to change” has been a lie all along.

* 

**WEDNESDAY ~ Day 29**

“What are you doing tonight?”


“What?” Louis actually pauses to look at the calendar hanging on the wall of his office. Sure enough it’s the fourteenth of February and - unfortunately - that would mean it’s Valentine’s Day. “Oh, you’re right.”

“I know I’m right,” Zayn says. “I’ve only been trying to figure out ways to surprise Niall for six months.”

Louis laughs as last year’s day of love comes flashing back - Niall ruining all of Zayn’s surprises a moment before they happened. “And how’s that going?”

Zayn sighs again. “We both woke up early to make each other breakfast, we bought each other the same watch, and now I’m walking back to my office because evidently he’s there to surprise me with flowers.”
“That’s sweet,” Louis says, smiling. “Why aren’t you at your office?”

This time Zayn groans. “Because I was going to his office to surprise him with lunch.”

Louis laughs clearly picturing Zayn trudging through the city with his classic scowl. “I’m pretty sure this means you’re perfect for each other.”

“I guess,” Zayn says. “It’d be nice to actually surprise him though. I have dinner reservations at the SoHo house tonight and I wouldn’t be surprised to find out he has the same one.”

“Well, I have a way you can surprise him,” Louis says, smiling.

“You didn’t even know it was Valentine’s.”

Louis nods though Zayn can’t see him. “That’s true. But, as you may know, Hearst is ending the rooms campaign today.”

“Isn’t that Harry’s campaign?”

“Bingo,” Louis says. “I reserved a table at Max’s to celebrate.”

“You reserved a table at Max’s? When have we ever done that?”

Louis laughs. “I wanted to make sure we’d have a spot. Which, now that we’re talking, I’m even happier about considering it’s the world’s worst holiday.”

“I don’t know,” Zayn says, clearly hesitant.

“Come on, Z. It’ll be the best surprise ever. Niall definitely won’t know.” He doesn’t have to be there to see Zayn roll his eyes. “Just come for a bit and then you can leave and go have domestic couple sex.”

“How about we don’t discuss sex lives unless you’re going to dish on yours?”

“Fair enough,” Louis says quickly. “Does this mean you’ll come tonight?”

“Yes. Mostly for Harry, though. I’m proud of him.”

“Me too,” Louis says, grinning.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m sure,” Zayn says. “See you tonight.”

Louis ends the call with a smile before opening a text to Harry to invite him to his own celebratory party. He hasn’t seen him since yesterday morning and he’s not too afraid to admit he misses him, is already looking forward to seeing him tonight.

* *

Louis gets to Max’s first to make sure his reservation is standing and the bartender barely gives him a glance as he points to the table with a placard marked LT. A quick look around the bar proves it to be full of couples holding hands, reeking of Valentine’s. Even the tables have been decorated with mason jars of flowers, paper hearts hanging from the ceiling. Louis isn’t too concerned he forgot what holiday it was considering Harry groaned when he told him the date earlier; he hadn’t remembered either.

Niall and Zayn show up shortly after Louis with Zayn leading the way, their hands clasped together. They look particularly cheerful and red cheeked as they both hug Louis hello before
going to the bar for drinks.

“I can’t believe you reserved a table,” Zayn says when he comes back. He knocks the LT placard over. “We look like pricks.”

“Louis is just getting used to having his name on the table everytime we go somewhere,” Niall says as he appears back at the table. He sets his drink down and slips off his jacket. “Like a celebrity or something.”

Louis laughs. “I can’t believe having reservations is a crime now.”

“I think reservations are sweet,” Niall says. “Really. Like, Zayn surprised me with dinner reservations tonight.”

“Granted you had to cancel your reservations at the same restaurant for the same time slot,” Zayn points out.

“You guys are ridiculous,” Louis says, shaking his head as Niall laughs loudly.

Harry comes in then and Louis isn’t so naive to say he actually takes his breath away but it feels like it. He looks beautiful; his hair is done in a subtle version of a quiff, his black shirt unbuttoned down his chest with a thin scarf tied around his neck, and his black jacket hanging open around the thin frame of his body. He looks like someone famous and then he meets Louis’s eyes from across the room and smiles. It’s all it takes - a smile through a crowd - for Louis’s heart to take off double time, for the butterflies in his belly to swirl.

“Miss America - er, Mr. Vogue, I mean.” He’s out of his chair with a laugh, wrapping Harry up in a hug and then passing him off to Zayn who gives him a quiet, “Congratulations,” with a slap on his back.

Louis is next and the moment feels heavy as they move in slow motion. His hands fall naturally to Harry’s waist as he hugs him. The second their chests touch Louis feels like he can breathe for the first time all day and he’s not sure how to explain that in words. He takes a subtle breath of Harry’s hair as he pulls back, weary of Zayn’s and Niall’s eyes on him. It feels like they’re on television right now, like whatever they do next is going to be judged and deconstructed later. At least, that’s the excuse Louis uses when Harry starts to lean forward in the increasingly familiar way he does before they kiss. Louis stops him with a hand on his shoulder and a wide smile, “Congratulations, H.”

They’re so close Louis can see the way Harry’s eyes fall, his smile tightening at the edges as he leans his head subtly to the side. “Okay,” he says, blinking quickly. He clears his throat, “I’m going to get a drink. Anyone need anything?” He doesn’t wait for an answer as he turns away and takes all of his warmth with him.

Louis collapses back in his chair feeling like a piece of shit. He takes a drink as Niall starts to talk without pause about something that happened at work. Zayn glances at Louis with furrowed brows and then turns back to his boyfriend as Louis tries to figure out what exactly is wrong with him.

Harry comes back with a drink and sets it next to Louis’s. He takes off his jacket and settles it over the back of his chair before he sits. He won’t make eye contact with Louis so Louis studies his drink and a few scratches on the table for something to do.

“How was the last day?” Zayn asks the question Louis should have said first, twirling his straw in his drink. “Anything fantastic happen?”
It turns out a reporter from Vanity Fair stopped by with the intent to talk with Harry about his upcoming projects. Louis feels his heart rush like an ache as Harry tells them with a shy smile. He feels even worse to have turned Harry away from a kiss when his happiness is infectious like this. There’s a subtle swelling of pride in Louis’s stomach as he watches Harry talk and he can’t stop himself from putting his hand on Harry’s thigh under the table. Harry’s reaction is only scooting his leg closer so Louis’s fingertips press against the inner seam of his trousers. Louis can’t believe he passed up the chance to kiss him.

The conversation rattles on but Louis can barely pay attention, his eyes never straying from Harry’s face - the line of his jaw, the way he bites his lip, how his smile pushes his dimple in. “Why are you staring at me?” He asks when Niall and Zayn have left to get another round of drinks. His smile is gentle, the one he saves for Louis. It only makes Louis feel like more of an asshole.

“I’m an idiot,” Louis says. He swallows and then kisses Harry right on the mouth without hesitation. He pulls back slightly so their foreheads are pressed together and their words are just for them. “I should have done that when you walked in,” he whispers though no one else is looking at them. They both sit there for a quiet breath and then Harry kisses Louis back, soft and slow like an answer.

“I’m sorry,” Louis whispers again, making sure Harry understands he never meant to hurt him or embarrass him just because their friends are there.

“It’s okay,” Harry says, his hand dropping under the table to cover Louis’s on his leg. “We’re still figuring this out.”

Louis kisses him again just because he can’t find the right words to thank him for understanding, for being the one who decided to do this thing with him.

If Zayn or Niall think anything odd has changed between them when they come back, they don’t show it. They actually don’t show much at all apart from staring at each other like they’d quite like to devour each other right there at the table. Louis can’t believe they were what kept him from kissing Harry earlier - the two people nearly ready to makeout if it wasn’t for the two-hundred innocent bystanders in the bar, their two best friends sharing a table with them. As it is, they barely finish their second drinks before they announce they’re going home - too tired to stay out any longer. Harry raises his eyebrows and Louis smirks which makes Niall laugh and Zayn flip them both off.

It feels like any other night except for how the two of them leaving only makes it appropriate for Harry to turn his body closer to Louis, for Louis to twist their ankles and feet together between them. It feels like they did their duty as friends and now they get to be dating again, flirting and ridiculous with no prying eyes watching them. Louis loves Zayn and Niall both but getting to have Harry to himself is becoming one of his favorite things.

“I have some news,” Harry says with a smile. He takes a sip from his mojito and then sets it on the table.

“What?” Louis asks. He matches Harry’s smile but he’s curious as to what Harry is about to say - why he didn’t say it when Niall and Zayn were still here.

“Tonight they told me they’re taking the rooms installation on a countrywide tour.” There’s something palpable in the words as he says them, something like starlight in his smile.

“What?” Louis’s eyes go wide and both of his hands are suddenly on Harry’s knees. “You’re kidding.”
Harry so clearly tries not to burst as he shakes his head, his smile curling his lips and making his eyes shine. “I’m really, really, not.”

“Harry,” Louis breathes, shaking his head. “I can’t believe it,” he says as he leans forward to tug Harry in close, squeezing him in a hug. When they kiss it’s soft but sloppy, their teeth click.

“Me neither,” Harry says, pulling back. His smile hasn’t dulled and Louis is unsure how he kept this a secret since he walked in the bar.

“I’m so proud of you,” Louis says. He presses another quick kiss to Harry’s lips. “You’re amazing.”

Harry’s cheeks are pink as he laughs this time. “I wanted to tell you first. Before Niall and Zayn.”

Louis wonders if he should be honored - then again, it was only a few days earlier he admitted the same thing to Harry. Harry is his default and with a warm rush he realizes Harry has made him his. “I hope you at least told your mom first,” Louis says, careful not to be overcome with pleasure like a fifteen year old with a crush.

Harry laughs, “I called her and my sister on the way over.”

Louis pretends to wipe his forehead, “Thank god. Don’t think I want to take on the Styles women.”

Harry rolls his eyes. “They love you, you know.”

“I am rather charming,” Louis says with a grin. He does a quick scan of his memory of all the times he’s met Anne and Gemma Styles trying to remember if he’s ever done anything embarrassing in front of them. Anything that would make them nervous about Harry dating him. He runs his teeth over his bottom lip. “Do they know? That we’re doing this, I mean.”

Harry shakes his head, “No. I didn’t want to get them involved.” He presses his lips together and glances at the table before meeting Louis’s eyes again. “I hope that makes sense.”

“No, it does,” Louis says, squeezing his hands on Harry’s knees where he’s left them resting. “This is just about us. You and me.” It’s becoming their catchphrase and it’s sticking.

“You and me.”

For better or for worse, Louis thinks but definitely doesn’t say out loud. There’s no point in pointing out the obvious - whatever happens, especially if its bad, they’ll only have themselves to blame.

They finish their drinks slowly, no particular rush as the crowd fluctuates around them. It’s prime people watching - happy couples mixed with fighting couples and a side of singles finding each other for messy make out sessions against the wall or free gaps of the bar. Louis has been on all three of those sides of Valentine’s Day but he thinks this may be his best yet. Not for anything in particular other than the haze of happiness he’s found himself in - a dash of neuroticism notwithstanding.

“I don’t think I’ve ever had a proper Valentine,” Harry says with his usual knack for reading Louis’s thoughts.

“No? Not even the two years with Robert?”

Harry shakes his head, scratching lightly at his jaw. “The first one he was traveling, the second
one we weren’t speaking. Other than that, I’ve never been seeing someone long enough for it to count or I wasn’t seeing anyone at all.”

“What about me?”

Confusion flickers lightly over Harry’s face. “What about you?”

“Do I count as a proper Valentine?” He moves his head to the side as Harry laughs. “Seriously, though. This is our twenty-ninth day of dating. That has to count for something.”

Harry’s smile dims but doesn’t leave his eyes. “Sure, then. You are my first proper Valentine.” He laughs and glances away. “I don’t even know what that means. A proper Valentine.”

“It means,” Louis says slowly as he looks around the bar for inspiration. “It means I give you flowers.” He plucks the bouquet from the mason jar on the center of the table and shakes it out a bit to dry it off before handing it over. Harry takes the flowers with a laugh, his head shaking slowly.

“It means I tell you you’re beautiful,” he says like he’s reading from a list. “Which, like, have you looked in a mirror? Duh.” Harry actually blushes as he adjusts his grip on the smattering of damp flowers. “And it means you wear sexy lingerie and we go devour each other like it’s the last thing we’re going to do on earth before we die. And that’s it. That’s Valentine’s Day.”

Harry bursts out laughing and actually goes silent at one point because he’s laughing so hard. Louis loves to make Harry laugh - has always loved it. He folds over when he finds something funny, like the joy takes over his whole body. It’s a spectacle to watch and tonight it’s Louis’s spectacle.

“Let me see if I got this right,” he says, once he recovers with smile still ghosting over his lips. “Flowers first.” He breaks off the top of a flower in his hand while pulling an apologetic face that makes Louis laugh. He smiles when he looks up and then, slowly, he leans forward and tucks the flower behind Louis’s ear. Before he straightens he presses a kiss to Louis’s lips, slow and steady. “You’re beautiful,” he whispers as he pulls back and Louis tries his best not to make it look as though Harry is making the earth rattle under his feet with his little routine. “And step three,” he says, “Is when I tell you I’m wearing black underwear with pink hearts so take me home, baby.”

Louis blinks, a smile slipping over his lips. “You are not.”

Harry takes a deep breath like it’s a chore to prove and then pulls up the edge of his black shirt with one hand, pressing down the waist of his jeans with the other. Sure enough, under the swell of his hips there’s the waistband of his boxers: black fabric printed with tiny pink hearts. He takes his hands away after a beat, a smug smile on his face.

“I thought you didn’t like Valentine’s,” Louis says, a bit suspicious.

“These are my lucky underwear,” Harry says. “I didn’t wear them just for a stupid holiday.”

Louis smiles and shakes his head. “You’re something else.”

“I’m something, alright,” Harry says, nodding.

“Well, now that you’ve showed me your underwear in a bar,” Louis says like it’s frowned upon, “I guess I should take you home with me.”

Harry’s lips twitch just before he smiles. “Told you they were my lucky pair.”
Louis pays their tab and they leave the bar hand in hand, falling into a cab to take them the few blocks to Louis’s apartment. It’s only after they get in the car that Harry points out the flower still in Louis’s hair. “You’re still holding the flowers from the centerpiece,” Louis says.

“We’re thieves,” Harry says with a gasp.

“Outlaws,” Louis agrees, closing the space between them in the backseat.

“Bonnie and Clyde,” Harry says just before Louis kisses him quiet.

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THURSDAY ~ Day 30

Louis wakes up cold. The draft from the open window makes him shiver as he pulls the sheets up over his shoulders and tries to hold onto the warmth he’s created between the covers overnight. He makes the mistake of kicking his foot out to the cold side of the bed and groans as it startles him awake fully. His entire apartment is cast in grey as he blinks his eyes open, the clouds outside setting the mood. He rolls onto his back and starfishes on the empty bed, a slight headache blooming from last night.

He’d tried (and failed) to get Harry to stay over. It would have been the perfect grand finale but Harry didn’t take the bait. They’d taken advantage of the empty elevator upon their arrival at Louis’s place and made out like teenagers on the way to the apartment, hands and lips everywhere all at once. Inside, it had taken less than a minute for Harry to have Louis back against the wall with his jeans tugged down his thighs and his shirt rucked up near his waist. Then he was on his knees and his mouth was taking Louis in, sucking and doing this thing with his tongue that Louis has been unable to stop thinking about since the first time Harry sucked him off.

It was hot and fast and Louis’s hands were shaking when he came, his orgasm ripped from him in a fire storm. He had his hands in Harry’s hair then, pressing the side of his face into his thigh as Harry pulled himself off in a desperate haze. Louis had been in the midst of still coming down but he kept whispering, “Come on, baby,” and “That’s it, darling,” until Harry shook apart against him. Louis sank to his knees and pulled him against his chest, both of them half dressed and sticky as they kissed.

Louis thought it was the warm up but then Harry had started to fall asleep against him and he realized it had been the main event. His stomach still floating pleasantly, he had no complaints. “Let’s go to bed,” Louis said, kissing Harry’s forehead and scratching at his hair. Always polite, Harry had shook his head and said he should go back to his place since he had a breakfast meeting. It was a logical decision but Louis hated to see him go. He’d made Harry text him when he got home to make sure he was safe and then he’d fallen asleep - perfectly positioned on the side of the bed Harry had last slept on, his smell still lingering in the sheets.

Now, in the dreary daylight of a Thursday morning, Louis reaches for his phone and flips through Instagram and then a quick run of Twitter. He vaguely wonders how, after only two mornings waking up with Harry, it’s already ineffably sweeter than waking up alone.

*  

“How’s it going on the physical intimacy front?”

“Good,” Harry says like he’s commenting on the weekend weather report.

“Fine,” Louis says without looking over at Harry but keeping the same nonchalance in his voice.
It’s halfway through their session and the first question they haven’t answered verbosely.

Julia raises her eyebrows and crosses her legs at the knee. “Good and fine?”

“Good and fine,” Louis repeats.

Julia sighs and consults her clipboard. Louis sneaks a glance at Harry, shaking his head imperceptibly when Harry’s lips twitch like he’s going to smile. There’s no way they could have known Julia would bring up the bridge of intimacy; one they have so valiantly crossed together in the past week since seeing her.

“I’m not trying to pry out bedroom preferences,” Julia says when she looks up. “But one of the most important aspects of a new couple is chemistry. If you choose to be physical with each other, that chemistry can be as valuable as your social chemistry.”

Louis and Harry both nod since that seems to be what she’s waiting for in the quiet that follows.

“Are you comfortable with your physical chemistry?” She asks with the same patience she’s applied since their first session. Louis can’t believe this is their fifth time sitting in these same spots and staring at her as she tries to pull answers out of them. More often than not she’s been successful but Louis isn’t sure she’ll find the same success asking them to spill how steamy their burgeoning sex life has proved to be.

“It’s good,” Louis says.

“Fine,” Harry agrees. This time Louis is careful to not even glance in Harry’s direction. He knows they’ll both break into laughter if they so much as catch each other’s eye.

Julia nods like they’ve said something meaningful though Louis imagines she just thinks they’re morons. “Good and fine. Everything is good and fine with you two.” She smiles and then it fades and Louis holds his breath. He has a feeling the next question isn’t going to be a softball. “You have ten days left by my count,” she says evenly. “Have you thought about what you’re going to do when the experiment ends?”

“Of course,” Louis says, glancing over at Harry and finding him nodding along. “We both went into this thinking about how it would end.”

“We’re not taking it lightly,” Harry says. “I think we’ve both considered the risks. Multiple times.”

As we should, Louis thinks. They’re starting their fifth week now, it would really be shit to find out just how much they’re risking at this point.

“I’m not talking hypotheticals,” Julia says. “I realize you’re not taking this lightly, which you’ve proved. You’re coming to see me every week and answering my questions. For the most part.” She smiles. “I’m talking about what happens in ten days. Have you thought about what you’re actually going to do when the time comes to make a decision?”

Louis opens his mouth to repeat his earlier answer and then pauses with his lips parted. His instinct is to say of course but, in a rush it hits him: He hasn’t. He’s always thought about it tangentially, what happens next, but not in any sort of definite terms. As soon as he starts to panic, Harry cuts through.

“I haven’t,” he says without any of the anxiety Louis’s mind is riddled with. “Right now, I’m really happy. So I’m kind of taking it one day at a time.”

“I haven’t either,” Louis says before Harry can get nervous in the quiet. He takes another moment
before he adds, “And I’m not sure why that is.”

“Are you still set on making a decision?” Julia asks as she circles her thumb over the eraser of her pencil. “Like, day forty is the deadline and that’s it. You’ll make a definitive choice then?”

Louis realizes how easy it would be to just back away slowly now, to see where things go naturally or if they fizzle without a looming deadline.

“Yes,” Harry says, not hesitating. “I think it’ll force us to be completely honest.”

Louis nods, agreeing even though he hadn’t considered the thought on his own. “I think part of valuing our friendship means we don’t want things to get muddled by time and indecision. We need to be in or out of it.”

“Right,” Julia says, nodding. “You both seem to be on the same page there, then. Now there’s one other thing I want to bring up, and I’m not looking for an answer here. It’s just something to consider.”

Harry takes a deep breath and Louis wiggles his toes to release the tension in his legs. Still, neither one of them seem all that prepared for what Julia says next.

“In the next week or so, I want you to consider what it will be like if you decide to be friends and what it will be like if you decide to keep dating.” She clasps her hands on top of the clipboard in her lap. “And then, I want you to consider what happens if you both make opposite choices come day forty.”

Louis swears a pin could drop in the ensuing silence and they would all hear it. Julia starts to wrap up the session once the silence has settled but it sounds like a static radio to Louis. How had he not considered that? Through every scenario and worst case situation he envisioned, he assumed they’d be on the same page - all in or all out. The sudden realization that may not be the case in the end hits him like a swat over his chest; he takes a deep breath to make sure his lungs are functioning and tries to tune back in to the end of the session.

Once they shake hands with Julia in thanks, they walk out of her office and down the hall in silence. It’s raining lightly so they pull up their hoods as the descend the stairs in a quiet daze. Louis feels the tension between them even in the silence. “Let’s grab a bite to eat,” Harry says, breaking it open. “I’m starving.”

“Good idea,” Louis says. His voice is raspy and he has to clear his throat to make himself louder. “What are you in the mood for?”

Harry drops his head back toward the sky like he’s studying the rain. The hood of his jacket tips back and he catches it with his hand as he looks at Louis again. “Pho.”

Louis smiles, “Oddly what I was thinking.”

Harry’s smile reaches only half his face, a smirk more than a smile. “Telepathy.”

Louis doesn’t bother with an answer already setting off toward the one Vietnamese place he knows in Tribeca and assuming Harry is thinking of the same one. His head is a mess of emotions he doesn’t want to articulate, monsters behind doors he doesn’t want to face even as they start knocking louder on their cages.

It all goes quiet as Harry reaches for his hand, twists their fingers together in the way they are starting belong. He doesn’t say anything and neither of them look at each other but all Louis can think is: you and me. When it’s all over - for better or for worse - it’s still you and me.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

"Dress" - Taylor Swift

"Inescapable, I'm not even gonna try,
And if I get burned, at least we were electrified.
I'm spilling wine in the bathtub
You kiss my face and we're both drunk
Everyone thinks that they know us
But they know nothing."

FRIDAY ~ Day 31

Can’t meet for drinks. Went home at lunch.

The notification pops up on Louis’s computer Friday afternoon and concern takes precedence over disappointment of cancelled plans. Honestly, after an anxiety-inducing therapy appointment the day before, he’d been looking forward to seeing Harry today as reassurance they were still okay. The chance he might not get to do that has his stomach sinking.

He rolls his lip under his teeth and then types a quick, Everything good? He ignores the part where he stares at the iMessage app for the next few minutes waiting for Harry’s grey three dots to appear.

All good. Just had a headache and wanted to rest up for tomorrow. Tomorrow. Louis smiles to himself. It’s the biggest night of the year - kind of. A gala to kick off fashion week where anyone who hopes to be someone shows up - or people like Louis, Harry and Zayn who are obligated to attend for their jobs. And then people like Niall who get dragged along for dating a member of the aforementioned groups.

They’ll get dressed in borrowed designer suits, walk a red carpet that doesn’t actually have cameras, dance in a ballroom with a gold arched ceiling, eat foods they can’t pronounce, and drink alcohol they really can’t afford any other night. It’s like a wedding on steroids and Louis usually looks forward to it; more so this year considering Harry will be his date. Fun or not, though, it’s going to be hectic the way it always is. Louis knows he’ll hardly get a chance to have Harry to himself regardless if they try to stay connected at the hip. Nothing will slow the swell of the night; the strangers, the friends, the sheer amount of random people who will demand their attention.

After the bad taste of yesterday - no offense to Julia - Louis really wants to have Harry to himself for just a bit before that all happens. He spins in his chair and grabs his phone from the charger on his back table. With two quick swipes he dials Harry and presses the phone to his ear. Harry answers sounding groggy but happy to hear Louis’s voice.

“Definitely tell me to fuck off if this is annoying,” Louis says, spinning back to face his computer.
“But if you tell me what you want for dinner, I’ll pick it up and bring it to you. Like an elaborate Postmates delivery. Free delivery and all.”

Harry laughs hesitantly. “What, why?”

“Because you don’t feel good,” Louis says. “And I’d like to see your face today. For at least a moment.”

“I’m not dying, Lou.”

“I should hope not,” Louis says loudly. He starts closing his projects and saving a few files to his flash drive to work on over the weekend.

“I can meet you for dinner somewhere. I just don’t feel like drinking and having to socialize in a bar right now.”

Louis rolls his eyes, “That’s the point. I want to bring you dinner at your apartment. You can even stay in your pajamas. No one has to know.”

“I’m not in pajamas,” Harry says, a smile coloring his words.

“What are you wearing?” Louis lowers his voice and grins when he gets a loud laugh from Harry.

“Grey sweats and a blue sweatshirt.”

Louis moans lightly, “Tell me more, baby.”

“Fuck off.”

Louis laughs as he runs his hand back through his hair. “How about it? Can I bring you dinner?”

Harry makes a low humming noise. “How about you bring enough dinner for you to have some too? And how about instead of dropping it off, you actually stay for a bit?”

Louis presses his lips together to contain his smile. “I can do that.”

“Good.” Harry sighs and Louis can practically see him relaxing into the couch. “Kind of want to see your face too, you know.”

* *

Louis ends up grabbing a pizza on the way to Harry’s. He stops at their favorite pizza truck and gets their usual order - white sauce on garlic crust with mushrooms, arugula, and truffle oil. He also orders a side of breadsticks because though they may be attending a fashion week kick off - neither of them claims to be a model.

Harry looks pleasantly sleepy as he opens the door for Louis, his grey sweats cuffed at the ankle and wearing the same UCLA sweatshirt Louis had stolen last weekend after his trip to Boston. Louis holds up the pizza box without saying a word and Harry groans, dropping his head back on his neck.

“How’d you know I’ve been thinking about this all day?” He smirks, “I was about to eat the truffle oil in my cupboard just to get over the craving.”

Louis tilts his head and raises his eyebrows, “Sounds like I got here just in time, then.”

“Yes,” Harry says, “You did.” He braces one hand on the doorframe and leans forward to catch
Louis’s lips in a soft kiss, smiling into it. “Thank you for coming.”

Louis hands Harry the bag in his hand in lieu of adding to the mushfest and gets the satisfaction of Harry jumping up and down like a giddy kid with a few air kicks thrown in when he realizes Louis has brought breadsticks.

Harry has his laptop sitting on the coffee table with a few documents pulled up but he closes it to clear off the table for their dinner. Louis sets the pizza down and then grabs napkins from the kitchen while Harry shuffles his work papers away.

They both sit on the floor with their backs against the couch, legs straight in front of them beneath the coffee table. The television stays off in favor of James Bay’s first record playing quietly behind their conversation. The pizza is as good as always and the breadsticks are just doughy enough for Louis to eat far more than he should.

They just chat - not about feelings or the experiment - but about anything that comes to mind. Namely, how the gala has everyone they know on edge despite both of them being rather excited about it. “The entire office was buzzing,” Harry says with a bite of pizza in his mouth. “Half the reason I got a headache was being asked whether Candlelight Peach is the new color of Spring and if it would look good in a dress.” He raises his eyebrows, “I wouldn’t be caught dead in peach regardless of season.” He does his imaginary hair flip that always makes Louis laugh. He follows that up by showing Louis the screenshots he took earlier of three engagement announcements on Instagram all in a row with very similar renditions of “spending forever with my best friend” for captions. “Christ,” Louis mutters taking Harry’s phone to look at them closer as Harry grabs another breadstick for them to split.

It’s easy - and despite a kiss at the front door - it feels the same as it always has between them. Where at the beginning this is exactly what made Louis crazy, the realization now settles something in his stomach. Despite everything they’ve done, they’re still friends. They still talk candidly and burp in front of each other; Harry tells Louis when he’s overthought an email from his boss and they both commiserate their stomach aches when they finish the entire pizza without getting up. For just a moment, it doesn’t feel like the world has tilted under their feet.

“I should go,” Louis says when their conversation has started to grow sleepy and snow has started to fall outside the windows. “I have a manuscript to read tonight.”

Harry has his head propped on his hand, elbow on the edge of the couch. Louis faces him with one knee pulled up in front of him, his toes under Harry’s thigh. Harry narrows his eyes, “Are you auditioning for a movie and not telling me?”

Louis nods, “I am.” He laughs before Harry can. “I’m actually just partnering with a publisher to do some book covers. I have to read the story before I can do the design, obviously.”

“Oh,” Harry says, eyes lighting up. “One of those exclusive copies before anyone else sees it?”

“Kind of,” Louis says, covering a yawn with his hand. Technically it’s a bunch of paper held together by a big black binder clip with his name on every page in case he tries to distribute it illegally.

“Is it good? Would I like it?”

Louis smiles, “Doubt it. It’s about this guy who basically comes to terms with the fact he’s going to be alone for the rest of his life.”

“Hard pass,” Harry says automatically.
“I think there’s a romantic arc coming up,” Louis says. He hasn’t gotten far enough to determine if it’s going to be depressing or optimistic. “I’ll let you know.”

“Maybe someone should write a book about us,” Harry says thoughtfully. “About this forty days thing.”

“I thought it was going to be a secret and now it’s going to be published in a book?”

“Our names would be changed,” Harry allows.

“Who’d write it?” Louis asks, smiling at the idea.

“Zayn. Obviously.”

“Obviously,” Louis echoes. “There’s no conflict of interest there whatsoever.”

“Nope.”

Louis laughs, “I’m sure it’d be a bestseller.” What he doesn’t add, and Harry doesn’t point out, is that neither one of them yet knows if they get a happily ever after in the pretend book or not. Louis helps Harry clean up after that, throwing away trash and picking up the crumbs they’ve seemed to scatter everywhere.

“Sure you don’t want to stay?” Harry asks for the fourth time in ten minutes while Louis pulls his coat on at the door.

“Yes,” Louis says for the fourth time. “You need to rest and I have a manuscript to read.”

“I took a nap today. I’m really not tired,” Harry says.

“I still have a manuscript to read.”

“Ugh,” Harry scoffs and manages to sound just like one of Louis’s teenage sisters. “At least kiss me before you go.”

Louis laughs and then Harry kisses him, his eyes closing as his hands drop to Harry’s hips. Despite everything not changing between them, Louis thinks this may be his favorite part of the whole dating thing. Kissing Harry, getting to press his tongue into his mouth, is more than he hoped it would be. It’s becoming his favorite thing to do, if he’s honest.

Harry tries to convince him to change his mind and stay by kissing along his jaw, down his throat with his soft lips and sharp teeth and Louis nearly caves. Nearly. “I have to go,” he says, finally pressing Harry away from him with two hands. “I have to. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Harry pouts his lip and Louis laughs, trying to appear less affected than he really is. The truth of the matter is, he hasn’t had Harry naked in bed for three days now - and that, along with the kissing - is his other new favorite thing about their current status. By Harry’s flushed cheeks and impatience at Louis leaving - he thinks they may be in the same boat.

“Tomorrow,” Louis says again, like a promise. He twists his fingers in Harry’s hair when he kisses him again, holding him right where he wants him as he runs his tongue over his teeth.


Louis hates to leave him and quite nearly doesn’t get in the elevator until he forces himself to do
so with the reminder of his responsibilities at home - namely a three-hundred page, single spaced, manuscript. It doesn’t help the fluttering in his stomach as he catches a cab with the snow picking up all around him. He’s felt like this before - the fluttering, burgeoning obsession. It’s not common and he hasn’t felt it in a long time but it’s recognizable all the same. It feels like he could be falling in love.

SATURDAY ~ Day 32

Louis always feels like he’s getting ready for prom when he has to attend fashion events. The bright side being, of course, less anxiety about his boutonniere and whether his date will have a good time. Now, it’s more about whether the smattering of snow outside will make it harder to get a cab and how long he’ll have to wait inside the venue before he spots a familiar face.

He finishes with his tie and then gives himself one more appraising look in the mirror. His black suit is relatively simple and though the black tie isn’t adding much by way of color there are gold details on his shoes. Considering he’s in no way a member of the industry besides a few graphics for events and such - no one will expect him in the latest style by any designer. For the record, his suit is Armani but he’s sure no one will care nor ask. Satisfied this is as good as it’s going to get, he pulls his phone from the charging cord and his keys from the kitchen counter. He flips off the lights as he does one last check of his hair in the reflection of the microwave and then he’s on his way with a reminder sent to the group text everyone else better be on time too.

There’s a mass of people surrounding the venue, traffic backed up in every direction around the block. Louis jumps out of the cab a couple blocks early to walk the rest of the way. There’s a distinct ombre where the cabs switch to luxury black cars and limos as Louis approaches. He can see a red carpet stretched up the main stairs with flashing lights of cameras emitting an ethereal glow as they all go off in tandem. Louis knows good and well the lit up red carpet is not meant for him. Instead, the darker carpet going through the side entrance is where he - and the rest of the normals - belong. His one strike of importance is getting to say his name at the door and the validation of the security nodding him past without further question.

Inside is just as bustling as outside but more brightly colored dresses and people taking selfies everywhere he looks. Despite his earlier group text insistence that Niall, Zayn, and Harry show up promptly, he finds himself in a sea of familiar enough faces but none are theirs. Some of the people he only knows through events like this - where they share a smile over a drink a few times a year. Others, he works with more closely; the creative directors and contractors who hire his agency for their projects. He swirls through the groups with smiles and quick waves, his eyes focused singularly on the bar. He isn’t capable of making it through these things without at least a drink. Or two.

Whiskey on the rocks in hand, he finds Niall first. It’s always funny to see Niall in these situations, looking around with wide eyes and a frantic smile. Half the time, Louis thinks Zayn leaves him on his own on purpose - just for the chance to see him looking like a wandering puppy in the middle of the ballroom.

“Oh god, there you are,” he says as soon as he sees Louis - his reaction comparable to finding a life raft after a boat capsizes.

“I always admire your bravery,” Louis says by way of greeting. “Just coming right into these things, throwing yourself to the wolves.”

Niall grins, “To be fair, Zayn said he was already here. I was waiting outside for a good ten minutes before he text me and I got brave.”
Louis laughs and nods toward the bar, “Come get a drink and then lets go find lover boy.”

“Yours or mine?” Niall’s grin widens as he asks but Louis pretends not to hear him.

They find Zayn next - or Zayn finds them, technically. Niall is taking the first sip of his vodka soda when Zayn slips up behind him, his hands going around his middle as he presses a kiss to the back of his neck. It’s another one of those moments when Louis has to keep from rolling his eyes though there’s something inherently sweet as Niall twists his neck to see Zayn’s face. He didn’t even flinch at Zayn’s hands and lips on him, like he knows the grip and weight so well already. Louis takes a sip of his drink and looks away as they embrace then have a silent conversation with their eyes he is not privy to. Admittedly, he used to be scared of the way Zayn and Niall are - settled and sure - but the fear has started to fade slowly. Fading quicker in the past thirty-two days, if he’s honest.

“H was right behind me,” Zayn says when he finally looks at Louis. “But I think he got swept up by some socialites or something.” He has one arm slung loosely around Niall’s hips as he smirks. “Probably recognized him from Vogue.”

Louis laughs lightly and rolls his eyes but can’t help the streak of possessiveness in his stomach. He acts indifferent as his eyes wander the direction Zayn came from. Easy enough, his gaze lands on Harry across the room. He notices his suit first - solid forest green with a dip in the waist and an incredible fitting trouser with slightly flared hems at the legs, the fabric hugging his thighs. Louis knows before seeing, Harry’s eyes are going to look incredible against the fabric. Suddenly, he can’t wait to see.

It seems, though, he will be forced to wait anyway as Harry chats with a group of three women. Even from this far Louis can see how he listens, the half smile on his lips at whatever the darkest haired one is saying. One woman with lighter hair brushes her hand against his arm as she laughs and Harry doesn’t flinch. Louis recognizes the whip of feeling in his stomach for exactly what it is and lets it linger. He’s never felt jealousy in relation to Harry before, not this noticeable at least. In eight days this experiment will all be over and he needs to figure out if this jealousy, this possessive envy, is passing or stagnant - if it’s the temporary hold of the experiment or something more.

Before he can truly process his thoughts, Harry is smiling at the small group around him, waving and then pointing toward where Louis stands with Zayn and Niall. Louis smiles as he realizes Harry knew where they were all along and, despite his conversation with the three women, was waiting for the moment to leave and come to them. Louis stays staring as Harry crosses the room; watches him adjusting his suit and buttoning the middle button as he smirks right at him - like maybe he knew Louis was watching him the whole time.

“Was wondering where you got off to,” Zayn says when he realizes Harry is making his way back over to them. It would appear he nor Niall kept an eagle eye on him - that was all Louis.

It sends an unnecessary thrill through Louis that Harry kisses him rather than answering Zayn. Nothing over the top or beyond a quiet hello but there’s no hesitance there, nothing ashamed as he turns to Zayn with a shrug. “Fans,” he says offhandedly, a smile giving away his nonchalance.

Louis laughs but Zayn and Niall just stare at them with lips parted, drinks halfway lifted to their mouths. Louis’s smile fades into confusion as Harry glances at him. “What?” Harry asks.

“You just-” Zayn motions with his head but it doesn’t come across as a coherent message.

Niall steps in, “I think what he’s trying to say is that we’ve never seen you kiss each other.”
Louis feels heat rushing to his cheeks and he’s sure Harry does too - the attention to the way they act with each other not something they’re fond of nor looking for. “Oh,” Harry says and Louis thinks he’s about to apologize but it doesn’t come as quiet pulses around the four of them again.

“It’s not bad.” This time Zayn is the one to regain his footing first. “It’s weird, yeah. Or not weird but different.”

“Different isn’t bad either,” Niall says, effectively adding gasoline to a dumpster fire as Louis and Harry both stare at them.

“Yeah, not bad,” Zayn says. “Caught me off guard because it’s weird, obviously, to see your best friends kiss.”

“You said weird again,” Niall says with wide eyes like it’s a curse word in church.

Louis tries to laugh it off but it comes out like a cough and Harry shifts uncomfortably. He can’t really think of what to say as Zayn and Niall continue to word vomit at them so he slips Harry’s hand in his and squeezes just once.

“It’s you and me,” he tries to say. Harry squeezes back like maybe he’s understood.

“I’m sorry,” Zayn says in a rush. He must either not notice or just ignores their hands holding. “I’ve made this so fucking weird. I’m getting used to it,” he says. He looks each of them in the eyes and then repeats himself, “Getting used to it still.”

“It’s okay, Z,” Harry says because he’ll always be the one to smooth everything over. Louis wants to flick Zayn in the forehead, honestly. Niall too when he takes a sip of his drink and asks, “How many days left in this thing, anyway?” Luckily they’re saved from answering when Zayn gives him an aggressive shake of his head.

“Let’s get you a drink,” Louis says, ignoring the two of them and pulling Harry by toward the bar.

“Sounds like I’ll need it,” Harry says quietly as Niall and Zayn start arguing over their shoulders.

“How are you?” Louis asks while they wait for the bartender. “Everything okay?”

“Busy day,” Harry says. “Just running errands and stuff.” He shrugs and a smile plays on his lips, “Was looking forward to this all day, though. Seeing you in a fancy suit.” It still seems important - these small admittances they make to each other. The simplicity should be laughable but the small twitch of a smile on Louis’s lips beg to differ.

Niall’s apology for the awkward intro to the night is a round of shots as they wait for Harry’s drink to be made so they take them all in the name of friendship, a truce to not mention the earlier conversation. The night swirls from there as the drinks catch a steady pace, the crowd surges and the gala officially starts. There are a few opening speakers talking about the importance of fashion week to the city and to the industry but the room never goes fully silent or still just muted to a murmur before raising up again to a fever pitch as soon as the podium empties.

The band starts and a mass of waiters in black ties descend on the space with silver platters and unending appetizers. Louis eats entirely too many bacon wrapped dates - something he only tries on a dare from Zayn and ends up falling in love with. Harry goes partial to wontons stuffed with cream cheese and crab, double fisting even as he chews a third. He gets cream cheese all over his mouth so Louis wipes it away with his thumb and then kisses him when no one seems to be looking.

Some of the bigger fashion houses put on displays and exhibitions in different corners of the room at the gala so their group of four splits off like a melting iceberg as they go to follow-up on the
business end of the night. Zayn asks Niall to go with him to the Burberry display - an icy sculpture
covered in flower petals - but Niall refuses, plopping down on one of the lux couches near the bar
with a fresh drink. “I’ll be here,” he tells them with a wave of his hand. “Just don’t forget me if
David Beckham asks you to an afterparty or something.”

They end up going in different directions after they leave Niall, merging into the crowd. A few
drinks before making the rounds definitely helps Louis’s confidence. Being part of an agency
means a lot of his work comes to his team but he likes for his face to be out there anyway - his
name along with it. Someday he may want to freelance or make his schedule more flexible and
work on his own and networking never hurts. Eventually, though, he gets bored of the networking
part and starts to work his way back to the bar - to the people - the person - he wants to spend the
night with.

Their group at the bar has grown - mostly faces Louis recognizes and a few he’s not sure about.
He spots Harry first and then Zayn, Niall’s hair flashing toward the back of the group.
Automatically, Louis wants to find himself next to Harry but he gets pulled in by Michael - Niall’s
roommate from when they first met him - who wants to introduce Louis to his fiance. He pulls
himself away from that conversation to get a drink and makes wayward eye contact with Harry as
they share a smile. He gets another whiskey and then tries to get to Harry again, this time stopped
by Zayn to introduce a couple of his co-workers who have complimented Louis’s work.

And so it goes. Whenever Louis gets anywhere near Harry, he gets intercepted by someone else.
It becomes a game though it does begin to edge on frustration. Harry knows what he’s trying to do
- always grinning when Louis pulls a face over the shoulder of whoever he’s talking to or when
he gets intercepted by another smiling face. By the time he finally gets to him, Louis thinks he
deserves a gold medal until he realizes his drink is empty. “Oh no,” he says pitifully.

Harry laughs and takes the glass from him. “I’ll get you another.”

“I just got to you,” Louis says, only slightly melodramatic.

“I’ll be quick,” Harry says, smiling still. His cheeks are flushed and his eyes are starting to go
glasy, his lips slick and red.

Louis wants to take him home and devour him but settles for, “Have I told you yet today how
pretty you are?”

Harry bites his lip and shakes his head, making no move toward the bar for new drinks. “You
haven’t.”

“Lucky me,” Louis says, taking a step closer. “The day isn’t over yet.”

“Nope,” Harry says, his lips drawing back over his teeth.

“You’re very, very pretty Harry Styles.” Louis’s gaze drops from Harry’s eyes to his mouth and
he’s not even ashamed. He’s been waiting all night for this moment.

“Sounds like you’re trying to pick me up.”

“I might be,” Louis says with a smirk. He loves the carefree way they flirt like this - when no one
is paying attention. The moments when it feels like no one else exists besides the two of them.

“This must be him.” He’s pulled back from their moment like a fish hook under the ribs at the
rough voice next to him, and then a more familiar one, Niall’s, says, “Yep, that’s Louis.”

Louis takes a step back from Harry like they’ve been caught and regrets it immediately. He throws
en apologetic glance at Harry but he’s not looking back at him, his eyes are on the guy next to Niall. Louis’s eyes fall there too, not accepting to the interruption. The guy is fairly tall and clearly muscled, his fake tan not doing him any favors in a tangerine shirt. “Sorry, have we met?” There’s an edge to Louis’s voice as he smiles to soften it.

“This is Mac,” Niall says, “He’s a model.”

Louis nods once and offers his hand, “Louis Tomlinson.”

Harry shakes Mac’s hand next and introduces himself, his voice cautious as Mac winks at him. Harry, for his part, doesn’t flinch but the jealousy Louis discovered earlier in the night rears its head. Niall looks indifferent to the clear tension as he puts his arm around Mac’s shoulder. “Mac wandered over here because he thought Harry was handsome.”

Louis tries his very best not to growl because he’s not a dog but Mac is looking at Harry like he’s a prize being offered in a raffle. Perhaps Niall senses it as he quickly adds, “I explained he was taken for the moment.”

For the moment. Three words Louis is sure are about to prove very messy.

Mac tilts his head like a predator looking at prey, “Niall says you two have a forty day agreement?”

It’s never sounded as filthy as when it comes from this guy’s lips and Harry must agree. “It’s a bit more complicated than that,” he says.

“Is it?” Mac squints and Louis sees the curiosity for what it is though there is something spiky to his demeanor. Niall seems to be regretting the introduction all together as he looks at the ground like he’s expecting a trap door to open up.

Louis knows he can’t blame Niall for being friendly though he can certainly blame Mac for winking at Harry yet again. He doesn’t make up the rules; he just follows them. “It is,” Louis says. “And while we’d love to share the details with you,” he says sweetly, “It’s really a private matter.”

Mac nods, eyes narrowing at Louis before he glances to Harry. “Do you think I could get your number for when this agreement expires?”

Louis is a second away from lunging at him when Harry’s laughter cuts, harsh and bitter. “Uh, no. Definitely not.”

Louis actually smiles as Niall escorts Mac to the edge of the group and away from the two of them. He’s back in a blink with an apologetic smile. “That was my bad,” he says. “I get that.”

“Just a little bit,” Harry says. Like Louis, he seems unable to be mad at Niall, though. He’s still holding both of their empty drinks but before Louis can mention it, someone else in the larger group turns to their circle of three.

Her name is Samantha and though she works with Zayn, tonight is the first time Louis has met her. She seems sweet with a harsh edge of sarcasm and now, it turns out, she’s curious as well. “I couldn’t help but overhear, you two have a forty day dating agreement? How does that work?”

“It’s complicated,” Louis says, pressing his lips together and echoing Harry’s line of defense.

Harry looks at him and tries to say something with his eyes but Louis can’t understand. “We’re dating for forty days,” he says and, belatedly, Louis understands his gaze. He thinks trying to explain it will put a stop to the questions rather than invite more. “And after forty days we’ll
decide what we want to do as far as like, going forward.”

Samantha nods like she understands but that doesn’t stop the ripple effect of a few other people turning. “Wait, you’re not actually together?” It’s one of Zayn and Niall’s current neighbors though Louis can’t remember his name before someone else says, “Are you actors? Is this being filmed?”

From there it’s...awful. He and Harry are suddenly the hottest topic of conversation - talked about like they aren’t standing in the same group as everyone else. No one is rude or malicious and the oddity of their situation certainly begs curiosity but not like this - like rats in a lab. Questions are lobbed neither of them answer, and odd comments spin out of people’s lips without much thought for the way they sound.

They both smile and laugh lightly to break up the tension of the ridicule but it feels like a wedge drives between them as gazes study the way they stand together. It’s a stark reminder of the way their bubble doesn’t stand the test of publicity. A reminder people like to poke and prod in ways that inadvertently feel like pressure. Zayn is the one to finally step in with, “It’s a circus, we get it. But it’s their circus, yeah? So everyone should just fuck off, really.”

It’s not the nicest thing Louis has ever heard but it gets the group to draw their attention elsewhere with laughs and changes in conversation. Enough for him and Harry to catch each other’s eyes. “What do you say we ditch the rest of this?” Louis asks with a tilt of his head toward one of the exits.

“I would love that,” Harry says. “You know what else I’d love?” Louis raises his eyebrows, ignoring the way glances are still lingering on them despite the conversation moving on. “A burger,” Harry says, a smile pushing over the words. “These appetizers aren’t really cutting it.”

Louis laughs and then kisses Harry in the middle of it because Harry remains to be his one reminder they’re not crazy. He hears a low whistle from the group and he’s so over it he can’t even articulate it fully. Without pause, he takes the empty glasses from Harry and sets them on the nearest table. Then, he grabs Harry’s hand and starts toward the edge of the building without looking back. They don’t bother with goodbyes because, it turns out, the only ones who matter in this whole mess of a night are each other.

* *

They make quite the pair in the twenty-four hour diner a few blocks away. Their suits stand in stark contrast to the rest of the tourist patrons but they hardly pay attention as the waitress leads them to a table by the window. They lay their coats and suit jackets over the back of the booth, melting snowflakes clinging to the fabrics.

“Can I get a cheeseburger and a strawberry milkshake?” Harry asks before he even glances at the menu.

“I’ll have the same,” Louis says, stacking the menus and handing them back. “Chocolate shake instead of strawberry, please.”

It’s the perfect ending to their night, like the air being let out of a balloon. The table is sticky, the burgers are big and messy, falling apart in their hands, and the fries are extra crispy. Their milkshakes are overloaded with whipped cream and they switch halfway through to change flavors. It’s so easy - the conversation, the mess they make, the way Louis kisses Harry when he leaves to use the restroom. The fluorescent lights overhead are the only witnesses to their moments and there’s no judgement or questions.
Harry pays the bill and Louis thanks him with another kiss as they leave hand in hand. It’s barely snowing as they walk down the sidewalk, flakes shimmering in the streetlights like tiny dancers. Louis is about to say they look like ballerinas when suddenly Harry is pressing him backwards to the darkened wall outside of a closed boutique. He laughs through his confusion even as the cold bricks press against his back. “What is this?” He asks as Harry’s hands fall to his waist, his face close enough each puff of his breath clouds between them.

“I don’t know,” Harry says. He smiles over his words, “Just wanted to kiss you, I guess.”

“Yeah?” Louis lifts his chin slightly, “So what’s stopping you?”

Harry starts to smile but Louis kisses him before he can. He goes easy, his mouth opening for Louis’s as he exhales softly when Louis drags his teeth over his bottom lip. Louis smiles when Harry squeezes his waist and his hands fall to his hips, pulling him closer as they kiss, relying on the wall to keep them standing.

Alone in a dark corner it’s not enough and Louis proves it when he rolls his hips forward against Harry’s. He presses a quiet moan against Harry’s mouth and then lets Harry catch his breath against his neck, small kisses mixing with gasps. His lips trail over his cheek and into his hair, slotting his thigh between Harry’s legs to pull him closer and put pressure where he’s hard. The sound Harry makes is one he wants to have recorded and he drags Harry forward again just to hear it one more time.

“Will you come back to mine, baby?” Louis whispers right up against his ear. He’d love to blame it on alcohol but he’s not sure there’s any of that left in his bloodstream when he says, “I’m sick of seeing you in clothes.”

Harry misses a breath and then Louis feels his smile against his neck. He lifts his head, cheeks flushed even in the cold, hair already messy from Louis’s hands. “I’ve been waiting all night for you to ask,” he says.

“Is that a yes?”

“Yes,” he says, smiling against Louis’s lips as he kisses him.

Louis has never had so many fantasies about Harry as he has in the past few weeks. Harry pressed up against the wall, Harry bent over the table in his kitchen, Harry begging, Harry writhing, Harry coming. He doesn’t want to unpack why the fantasies are so vivid in his imagination but he especially doesn’t have the time to think about them now - not when he finally has Harry in the exact position he dreams of.

They’d tripped in his apartment quite literally - their feet getting wrapped up as they came through the door. Their laughter moved seamlessly to kissing and then Harry stayed patient while Louis undressed him slowly. Kissing each inch of skin revealed by unbuttoning his shirt, lathing his tongue over the thin skin under the curve of his belly.

Louis pushes him back on the bed to take off his pants, kissing the inside of his thigh, his knee, the curve of his ankle before drawing the same path on the other leg. He pulls off his boxers with slow precision, watching the way his cock curves against his hip, a bead of precome forming as he spreads Harry’s legs and then kisses it off. Harry’s back curves with the sensation and Louis slips off the bed to look at him like this, spread out for his taking.

He lets himself drink in the way Harry’s body looks against his sheets. Harry lets him, his hands
drawing absent lines on his stomach as he tracks Louis’s eyes with his own. It’s a heady feeling when Louis meets his eyes again, something heavy and hot in the lingering silence. “You planning to take anything off or is this all about me?”

Louis’s eyebrows flicker at the statement as he glances down at himself. He’s gotten himself so lost in Harry’s body, he didn’t realize he’s still dressed. His suit jacket shucked by the door but his shirt and trousers still intact, his black shoes on like he may make a run for it. “Maybe it is about you,” Louis says, his lips twitching. He undoes the top two buttons of his shirt with one hand as he smirks. “Is that what you like?”

Harry smiles and it lights up his face. It should be sinful, the muscles of his body and softness of his curves paired with a smile that dimples on one side. Maybe it is a sin, maybe Louis accidentally made a deal with the devil a long time ago and this is what he finally gets in return. “I do like that,” he says, “But not tonight.”

Louis smiles, “Aw, babe, going soft on me?”

Harry, in the way only he can, gives a pointed look at his half hard cock and raises his eyebrows, “What do you think?” Louis laughs and then he’s crawling over Harry to kiss him because he can, because there’s not much else he’d rather do.

Eventually other things catch his attention, like Harry rolling them over and stripping off the remaining layers between them until their skin touches in every possible place, heat building with each roll of their hips and slip of their mouths against jaws, necks, chests. Out of breath, Louis presses Harry flat against the bed and kisses him hard, hands holding his head steady by his hair. When he pulls back, their chests touch already sticky with sweat.

“I just thought of something,” Harry says, gasping against Louis’s lips.

“Yeah, what’s that?” Louis brushes his hand back through Harry’s hair and then kisses him again, intimacy curling around them.

“We’re both vers,” he says.

Louis has no control over the laugh that bursts from his lips, “You just thought of that?”

“Yes.” Harry sounds partly offended even as they kiss again

Louis realized it a long time ago in a rather offhand way though now, naked, sweaty and in bed with Harry, it does seem rather more important. “Is that your way of saying we’re going all the way tonight? No regrets?”

Harry puts two fingers against Louis’s lips and shakes his head. “You sing Katy Perry and I will go all the way out your door and not come back.”

Louis falls apart when he laughs, clinging to Harry as he tries not to fall off the bed. “I swear I won’t,” he says. “Promise.”

“You’re insufferable.”

“You keep saying these sweet things to me, babe, I’m going to think you have a crush on me.”

They don’t say anything else as they dissolve into kissing again, hands and mouths roaming. Louis finds himself cataloging Harry’s reactions like there is going to be a test: the way his toes curl when Louis bites his neck, the long drawn whines when Louis spends time on his chest, the way his back arches when Louis presses kisses against his thighs.
Despite the exploration, there’s a steady need growing in Louis’s stomach, in the hardening of his cock. He’d happily taste each inch of Harry’s skin tonight but his hands start to shake with holding back and Harry’s eyes have turned dark with the same need. “What are we doing, H?” Louis asks as he finishes kissing the crease of Harry’s ribs. “What do you want?”

Harry looks lost in it all, his lips bright pink and cheeks color matched, his fingers twitching where they rest on top of Louis’s thighs. There’s a flash of nerves in his eyes and Louis feels it reflected in his own. For every bridge they’ve crossed, whatever comes next is still uncharted. “Will you fuck me?”

Four words and Louis is sunk, fire raging in the previously simmering pit of his belly. “I will,” he says, folding close to say the words against Harry’s mouth. “I want to.”

Where they usually laugh or make a joke, now they lock eyes and hold gazes, a steady beat and quiet understanding. Then Louis kisses his lips, soft as their noses brush. “I trust you,” Harry whispers and whether that’s for this moment, for the rest of this experiment, or for always, Louis is too scared to ask.

Exploration suddenly becomes intentional as Harry makes quick work of pulling himself up on the pillows and Louis arranges Harry’s feet flat against the bed so his knees are bent. He kisses the inside of Harry’s knee in a fleeting moment before getting a couple of condoms and a half-used bottle of lube from the top drawer of his dresser. He tosses the bottle at Harry and he manages to catch it one-handed which gets the first laughter out of them in a couple of minutes, at least.

Louis slicks his fingers carefully and then lowers his hand, eyes locked on Harry as he moves by memory to press between his legs. He glances down once to make sure he’s lined up and then his eyes are back on Harry’s as he starts to open him up slowly, carefully. Harry takes each finger with a roll of his hips, soft gasps and then subtle nods as Louis takes turns studying his face and his hand in equal turns.

When Harry starts to get antsy, his fingers curling around the sheets, Louis pulls his hand back smoothly. He knows they’re both pulled tight like frozen ropes and about to snap at any moment. Sweat is beading at Harry’s hairline and Louis feels moisture gathering at his lower back. “You ready?” Louis asks. He lays his hand flat over the condom laying by Harry’s hip.

Harry nods, a small smile on his lips.

“You’re sure?” Louis checks when Harry doesn’t say anything.

“Yes,” Harry says, this time without hesitation. “Definitely.”

Louis nods and then tears the foil on the condom like a punctuation mark. He rolls it on carefully and lines himself up between Harry’s legs. Harry wraps one leg around his waist, his heel pressing at Louis’s lower back. Slowly, he presses in. He tries not to think about it further than the act itself, the way Harry’s warmth feels around him. He tries not to analyze or get caught up in the fact this is his best friend under him, his best friend clenching around his cock and pulling him in tighter. When his hips are pressed to Harry’s ass, they both take a deep breath, eyes locking as they smirk at the same time.

“You can move, you know,” Harry says and just like that, any tension snaps, any hesitation gathering in Louis’s chest. Despite everything else going on, the reminder this is Harry, his Harry, lets him breathe again.

Like anything, it takes a moment to catch a rhythm with their hips. Louis hitches Harry’s leg higher on his waist and gets a low groan to let him know he’s done it right. Harry’s reactions
make everything hotter and make Louis experiment a bit more, leaning forward to take bites at his
nipple, switching the rhythm of his hips when Harry starts to get too comfortable with the
cadence. Harry doesn’t babble; the sounds he makes are punched from the back of the throat and
he arches with moans like a wanton pin up boy. Louis watches the way pink blooms on his chest
and climbs up to his face, his eyes brightened even by the light of a few lamps. His mouth shows
his reactions best, the big smiles and dropped jaw, bitten lips and silent screams with his mouth
open wide.

Louis is out of breath from gunning for each reaction and it has to be some of the most physical
sex he’s had as he gets up on his knees for a few beats and then lower on the bed at others. Harry
makes him work harder, makes him gasp for air just to see the moment a wave of pleasure breaks
over Harry’s face and he gasps like he’s been punched with it.

“Fuck,” Harry says at one point. “You’re really fucking good at this.”

Louis pauses to push sweat damp hair from his face. “Are you surprised?” He covers Harry’s
mouth with his hand before he can say anything. “Don’t answer that,” he says. He feels him smile
against his palm.

Louis gives an experimental roll of his hips without moving his hand and watches the darkness
flicker over Harry’s eyes, the flutter of his eyelashes. “Yeah?” He adjusts his hands to slip two
fingers into Harry’s mouth. It’s off instinct but when Harry sucks and lathes his tongue in a circle
over his fingertips, he quite nearly combusts. “You like that?” He asks, rolling his hips again. His
arm aches holding himself up but the image of Harry’s pretty lips wrapped around his fingers is
allowing him strength he didn’t know he had. Harry moans around his fingers and nods. “Fuck,”
Louis says it under his breath first and then louder a second time. “Fuck. What are you?” He
doesn’t give Harry a chance to answer as he focuses the rolls of his hips and presses in as far as he
can, his fingers pressing down on Harry’s tongue. The next noise Harry makes sounds ripped
from his lungs and it may as well be a firing gun for Louis.

Suddenly all he can think about is making Harry come, watching him fall apart under him and
knowing he’s the one responsible. Realizing he needs both hands, he pulls his fingers from
Harry’s lips and drags drool down his chin. Neither one of them seems to mind as Louis grabs
hold of his hips, pressing against the backs of Harry’s thighs to fold him. He feels himself
vibrating as Harry clenches around him to pull him tighter. There’s sweat dripping under his ears,
his mouth dry as Harry becomes his total focus.

Harry’s abs and arms tremble, his head thrown back and throat bared. Louis wants to bite the skin
and kiss his pink mouth; he wants to lick the sweat off Harry’s thighs, wants to cover his entire
body with his own. Instead, he settles for squeezing his hips hard enough to leave marks and
focusing his thrusts until he gets Harry shaking even more vehemently under him.

His own orgasm is curling and fighting in his chest, reaching out to his legs and making his toes
numb. He wants Harry to get there first. Harry actually hisses when Louis gets a hand around him,
a whoosh from behind his teeth. “Come on, baby,” Louis says softly, almost to himself. He smears
Harry’s precome over his cock, using it to ease the slide of his hand. He speeds up his hips, eyes
flickering from Harry’s face to his reddened cock and back again. Harry’s hands shake in their
grasp on the comforter and his eyes stay glued to Louis’s hands until he seems to surrender
himself to something stronger and allows them to roll back and then close.

When Harry comes, his entire body convulses. His shoulders press down and his lower back
curves up, his chin points up to the ceiling as he makes a mess of his belly and Louis’s hand in
equal amounts. The glide turns to a click in Louis’s fist but he barely notices as Harry’s body starts
to pull him closer as he clenches, sending stars shooting behind Louis’s eyes.
Louis pulls out before Harry comes down; his legs falling to the bed as Louis peels off the condom quickly to get a hand on himself. His groan is breathless at the first grip of his hand and gets Harry’s attention as he looks over. His chest is shiny with sweat, his hair disheveled as he pants to catch his breath. Louis bites on his lip as he feels strings start to cut loose in his stomach. “Come here,” Harry says without making a move. Louis is too distracted to wonder what he means so he just knee-walks further up the bed, his knees brushing Harry’s sides. The precipice of the wave rolling his body reaches a peak he can feel under his lungs, the pressure pushing out.

Two things happen at once, then: He meets Harry’s eyes just as Harry drops his mouth open and sticks out his tongue like an offering. Whether a coincidence or not, everything in Louis breaks and he sees stars and meteors as the solar system collapses. He tries to watch the way his orgasm paints Harry’s face but he loses himself to the moment, eyes squeezing shut as his mind goes blank.

Consciousness comes back slowly but when he opens his eyes it doesn’t seem as though much time has passed by. Harry is still laying with his eyes closed, his face, neck, and chest streaked in come. It makes for a pretty picture as Harry tries to catch his breath, his lips puffy and parted. He blinks his eyes open, hazy green meeting Louis’s as he slowly smiles. “What the fuck just happened?” His voice is slow, sounds like there’s a period after each word.

“I don’t know,” Louis says, too lazy to fake bravado. He feels like he’s left his body and is now relearning his edges and way his pieces all fit together. All because of the guy under him, the guy still covered in his come. The last thought sparks him from his reverie and he uses the edge of the sheet to clean off Harry’s face and neck, too lazy for much else.

“I just-” Harry shakes his head, “I just can’t believe that happened.”

Something like concern presses at Louis’s stomach as looks down at Harry. “Good can’t believe that just happened?”

Harry laughs, quiet and a bit raspy. “Yes, very good.”

Louis presses forward to kiss him, his body falling flat as he lets his weight off of his arms. He can feel each curve of breath from Harry’s stomach against his, the warmth wrapping them both up. Harry’s hands come up to rest on his lower back, fingertips on the curve of his ass as they kiss lazily.

“We definitely need to shower,” Louis says against Harry’s lips. “This is borderline gross.” He means the drying sweat on their skin and the places they now seem to be sticking together.

“Definitely,” Harry says on top of a yawn. It makes Louis yawn in response and then he adjusts so his head rests on the front of Harry’s shoulder. Scooting any lower and he might be able to hear his heartbeat.

“In five minutes,” Louis says, shutting his eyes. Harry’s hum echoes through his chest but he may already be falling asleep.

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**SUNDAY ~ Day 33**

Louis wakes up sometime in the dark part of the morning essentially glued to Harry. He’s drooled on his shoulder and realizes he all of the lamps in his apartment are still on as he blinks lazily. “H,” he whispers, trying his best to keep his mouth and, what must be, terrible breath from Harry’s nose. Harry doesn’t stir so he trips his fingers up over his ribs. “Hey, babe, Harry,” he tries again.
Harry opens his eyes on a sharp inhale and Louis gets the distinct privilege of watching his gaze focus and then soften over his face. “What time is it?” Harry asks, slurring the words together into a single line of syllables.

“Don’t know,” Louis says. Slowly, he pulls himself off of Harry and flops to the bed. “But we still need to shower.”

“Eh,” Harry hums as he rolls to his side, his back to Louis. He arranges his head on the pillow. “Don’t really want to.”

“Gross,” Louis says as Harry attempts to pull the sheet up over himself. “That’s disgusting.” He yanks the sheet back from Harry’s grip and they end up wrestling with it, laughing as it gets tangled around them.

“Get up,” Louis says when he has the majority of the sheet and Harry flops over in defeat. Louis takes the sheet with him as he gets off the bed, “Then you can go back to bed.” He slaps Harry’s ass. “Up.”

The shower still isn’t big enough for two but they get in together anyway this time. They don’t bother to wash their hair or even pay attention to each other as they share Louis’s body soap and wash quickly, changing places beneath the spray as needed. Louis gives Harry a squirt of face wash and then they both disappear into suds as they try to exfoliate. Harry goes under first to rinse and then Louis. It’s while his eyes are still closed that Harry swoops in and kisses him. There’s something heated in it as he presses his tongue between Louis’s teeth and grips his hips. As quick as it starts, he’s gone, the shower door opening and clicking closed. Louis opens his eyes slowly, the water still streaming over his head and blurring his vision. He swears Harry is smirking as he walks away.

When Louis comes out of the bathroom, Harry has already turned off the lights and put the bed back together after their escapade. Louis slips in under the covers and shivers at the coolness as he scoots closer to Harry in the middle of the bed. Harry adjusts the pillow under his head and then settles, eyes on Louis. Louis does the same and then presses in as close as he can, their ankles twisting together. Harry folds into him like a pushed house of cards, his face going to Louis’s neck. Louis finds himself smiling as he brings one hand up to Harry’s head, pushing his fingers through his wet hair. “Goodnight,” he whispers into his hair, unsure if he hears him. Harry presses a small kiss to Louis’s neck and that seems to be enough.

* 

It’s Louis’s phone that wakes him up a second time that morning, reminiscent of their first morning together. This time is a bit less frantic as he rolls away from Harry to get his phone from his nightstand. He tries not to laugh as Harry rolls right along with him and clings to him again like he hasn’t moved at all. His phone lights up again with a message from Zayn. Are you up? Followed by, I have something for you. Louis isn’t even hungover but he’s confused. Another pops up while he’s staring at the screen. Never mind. I’m a few blocks away. I’ll drop it by.

Louis glances at Harry’s cheek pressed to his chest, hair in a birds nest halo, and he feels an odd swerve of protection; he doesn’t want to share this quiet morning. He doesn’t quite get a choice as Zayn texts him again, I’m here. Someone let me in. Be up in a second. “What the fuck?” Louis whispers, so quiet he nearly mouths the words. Zayn must have sprouted superhero powers overnight to get a few blocks in a matter of a seconds.

Envisioning Zayn’s inevitable pounding knock on the door, he gets out of bed quickly, hissing at the loss of Harry’s warmth and lash of the cold apartment. For all his earlier heat seeking, Harry seems to accept Louis is gone as he curls around the pillow instead, his eyes not even twitching in
his sleep. “Traitor,” Louis whispers as the corner of his mouth quirks up.

He grabs a pair of boxers and jogs to his door, carefully switching the lock and gently pulling it open. Zayn is just getting out of the elevator in a hoodie and sweats, a cup of coffee in hand. Louis lets the door fall halfway shut against his side to keep their noise in the hallway. He loves his studio but it doesn’t exactly give anyone privacy, no matter how he wants to pretend.

“Good morning,” Zayn says brightly. “Your nipples could cut ice right now.”

Louis looks down at his goosebump covered chest and crosses his arms with a roll of his eyes. “Good morning. What in the world is so important you couldn’t wait until like, noon?”

Zayn smiles as he pulls a business card from his pocket. “Just after you left last night Ella Jones came over and asked if I could pass along the message for you to contact her.”

“No fucking way,” Louis says as he grabs the card from Zayn’s fingers. He reads the name and contact information twice, his heart taking up some kind of double time beat in his chest. He runs his thumb over The New Yorker logo and suddenly wants to cry. He’s known Ella Jones’ name since he moved to the city - the goal to always get noticed, get some sort of acknowledgement from her. He thought it was only part of his wildest dreams.

Zayn smiles, “I wanted to give it to you in person. Not just text a picture.”

Louis grins, shaking his head. “This is nuts.” The fact Ella Jones has even an idea of who Louis is, is mindblowing.

“I know. You’re a superstar now.”

Louis laughs lightly. “Don’t know about that. But thanks.”

The silence lingers for a moment and then Zayn clears his throat. “What’s up? Do you want to go get brunch or something to celebrate?”

Louis swallows, considering. He could wake Harry up and they could go with Zayn but there’s still that protective streak, something that says mine, mine, mine with each beat of his heart. “I actually have someone over.”

It’s the weirdest possible way to say it but Zayn gets it, his eyes flickering. “Harry?”

Louis nods, “Yeah. He spent the night.” He shouldn’t be embarrassed by his sex life - not in front of the man he’s literally seen in the midst of the act before - but there’s something to be said the fact he has now fucked their mutual best friend. Regardless of it always being the three of them, only two can share the bed.


Louis smiles, “Is it weird? Different?”

“Shut up,” Zayn says, recognizing his words from last night. “I was caught off guard.”

“First we kiss and now we’re sleeping together,” Louis says, “Is your mind blown yet?”

“Shut up,” Zayn repeats as he rolls his eyes. “I’m happy for you. Both of you.”

Louis’s smile doesn’t waiver. “Thanks.” He holds up the business card, “And thanks for this.”
Zayn nods, lips pressed together. He looks like he wants to say something but it doesn’t come. “I’ll let you get back to H,” he says instead. “Tell him I say hello.”

Louis is struck by how strange the statement is, how odd it is Zayn can’t say hello to Harry himself. “I will,” he says as Zayn presses the call button on the elevator. Louis waits for the doors to slip closed before he goes back into the apartment, back to Harry in the exact same spot he left him.

* 

Despite slipping under the covers again, Louis finds himself unable to fall back to sleep. He’s sure he’s tired enough to at least doze but closing his eyes just sends off a myriad of thoughts he doesn’t really want to have so he stares at the ceiling instead.

He finds himself listening to Harry’s breathing and the way he grinds his teeth every once in awhile. On a passing thought, he wonders if it’s weird to listen to someone sleep - an invasion of their unconscious privacy. That thought starts to weasel into the category of unwanted as well so he plays with Harry’s hair, scratching gently at his scalp and lazily combing through the tangles from a messy night of sleep.

He’s not sure what he’s after but feeling Harry’s eyelashes flutter on his chest as he blinks awake a few moments later seems to be a pretty good result. “Morning,” Harry mumbles before he’s so much as moved his head. Something in Louis settles, something he didn’t know was out of place. The confidence with which Harry has woken up, not in silence or abrupt separation of their bodies, is like maybe last night felt as perfect to him as it still does to Louis.

“Good morning,” Louis says. His voice betrays the fact he’s been awake for nearly an hour compared to Harry’s rougher cadence.

“What was Zayn doing here?”

Louis can’t help the subtle jolt of surprise. “How’d you know he was here?”

This time Harry lifts his head, a smile on his dry lips. “You’re not as quiet as you think you are.”

Louis drops his jaw in mock offense. “Hey. I’m plenty quiet.”

Harry squints. “Sure.” Louis rolls his eyes. “Seriously though, is everything okay?” There’s concern in the crease of his eyebrow and Louis uses his thumb to smooth it out.

“Everything’s fine. He wanted to bring me a business card.” He chuckles lightly as he shakes his head in disbelief. If he had fallen asleep again he would have thought it was all a dream. “Someone at The New Yorker was looking for me after we left. They’re interested in my work.”

“What?” Harry barely lets the word hang before he presses up to kiss Louis, his mouth warm and soft with sleep. “That’s amazing, Lou.”

Louis smiles and nods. “I know. I’m still in shock, honestly.”

Harry frowns and the crease comes back again. “Should we have stayed longer last night? Did we leave too early?”

It should say something this is Harry’s reaction to the news after congratulations, if perhaps there were more opportunities missed because they got burgers instead. “No,” Louis says easily. “Besides, I wouldn’t trade last night for anything.”
Harry smiles and collapses onto his back next to Louis. “Anything besides illustrating a cover for The New Yorker, right?”

“I’m being nice,” he says, flicking the top of Harry’s stomach lightly. “Don’t ruin it.” Harry sucks in a breath and wiggles further from Louis’s reach. “And don’t say they want me for the cover. They probably want me to do a border design for a story.”

Harry folds his hands under his head and rests his ear over his wrist as he looks at Louis. “Yeah? You think they purposefully seek people out for border designs? Complicated business, that?” His smirk is full of shit, eyes shining with mirth.

Louis takes the pillow from under his head and sets it over Harry’s face instead. “You’re awful.”

“I think you like it,” comes out muffled but Louis hears the smile. Harry wiggles out from under the pillow before Louis can hide his own, embarrassing grin.

“What are you doing today?” Louis asks, his thumb tracing the arc of Harry’s cheek. “Any plans?”

“No plans,” Harry says. “I’m free.”

Louis misses a beat just watching the way his lips move around the words and then he curls forward to kiss him. “Me too.” He kisses Harry again, traces his lips with his tongue. “Stay here. Let’s do nothing all day.”

Harry smiles against his mouth, “Sounds perfect.”

* 

Louis gets out of bed to make coffee and he’s just finished brewing a cup when Harry ambushes him by pinning him back against the kitchen sink. Confusion moves to heat as Harry kisses him then sinks smoothly to his knees and takes Louis’s boxers with him. He licks Louis’s cock and lets it settle in his mouth as he tightens his lips and starts to move. It must be the quickest orgasm of his life but Harry takes it all, sitting back on his heels when he’s done and licking his lips as Louis’s cup of coffee sits steaming on the counter.

“What was that?” Louis asks, his heart trying to beat out of his chest.

Harry shrugs, “You got me more yogurt.”

Louis catches sight of the blue and white cup of Fage sitting on the opposite counter. Harry must have gotten it out of the fridge when he walked in the kitchen a moment before his blow job assault. He cups Harry’s face in his hand and drags his thumb over Harry’s lips until he can slip inside and press on the edge of his bottom teeth with the pad of his finger. “Keep that up and you can have all the yogurt you want, babe.”

Once they’ve eaten and had two cups of coffee each, Louis repays Harry against the wall connecting the kitchen and the bathroom. He sucks him off and presses two fingers inside where he’s still soft from the night before. When Harry comes, he crumbles to the floor with a gasp and Louis catches him.

They shower and get back in bed naked to watch a few episodes of Harry’s most recent obsession - This Is Us - which only makes Louis feel emotionally deflated and has Harry tearing up every ten seconds. Louis lightens the mood by closing his laptop and climbing on Harry, snagging the lube from the nightstand and waving it around gamely. He gets Harry messy and ready and then fucks him for a second time with Harry’s ankles on his shoulders, his hands digging into Louis’s
hips.

After, they graduate to the couch where they doze, Harry in just Louis’s t-shirt, Louis in a pair of boxers, while they pretend to watch some cooking show on Food Network. They order sandwiches and soup for lunch and make a bet for who has to answer the door - and therefore put clothes on - when the delivery arrives. They argue until it’s too late and then Louis ends up naked while Harry steals his boxers for a complete and semi-appropriate outfit to answer the door as the knocking turns from friendly to incessant. They take another nap after they eat and Louis is hard pressed to remember a day this good.

In the late afternoon, they both read - Harry borrowing a Garth Greenwell novel Louis refuses to finish because it’s depressing while Louis reads one of the books Harry bought him from the museum sale. It’s quiet as they flip through pages, their bare feet tangled in the center of the couch.

At one point Louis feels his heartbeat echoing perfect on repeat and he has to catch his breath because surely nothing this good can possibly last. To disrupt the train of thought before it can get going, Louis decides to drown himself in Harry again; tossing their books to the side as he crawls in Harry’s lap. The startled sound Harry makes is soon mollified with a satisfied hum when Louis kisses him.

“Can I fuck you?” Harry whispers when it’s starting to get sweaty again, when his hands keep pulling Louis down by his hips, dragging his ass over where his cock is getting steadily harder.

“Yeah,” Louis gasps against his mouth. The act of being asked sends fireworks in his stomach so he can’t imagine where they go from here. “Want you to.”

Harry flips them so Louis falls against the couch and suddenly he’s covered in Harry’s warmth as they kiss. He’s loved having Harry under him twice in the past twenty-four hours but the sight of Harry sinking down between his legs with determination in his eyes is a whole different kind of thrilling animal.

Louis’s sweats end up thrown over the back of the couch and then Harry takes his goddamn time kissing his ankles and knees, the insides of his thighs and mouthing the tip of his cock like it’s a pastime he’d like to take up. “You’re being slow as fuck,” Louis calls when Harry finally leaves him to get the lube from where they last left it.

“This is the Harry Styles experience,” Harry says as he comes back. “Do not rush it.” He dips over the back of the couch to kiss Louis, “We’re going slow.”

“Probably good,” Louis says, softened by Harry’s lips though he doesn’t want to admit it. “It’s been awhile since I’ve bottomed.”

Harry smirks as he crawls back between Louis’s legs. “Been awhile since I topped, actually. Not sure I remember how it works.”

Louis raises his eyebrow lazily. “I’m sure you’ll manage, sweetheart.” Harry laughs so hard he snorts.

Manage, they do. Harry opens Louis up slowly and there’s something hesitant in his eyes as he runs his free hand over Louis’s belly in soothing circles. Harry’s fingers are smooth inside of him, even as he chews his lip while he studies Louis’s face. Louis finds himself praising him, telling him he’s doing a good job, that everything feels so good. It’s not even close to a lie.

Harry’s hands start to shake when he rolls the condom on and Louis sits up to help him though
there are only so many hands one condom can really take so he mostly just flutters around helplessly. He draws Harry into a slow kiss when he can, his fingers running up over his sides and the curve of his ribs. “Everything okay?” He asks.

“Aren’t I supposed to ask you that?” Harry says in response, a smile breaking his lips apart.

“We can be in this together,” Louis says, biting his lip lightly and then laying back again. “Now, fuck me, baby.”

Harry slides in so slowly his abs shake and Louis can’t take his eyes off of him even when the first parts of uncomfortable twist in his stomach. He waits for it to pass, waits for his body to agree to letting Harry inside and when it does, the twitch turns to a flame and he still can’t take his eyes off of Harry.

“Fuck, you feel so good,” Harry says, eyes rolling back in his head like he means it. He groans as Louis clenches around him and Louis can’t help his smirk. He loves the ways he’s learning to twist Harry inside out.

You and me, he thinks as Harry regains his composure and starts to thrust slowly. In the end, it’s still you and it’s still me. In a rush, he’s so scared it won’t be, so scared of all the ways this can go wrong, he finds himself closing his eyes in overwhelm. He knew it would come - this feeling of fear constantly itching his belly - but certainly not in the throes of sex.

Harry must notice because he presses forward to kiss Louis, his lips a gentle coax until Louis kisses him back steadily. They’re close enough for Harry’s eyes to be a mossy blur and all Louis can hear is the desperate gasps of his breath, all he can feel is the erratic rhythms of his hips. “Let me ride you,” he says pushing Harry back. His racing mind is making him feel fragile and Harry is barely holding himself together as it is.

It takes a moment for them to get situated again, for Louis to get comfortable but they get there in the end. Louis locks his fingers behind Harry’s neck as he kisses him, rolling his hips in a rhythm he controls even though Harry’s hands rest on the curve of his ass. Louis picks up the pace and tugs the back of Harry’s hair so his head falls back along the edge of the couch. Harry’s eyes search for Louis’s and when they meet, Louis sees the same darkness as the night before, the same height of arousal there as he bites Harry’s lip and drags his teeth over the inside. He holds Harry steady as he makes a mess of his neck, nothing that will last more than a few hours of permanence but enough for Harry to whine lowly, kick a leg out when Louis blows cool air over the same spot he’s been working on with his teeth.

Harry gets impatient eventually and slides lower on the couch for leverage, leaves Louis clinging to his shoulders as his hips come to life, drilling up into Louis like he’s been waiting for this. Louis recovers to give as good as he gets and suddenly they’re both a symphony of sounds as they fall apart, Harry coming first with a stuttered and then silent groan. Louis works him through it with his hips, even as he gets a hand on himself. He feels Harry still pulsing inside him, Harry’s whispered, “Lou, oh my god,” and then it’s all over, his come streaking across Harry’s torso for a third time today.

They catch their breath with a round of soft, gasping kisses. Their teeth knock more than their lips touch and their chests slip against each other with sweat. Louis falls out of Harry’s lap gracelessly and onto the couch, his hands thrown up over his head. Harry pulls off the condom and ties it in a knot before letting his body fall back. “Why do I feel like I’m the one who just got fucked?” He asks the ceiling.

Louis laughs, “Trust me, love. It was me.” Even as he says it, he lets his hand trip down over his stomach and between his legs to press where Harry has been. Harry watches him and it’s a heady
sensation to feel where he’s been broken open accompanied by Harry’s heavy gaze. Harry can only watch for so long and then he's pressing forward to kiss Louis again, their bodies falling heavily against the couch. Louis digs his fingers into Harry's hips to make him squeal with laughter and then they try to catch their breath out of each other's mouths.

“Should we order dinner?” Louis asks when they're done playing, skin sticking together, and smiles stifled.

“Can we get chicken strips?”

Louis laughs and he can’t say why. It’s not even funny but it gets Harry laughing too then they’re collapsed on the couch all over again, and they can’t stop smiling. “We can get chicken strips,” Louis says, pressing a kiss behind his ear.
“Let’s be reckless, unaffected
Running out until we’re breathless
Let’s be hopeful, don’t get broken
And stay caught up in the moment.”

MONDAY ~ Day 34

Monday is an abrupt contrast to their long awaited lazy Sunday - teeming with too many things to do and, quite frankly, not enough time. Louis can hardly recall how refreshed he felt yesterday when today is a trial by fire in the practice of unexpected changes and small crises with part of his team still hungover from Saturday. He gets through it the way he usually does - a lot of coffee and sticky notes with reminders plastered across his desk.

He leaves the office after dark and texts Harry to see where he is. Harry sends an ominous text of a few skull emojis but follows up with a phone call before Louis can actually be worried. By the sounds of it, they had the same kind of Monday except Harry’s voice drags on slowly like he’s about to fall asleep. Reasonably, Louis knows he should just let him go to sleep - that he should just get some rest himself. Instead, he keeps walking past the turn for his apartment. “Are you home yet?”

“Nearly,” Harry says over a yawn. “Walking from the subway.”

Louis smiles, “Cool. See you soon.” He hangs up over Harry’s confused, “Wait, what?”

Despite there not being enough hours in the day, Louis manages to make time bend as he stops at the corner convenience store for two pints of ice cream. The obligation of upholding their forty day agreement by seeing each other everyday doesn’t even cross his mind; all he can think about is seeing Harry, hearing his laughter and ending the day on a sweet note.

The look on Harry’s face when he comes into his lobby and finds Louis already there melts away the stress of the day in a whoosh. Louis kisses the surprise right off his face with a smirk.

“What did I do to deserve this?” Harry asks when they’re in the elevator.

“What went along with my crazy scheme to date me as an experiment,” Louis says. “Ice cream is the added bonus.” Harry presses his lips together like he’s trying not to smile.

They eat their ice cream on Harry’s couch and watch a terrible movie on the Hallmark channel with their legs all twisted together. Halfway through, Louis puts their half eaten pints back in the freezer before they melt and when he comes back, he kisses Harry just to taste the sweetness of his lips - and not even just from the ice cream. He’s not sure when Harry made him go so soft but he doesn’t have the heart to complain about it. They re-adjust for the second half of the movie,
Harry’s back to Louis’s chest, their fingers twisting together at their hips. Louis won’t admit it out loud but he stops paying attention to the movie eventually and watches Harry’s eyelashes instead, the slow blinks as he gets sleepy.

“Do you want to stay?” Harry asks when the movie ends and Louis flips the television off. The only light comes from the kitchen but they’re mostly cast in darkness, softening their edges.

“Do you mind?” Louis asks in a quick wave of self consciousness.

“No,” Harry says. He rolls to his back and kisses the side of Louis’s neck. “Want you to.”

“Okay.” Louis kisses his lips, slow and drawn with one hand slipping up under his shirt to rub over his stomach. “I will.”

Harry has a spare toothbrush for Louis so they brush their teeth side by side knocking hips in the bathroom. Louis can’t even remember brushing his teeth next to his last boyfriend but somehow with Harry it makes sense - as mundane and boring as it is. Maybe it’s because they’ve been doing the boring stuff for such a long time anyway. Now the kissing and touching is new and exciting while the boring stuff already belongs.

“Oh my god,” Harry says with foam clouding over his lips and dribbling over his chin.

Louis spits and looks at him in the reflection of the mirror. “What?”

Harry doesn’t say anything just turns his head to the side to show Louis his neck. In the ridiculously bright lights of the bathroom Louis can see a bruise under his ear. “How’d you do that?” He reaches even as he asks, gently pressing his thumb against the mark. It’s purple in the center and red on the edges.

Harry hisses at the pressure, “Pretty sure you did that, not me.”

Louis gasps as he realizes what Harry’s saying. “You mean you went the whole day without noticing?”

Harry spits and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “I was in a hurry this morning and I didn’t look in the mirror.” It’s quiet except for the click of his toothbrush being slotted in the holder. He glances at Louis quickly and then again when he notices him smiling. “What?”

“It’s kind of funny.”

Harry frowns, “Is not. People probably noticed.”

“They were probably jealous.”

Harry tilts his head and his lips twitch as he presses them together. “Of?”

“The fact you had all sorts of sex yesterday,” Louis says. He presses in to kiss Harry, biting on his bottom lip and tugging. “Probably jealous of me, actually.”

“You’re so full of shit,” Harry says, still trying not to smile. His voice sounds the way it does when he tries not to let Louis win. Except, this time, winning means making him laugh even if he doesn’t want to and Louis is pretty good at the game.

“No, really,” Louis says. Harry crosses his arms and he looks the kind of petulant where you put in a lot of effort to make it look that way. “I’m the one who had the privilege of sucking on your neck for so long it bruised. And bruised for more than a few hours, we’re twenty fours later here,
darling. You’re hot as hell and I got to give you a hickey. I’m the belle of the ball, envy of the crowd.” Harry starts smiling somewhere in the middle of that but by the end Louis can barely get the words out over his own laughter, his eyes squinting with it. “See? I told you. It’s kind of funny.”

Harry shakes his head slowly, his smile making his dimples press in. “You’re awful.”

“I think you kind of like it,” Louis says. He doesn’t wait for Harry to say anything byway of their typical response just presses forward and kisses him, slotting his thumb over the hickey and pressing in just to swallow Harry’s gasp.

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**TUESDAY ~ Day 35**

Tuesday morning starts with Harry’s alarm and an abrupt chill as Harry rolls away and takes his space heater tendencies with him. Louis pulls the blankets up on his shoulder as he opens his eyes. He’s met with the muscled expanse of Harry’s back and shoulders as he leans toward the nightstand where his phone lays. It’s not a bad first sight to wake up to.

“What time is it?” Louis asks, pointing his toes to stretch them.

“Six.” Harry rolls on to his back and turns his head to look at Louis.

“Six?” He groans, “Why are we awake at six?”

Harry smiles. “Early meeting. For me, at least. You can sleep more.”

Louis smiles while admiring the puffiness of Harry’s face from a night of sleep, his eyes still looking tired despite his relative alertness. “What a prince.”

“So I’ve been told,” Harry says, grinning. He rolls just slightly so they can kiss and it’s soft and perfect for the morning. Louis feels more awake just from Harry’s lips and he finds himself pressing forward a bit more, licking into Harry’s mouth and running his tongue over his teeth. He slips his leg up over Harry’s hip to seal their bodies together but Harry shakes his head. “I seriously have a meeting, that’s not a joke.”

“Didn’t say it was,” Louis says, kissing him again and then nipping at his jaw when he tries to turn away. “Just taking advantage of the position we’ve found ourselves in.” He drops his hand between them to find Harry half hard. He knows it’s usual for the morning but he’d like to get himself some credit. Harry takes a quiet gasp for air and then reaches for Louis’s wrist to still him.

“I need to get out of bed.”

Louis fights his grip and presses to his crotch again. “Then get out of bed.”

“Do you have any idea how hard you’re making it?”

Louis smiles, kissing along his throat. “No.”

Harry groans when Louis squeezes his cock and then the sounds turns remorseful as he hauls himself up to a sitting position and rolls out of the bed altogether.

“Hate to see you leave, love to watch you go,” Louis calls as Harry starts down the loft stairs, his boxers hugging his cute ass in the best ways.
Louis dozes while Harry showers. When he hears him puttering around downstairs he decides to get up to join him. He finds a pair of sweats at the end of the bed and stretches his hands in the air then heads downstairs. On a last second thought, he grabs Harry’s phone for him and throws the comforter back over the bed in some resemblance of being made. Two steps down he picks up some of the laundry scattered on the floor and takes it with him, shoving it in Harry’s laundry hamper at the bottom of the stairs.

Harry is still in the bathroom, shuffling around and opening the drawers at random intervals. Louis finds a hoodie in a drawer and pulls it on as he goes toward the kitchen. He could put on his trousers and button down shirt he wore yesterday to work but he gets a thrill out of wearing Harry’s clothes.

Harry has already started a pot of coffee because he’s exactly the kind of person who has a coffee pot that is auto-synced with his alarm. Louis pours two cups, yawning as he does. He smells Harry’s cologne first and then sees him padding toward him, his shirt half buttoned, already tucked into his pinstripe trousers.

“You made coffee,” he muses, a quiet smile over his words.

“I poured it from the pot,” Louis says, “But we can pretend.”

“Good morning, by the way,” Harry says, leaning forward to kiss him. “Sorry I didn’t tell you about the early wake up call before you agreed to stay.”

“It is early,” Louis agrees. “But you being here makes it better.”

“Hey,” Harry says, smiling still. “That’s what I was going to say.”

“Yeah?” Louis finds himself in front of Harry, his fingers doing up his buttons for him. It’s not even a conscious decision as he smooths Harry’s collar down and he feels oddly self conscious as he realizes it. Somehow it feels too intimate, like he’s gone too far.

Like he’s read his mind, Harry hooks a finger under his chin and tilts his face up. “I’m nervous.”

“Why?” Louis breathes, the word coming out bumpy despite it’s single syllable.

Harry studies his face in the quiet, eyes jumping from his eyes to his mouth to the ceiling and down again; Louis thinks he might get seasick if he keeps it up. Harry stops in favor of smoothing his tongue over his bottom lip. “I’m scared I could get used to this.”

The words settle like thorns Louis feels under his lungs, his own fears falling from Harry’s lips out loud like this. He doesn’t know what to say - not sure how to make them feel better as they march toward the potential edge of everything they think they know. Instead, he kisses him, his hands falling to Harry’s hips and pulling him close. It’s not an answer, an excuse, or a reassurance. But for now, in the dull morning light of a February morning, it’s enough.

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WEDNESDAY ~Day 36

“Without further adieu, I present the new design with a nod of thanks for principal designer, Louis Tomlinson.”

At his name, Louis waves around at the small crowd of twenty or so gathered in the park on this particularly sunny if typically chilly day. There’s a smattering of applause from the park’s benefactors and a few local media attempting to cover the local art scene in a huge city.
The big reveal is a white sheet being dragged down over the mural by the director of the park. At this point, the design seems old. The project pitch was last January, the final files submitted in June. It took until now for it to be installed throughout the park and on all of their marketing materials leading up to this modest roll out.

The crowd oohs and ahs appropriately and Louis smiles, pushing his aviators further up his nose. He loves the odd February days where he’s forced to dig out his sunglasses. He glances around at the crowd with another wave of thanks. If anything, it’s a good excuse to get out of the office early. His eyes catch on a familiar face at the edge of the crowd, sunglasses perched on his head to push his hair back, a dimple curling in his smile when he knows Louis is looking at him. Harry.

Louis pushes through the small crowd with a few handshakes and small smiles but his eyes have a singular focus. “H,” he says when he reaches him, the rest of the crowd stepping forward to congratulate the park team and leaving the two of them on their own. “What are you doing here?”

“You said you had a thing,” Harry says, shrugging his shoulders. “I had a few free hours.”

Louis’s eyebrows raise over the edge of his sunglasses, “Oh you did?”

Harry presses his lips together and nods. Louis rolls his bottom lip under his teeth and then kisses Harry right there in broad daylight on a Wednesday afternoon. “Congratulations,” Harry says against his mouth. “You make me proud to know you.”

Are words supposed to make your spine tingle? Louis bites down on his back molars as he realizes these ones do. “It’s a beautiful day,” he says, changing the subject because it’s easiest. “Should we walk the High Line?”

Harry smiles, “I’d love that.”

Their hands brush as they walk the few blocks to the nearest entrance to the High Line in Manhattan. On Harry’s insistence they stop at Levain Bakery for tea and a soft peanut butter cookie to split. Harry hands Louis a chunk as they make their way up the stairs to the walkway. It’s usually packed with tourists on nice days but now it’s eerily empty. Amazingly, so.

“This is actually good,” Harry says as he pops a second chunk of the cookie in his mouth while Louis inspects his. “Really good.”

Louis laughs as he pops the first chunk of the cookie in his mouth. Harry’s right, it’s incredible - rich and bitterly sweet, melting in his mouth. “Fuck,” Louis says, chewing. “It is good.”

“Told you.” Harry puts a second bite in his mouth and then offers another piece to Louis as they start walking.

Four years later and the High Line is still one of Louis’s favorite place in the city. An abandoned railroad transformed into a walkway over the skyline, swerving through apartment buildings twelve stories high. There are garden plots lined along the sides, and a fence to keep you from wandering off the walkway and falling to the busy streets below.

“Are we still on for this weekend?” Louis asks as he throws away the bag that had been holding their, now demolished, cookie.

“Yep.” Harry hands Louis his tea as they fall into step again. “I’ll rent a car and we can drive up Friday afternoon. That okay?”

Louis nods, “Let me know how much the car is. I’ll split it with you.” He can’t quite believe
they’re taking a trip together. They’ve gone places before - snowshoeing in the winter, the Hamptons in the summer, upstate in the fall - but never alone with only the two of them, never as a couple.

“Don’t worry about it,” Harry says. He takes a sip of tea. “I’m excited.”

“Yeah?”

“I haven’t been skiing yet this season and there’s supposed to be more snow on the mountain this weekend.”

Louis laughs, “And here I thought you meant you were excited to go with me.”

“No, no, I am,” Harry says, eyes wide as he looks at Louis. “The whole thing is exciting.”

Louis nods, “Yeah, yeah,” but he’s smiling. Harry moves his cup to his opposite hand and holds Louis’s hand as they wander.

It’s a slow walk and their cheeks and noses are kissed cold by the time they make it to the farthest end. They descend the steps into the Chelsea market on a mutual decision in favor of dinner. They go to a wine bar and sit in a cozy booth, order all sorts of cheese and wine samples, little rosemary crackers and crunchy bread.

The fact it’s day thirty-six feels like it should hang over their heads like a cloud but they don’t let it. They laugh and sneak kisses as the waiter walks away; get a little drunk and feed each other cheese like they’re in a movie. They act like it’s day fifteen and they have a world of days ahead of them, not one looming decision prickling their spines.

It’s well past eight when they finally leave the bar and dark outside already. The cold is numbing, and a clear sky without clouds is no help. “It’s fucking cold,” Harry yells causing a few wayward stares. “Where is spring?” Louis smile as he pulls Harry in close, covering his mouth with his hand as they both start laughing.

“Come over,” Harry says, quieter and just for them. “Stay at mine.”

“Okay,” Louis says, kissing Harry harder than he has all night. Day thirty-six doesn’t loom but something about everything is starting to feel like it could be the last time.

“Come over, stay at mine, and fuck me,” Harry drawls against Louis’s lips.

“Whoa there,” Louis says loudly, cutting him off before he can keep going. “I already said I’m staying. No need to make the deal sweeter.”

Harry smiles at him, glowing under the streetlight. “Oh, Louis,” he says, a tinge of sadness in his voice. “What are we doing?”

Louis lifts his chin and holds out a hand for a cab, one hand on Harry’s waist. “We’re getting a cab, going to yours, and then I’m gonna fuck you, baby.”

It’s not the answer Harry is asking for, Louis knows that even after a bottle of wine on a Wednesday night but it’s the answer he has right now. Harry smiles, blinking slowly. Louis knows he could repeat the question again, turn Louis’s silly answer on its head in favor of something serious but he doesn’t. A yellow cab pulls toward their side of the curb and Harry kisses the side of Louis’s neck. It’s not the answer he wants but it seems to be the one he’ll take. At least for now.
THURSDAY ~ Day 37

Louis walks up to Julia’s office building with a nostalgic thrill. They’ve only had five session together, this being their sixth, but the place still holds something special. She’s forced him and Harry both to admit things they probably wouldn’t have in ordinary conversation, to take this whole thing seriously. He can’t say he’ll miss her, or being psychoanalyzed weekly, but, he can admit, it hasn’t been the worst thing to happen to them.

Harry is already outside the office, standing there with his hands clasped behind his back, waiting. “Hey you,” he says when he sees Louis, a smile blooming on his lips. It’s the same smile Louis kissed this morning before he got a cab back to his apartment. It’s also the same smile he kissed at midnight last night when they were both naked and lazy from a round of orgasms.

“Hey,” Louis says. “Ready for this?”

“How bad can it be?” Harry says, turning to open the door to Julia’s office. “She already knows all of our secrets by now.” Louis smiles though there’s an itch in his stomach that causes him to be suspicious.

Julia starts with her usual softball questions - how the last week has been, what they’ve done. By session six, Louis knows it for what it is: She’s lulling them into a false sense of security before she says something that turns them upside down.

“And you’re still planning on the trip?”

Harry nods as Louis answers. “Yeah. We decided to do a ski weekend, leaving tomorrow.”

“So, still playing by the rules, then?” Julia smiles. “You’ve done all the things you lined out at the very beginning. Seen each other almost every day, come here to see me, three proper dates a week, and now a weekend trip.” Louis feels like she’s putting metaphorical gold stars on a chart for them like in elementary school.

“We thought that stuff would help us develop a relationship,” Harry says only half defensive in tone.

“I agree,” Julia says. “It helped you take things a bit more seriously by having guidelines. Have you thought about when you don’t have the constraints?”

Louis nods his head back and forth. “To be fair, I didn’t see this as a constraint. If it was, it wasn’t bad to have something holding us to our agreement.”

Julia nods, “Let me put it this way: It’s not realistic you’ll see each other every day after this experiment ends. It’s difficult to do it for forty days but you both put the effort in to make it happen. To hold your agreement.”

“We missed one day,” Harry says, his lips twitching.

“We missed one day,” Harry says, his lips twitching.

“Right.” Julia presses her lips together and Louis gets the distinct feeling they’re missing her point. “What I’m trying to say here is, it’s easier to see each other when you’re both playing a game, so to speak.” If she notices the way they bristle at game she doesn’t let on. “But things are harder in real life. It’s not as easy to put on a happy face or drive across town when there’s nothing holding you to it.”

Louis clasps his hands and lets them hang between his knees. “If we go past the forty days, I don’t
think either of us expects to have rules.”

“We’ve been in relationships before,” Harry says wryly. “We get how it works to not be obligated by an experiment. We know it’s hard.”

“They’ve failed.” Julia blinks at them. “To be completely blunt, neither one of you has been in a successful relationship longer than a year or two at most.”

Louis feels like he blinks three times before anyone says anything. He doesn’t know how to explain the last thirty-seven days haven’t been a cakewalk but they’ve been better than any “real” relationship he’s been in.

“That’s, uh, valid,” Harry says and it sounds like the words are being tugged from his throat.

Julia smiles at both of them, “This whole thing has been like training wheels, yeah?” Louis drops his gaze to the ground and Harry shifts, tugging on the fabric of his trousers. “I just want you to take that into consideration before you commit to anything. Training wheels can be a good thing,” she says, “But they can be a hindrance too.”

“Something to think about,” Harry says, voice flat.

Louis nods, not looking up. Just like that, a second week in a row, Julia has rendered them both speechless. This time, though, they aren’t allowed to sit in silence until the session ends; they have to put on happy faces, thank Julia for her time, kiss her on the cheek and promise to let her know how things go.

Louis isn’t sure they’ve ever left therapy floating on air but this time he truly feels like gum on the bottom of a shoe. Somehow Julia has managed to point out their flaws with a perfectly sharp pencil and then disguise it as advice, something to think about. Harry follows after Louis with crossed arms and a crease between his eyebrows. Louis so badly wants to know what he’s thinking while, at the same time, he can’t bear to ask.

He pauses just before he presses the door open to go outside and Harry walks right into him. It’s a miniature collision that makes them both half laugh even if there’s something raw laced in the sound.

“That kind of sucked,” Harry says when they get outside.

Louis nods, lips pressed in a thin line. “Not so great, no.”

Harry looks at Louis with a storm in his eyes and he can’t take it. He slips his hands around Harry’s waist without warning and pulls him until their chests collide, their faces tucked tight together. It’s just a hug but Harry relaxes into it enough for Louis to catch his breath again.

“It’s easier when it’s just us,” Harry says softly as they pull back.

“When we’re in our bubble,” Louis says, realizing he hasn’t used that metaphor out loud before. Harry nods like he gets it. “That’s not how the world works though, is it?”

Harry shakes his head, a wrinkle in the curl of his lips. “No, it’s not.”

Louis shoves his hands in his pockets, “Do you want to get something to eat?”

He shakes his head again. “I think I should head home. I’m not in the best mood right now.”

It’s typically honest and Louis wants to throw his hands in the air. How can anyone say they
won’t be this honest outside of the forty days? Just because there wouldn’t be a timeline, why
would everything have to change? They’d still be Louis and Harry. He wants to scream out but
instead he nods, swallowing. “No, that’s a good idea.” he says, knowing his own bad mood
won’t be helpful either. “And we should pack,” he says, lips turning up. “Big trip tomorrow.”

Harry looks like he wants to throw up as he nods.

“Hey,” Louis says, ducking in close to make Harry look at him. “We have three days still, yeah?
Let’s make the best of them.”

This all seemed a lot better starting out rather than getting close to the end.”

Louis can’t help but agree but he doesn’t let on. “We’re fine.”

Harry meets his eyes. “We’re fine.”

Louis nods once and then kisses Harry with his eyes open. They’re fine. Everything’s fine.

FRIDAY ~ Day 38

If there was an award for being miserable at packing weekend bags, Louis would surely get it. He
knows he has two minutes before Harry is supposed to pick him up but he’s still throwing things
in his bag at random - sweatshirts, slippers, swimsuits - because you just never know what you
may need. He runs his hands back through his hair and sighs at the overly full bag on his bed.
“Fuck,” he says loudly when his phone vibrates with a text from Harry.

With a few more things thrown in his bag - an extra toothbrush, a flashlight, three more pairs of
socks - he zips it up and calls it good. He swirls around the apartment in a miniature hurricane to
turn off all the lights, double check he has his keys and phone and then he hurries into the
hallway.

Downstairs, Harry is standing outside the car in sunglasses and his brown coat looking like some
sort of ski bunny advertisement. It’s not a big help he’s rented a Range Rover and looks a little
famous like this.

“You didn’t have to get out of the car,” Louis says as he presses through the lobby doors. “I’m not
a damsel in distress.”

Harry laughs lowly. “I know you’re not a damsel nor in distress.” He pushes his lips forward,
“But I am.”

“Come again?” Louis pauses as he goes to open the back door of the car.

“I nearly got in three accidents on the way over,” Harry says. “Can you drive us?”

Louis laughs, his head tipping back on his neck. “Did you forget how to drive since you’ve lived
here?” He tosses his bag in the backseat and closes the door. Harry just stares at him and then,
finally, he nods slowly. Louis laughs and rolls his eyes. “Yes, H, I’ll drive us.”

He holds out his hand for the keys and then walks around to the driver’s side. He’s never been
lucky enough to drive a Range Rover but he’s sure he can learn. Harry gets in at the same time
and meets him in the middle with a kiss over the center console. “Hey,” Harry says, pulling back.
“I’m excited.”
Louis smiles softly, “Yeah, me too.”

Windham Mountain is a two hour drive outside of the city which, in the scheme of things, isn’t that far. Of course Harry is prepared with snacks and water bottles along with a playlist perfectly curated for driving through the countryside - Sam Smith, Vance Joy, Lorde. “I can’t believe it’s been forty days,” he says as he takes out two packs of trail mix and a bag of M&M’s. Harry can never eat trail mix as is; he always adds more candy. Everytime.

Louis waits to respond as Harry carefully pours half of the M&M’s in Louis’s portion before handing it over. The last thing they need is Harry distractedly pouring candy all over the floor of a rented car. “Technically it hasn’t been forty yet.”

“Technicalities aside.” Harry settles back in his seat. “It’s hard to believe.”

“It’s gone fast,” Louis agrees. He picks a cashew out of his mix and bites it in half. “And if you think about how awkward the first date was compared to now?”

Harry covers his face as he laughs, folding into himself. “It was bad,” he says, still smiling. “I never pictured us in that situation and not being able to have a conversation. I thought I was going to crawl out of my skin.”

“I was about to call it all off,” Louis says, remembering The Fat Radish so clearly. “We hadn’t even started and I thought we were already doomed.”

Harry pulls one foot up on the seat and sets his chin on his knee. “What was your favorite moment? Out of all of this?”

It’s a simple question but Louis is slapped with something like nostalgia. To think of where they started and where they are now, to try and piece together all of the conversations into one cohesive experience feels like the last day of summer camp and it hurts to leave. He takes a deep breath and smiles as he thinks about it. Moments stick out but nothing stands up like the best - perhaps there were too many good ones to count. He rolls his lips together, waiting for something to pull focus. The first vision to swim in is Harry’s face the first time they had sex, the way his eyebrows pulled together as he came. Louis tries to control his face from the shock of the memory though he’s not sure he does it well.

“What is it?” Harry asks, smiling as he looks at Louis. “You look like you’re laughing. What are you thinking of?”

Louis spits his answer without much thought, “The Fleetwood Mac concert. That whole night.”

The first night they kissed he realizes belatedly. What made him say it, though, is the clear memory of the feeling after Harry left his place, the butterflies dancing over his heart.

“With the bubble bar on the rooftop?”

Louis snorts, “Yes.” He runs his tongue over his bottom lip. “I have a long list of other favorites,” he says. “I won’t bore you but I hope you know there’s more than one.” He glances at Harry to find him staring back with his lips parted like he’s surprised and it scares Louis enough to look away. “What about you, what was your favorite?”

Harry tosses his head back against the seat. “Oh no, I knew you’d ask.”

“Fair and square, darling,” Louis says, grinning as their surroundings start to turn snow covered
the closer they get to Windham.

“I think the night we danced in the street,” Harry says. “After the twenties bar.”

Louis smiles, remembering it perfect, “I’d never danced on the streets of New York.”

“I know,” Harry says. “That might be why I liked it so much. The fact I was able to make you dance on an empty New York street.” He glances over, “With me.”

Louis scratches his forehead as he debates his next question before he goes for it. “I think it’s pretty well-documented I wanted to blow the whole thing up and quit a couple different times.” He smiles when Harry snorts. “But what about you?”

“What about me what?”

“Did you ever want to stop? Not go the full forty?”

“The full forty,” Harry says, giggling a bit and then letting it fade. “There was one time, yeah.” He sounds resigned like he wasn’t planning to admit it.

“Yeah?” Louis tries to keep his surprise at bay.

“The night of my birthday.”

“What? Why?” Louis tries to backtrack to what happened then - dinner where they told Zayn and Niall, Harry singing karaoke in the bar, holding him on the way home in the cab.

“It’s the night I tried to kiss you and you turned away.”

Louis’s speeding mind slows to a crawl. He’d forgotten that part. “Oh.”

“Yeah.” Harry nods, staring out the front window.

“Was it because I turned away?” Louis feels like shit the way you do when you realize you’ve hurt someone carelessly.

“No,” Harry says, pressing his lips together. “It was because of how badly I wanted to kiss you. The way it hurt when I thought you didn’t want that. To be honest, it was then that I realized how scary this all is. How vulnerable it’s made us.”

Louis grips the wheel tighter as he nods into the quiet. There’s not much more to say here. They’ve put everything on the line and there’s still no saying if they get to land safely or not.

“Hey,” Louis says, his voice a little raw with emotions he doesn’t want to acknowledge.

“Hey what?” Harry asks as looks over. Louis glances at the road and then leans over, kissing Harry softly. “What was that for?”

“An apology for your birthday,” Louis says. “I should have kissed you that night.”

Harry nods, “Okay.” He looks out the opposite window but Louis catches him smiling.

The Windham Lodge is a sprawling, two-story cabin. It’s definitely not like the cabins Louis built as a kid with wooden blocks, though; this has three peaked roofs, a balcony running along the second floor, gorgeous wooden pillars running through the front, snow piled all around the base and even some frosting the tops. According to Harry, it holds more than twenty guest rooms but
for a moment Louis lets himself dream it’s all one house - a hideaway in the hills of the Catskills like a fairytale.

Since it is a lodge, the roads are paved in loose gravel for guests and the parking lot has been cleared of snow and ice. Across from the residential lodge is the resort, another wood cabin on steroids situation, and beyond is the mountain looking just like a picture covered in white and dotted in grey terrain. They both sit in the car staring for a moment before climbing out. They grab their bags from the backseat and set off for the office to check-in.

Their room is on the second floor and they find it to be fairly standard with a bed, television, electric fireplace, and small kitchenette. The star is definitely the balcony facing the mountains and two large windows framing the view perfectly.

“That bed looks like a fucking dream,” Harry says as the door shuts quietly behind them.

“It’s California King,” Louis says, only quoting what the lady in the office told them.

“I grew up in California and I didn’t even have a California King.”

Louis rolls his eyes as he claims his usual side of the bed by plopping his bag on top. “You say that like it was a requirement of being in California.”

“It should have been,” Harry says slightly under his breath as he lets his bag fall to the floor.

Louis checks out the bathroom and the tiny fridge before going out onto the balcony. The wind chill makes him shiver and he immediately pulls his hands into the sleeves of his sweatshirt as his breath clouds around him.

“Do you have a phone charger?” Harry calls from inside. “I think I forgot mine.”

“In my bag somewhere,” he says, folding his arms and leaning over the balcony railing to see below. “You might have to dig around.”

He hears the zipper on his bag and then gets distracted watching his breath on each exhale. It’s going to be even colder once they go up to the mountain and he’s suddenly quite thankful for his overpacking of long underwear and wool socks. He focuses again when he hears a Harry sounding squeak from in the room. “Got it?”

“Uh, no.”

Louis turns at the tone of Harry’s voice, confused. “It’s a white cord. How hard is it to find?” He takes two steps in the room to find Harry standing over his bag with his hand clasped around something immediately familiar and out of place all at once.

“I got distracted,” Harry says, lifting his hand. “Did you have big plans for this?”

Louis laughs as he realizes his mistake. “I thought I grabbed a flashlight out of the drawer this morning.”

“And instead you grabbed a - “


“It vibrates?” Harry studies the dark blue toy in his hand, curved edges and flared end.

“The bottom twists,” Louis says for lack of something better to add. It’s too late to deny the
Harry uses his free hand to twist and then his eyes go wide as the toy starts to subtly vibrate. “Oh my god,” he says. Something about the tone of his voice sends a spark in Louis’s stomach like a faulty lighter. “I’ve never used one that vibrates.”

Louis’s vision whites out for a moment as his blood rushes in the opposite direction his body is used to. “Like it?” His mouth is dry, his voice quiet as Harry glances up at him. This should be awkward but, as he’s finding out, it’s edging toward something else.

“I’m kind of getting hard right now,” Harry says, a classic smirk on his face and no sign of nerves.

Louis raises his eyebrows as he slides the balcony door shut with just one hand. “Yeah?” He feels like a hunter approaching prey as he takes slow steps toward Harry.

Harry’s smirk slips as the room goes quiet save for the quiet vibrating sound of the toy. Louis watches him swallow, the way he barely licks his bottom lip. “Yeah.”

Louis smiles as he comes right up to him. He can tell Harry thinks he’s going to kiss his lips so he dives down instead, kissing the side of his neck and then pressing the tops of his teeth to the muscle lightly. Harry moves his head subtly to the side and Louis can’t quite help himself as he kisses under his ear and then whispers, “Want me to use it on you, lovely?”

Harry’s answer is a quietly whimpered, “Lou,” but it’s as good as go as Louis grabs for him and kisses him all at once, one hand low on Harry’s back the other on the side of his neck as he uses his tongue to open Harry’s mouth to him in quiet agreement.

The vibrator falls somewhere between them when Harry crawls backwards onto the bed without disconnecting their mouths. Louis’s bag gets pushed to the ground with his foot and a quiet thud as it probably empties on the floor. He really, really doesn’t care. What he does care about is slipping down the bed and untying Harry’s black vans, pulling them off while he steps on the heels of his own shoes to get out of them. He makes quick work of Harry’s jeans and then his, throwing his shirt off when Harry sits halfway up to wiggle out of his.

“This is not how I saw this afternoon going,” he says as Louis crawls back on top of him, balancing over his hips with his knees on the bed.

“No? Should we stop?”

Harry raises his eyebrows as his hands smooth up Louis’s thighs. “Absolutely not.” He hooks his fingers in Louis’s boxers and tugs them just as he rolls Louis to his back, both of them laughing against each other’s mouths as they fall.

“It’s fucking cold in here.”

Louis laughs as he traces his finger over the slow drying sweat on Harry’s chest. It turns out edging Harry with a vibrator and his tongue for an hour made them to forget to turn the heat in their room on. Not that Louis really noticed when Harry’s eyes rolled back in his head as he came and then he had Louis fuck his mouth for the grand finale.

Now, though, the drying sweat and stickiness has left them naked and chilly, intertwined on the biggest bed they’ve ever shared. “We should put on the fireplace,” Harry says, catching Louis’s hand over his heart and pressing it there.

“But I’m cold.”

Louis kisses the side of his bicep and rolls to his back, fingers resting over his stomach. “You could get out of bed and do something about it.”

Harry groans like an oversized puppy as he rolls onto his side and throws his leg over Louis’s thighs. “Don’t you think you’ve made me do enough today?”

Louis turns his head, his hair squishing against the pillow under his head. “You had fun.” He smirks at the mere memory of Harry shaking as he pressed the vibrator against his prostate, the way his eyes started to tear just before they rolled back, the filthy grin on his face when he opened his eyes again.

“I did,” he agrees, his lips twitching. “But I’m exhausted now.”

Louis groans, “Well, today’s your lucky day.” He heaves himself up and rolls over Harry’s body, their skin brushing as Harry cheers. “But only because I need to pee.” He flicks the switch over the fireplace on as he passes, shivering slightly as it lights.

“It smells like sex in here,” he says once he finishes and wander back into the room.

“Wow,” Harry deadpans from the bed where he’s slipped under the sheets. “How did that happen?”

“You’re insufferable,” Louis says as he opens the balcony just a crack to get fresh air circulation. Harry smiles at him and the usual, “You like it,” stays unspoken as Louis smiles back.

The slow heat filling the room is already making him sleepy not to mention the last hour spent at various levels of cardio fatigue. The best part of this vacation is they don’t have any plans or reason not to crawl in bed and take a nap. He doesn’t bother with clothes as he slips under the sheets, chills raising on his skin from the breeze at the door and the cool sheets. The idea of the fire warming them up slowly makes him feel cozy as he scoots closer to Harry.

“Nap time on a Friday,” Harry says, turning away and then scooting so his back collides with Louis’s chest. “My favorite.”

Easy as anything, Louis slips his arm around his waist, his hand spaying over Harry’s ribs. “I know,” he whispers, a quick kiss to the freckle on Harry’s shoulder before letting his head fall to the pillow. A Friday nap with Harry in his arms feels like it could easily be his favorite too.

* 

Louis wakes up disoriented with the room cast in the blue tones of a post-sunset fade. The fire casts shadows against the wall and Harry hums in his sleep as he adjusts his head on the pillow. Louis lets go of him as he moves to his back. He rubs his eyes and takes inventory of his sore muscles, the warm room diluted comfortably by the cool air outside. He points his toes and stretches his arms over his head, glancing at the clock on the nightstand. It’s close to seven which explains the growl in his stomach.

“Time is it?” Harry mumbles, rolling over to face him. His voice is low and scratchy and he has the crease of the pillowcase imprinted on his cheek.

“Seven,” Louis says as Harry yawns. “I’m hungry.”
“I know. Your growling stomach is what woke me up,” he says with half a smile.

“Too bad there’s no room service.”

Harry snorts, “We didn’t drive all the way up here to do the same stuff we always do.”

“We’re not,” Louis says, smiling. “We have a fireplace and a vibrator.”

Harry’s laughter is loud and rocketing as he flops to his back. He covers is face with his hands but it doesn’t dull the sound. “Let’s go to the lodge for dinner,” he says once he settles. “I could really go for some wine.”

“You’re not hungry?” Louis asks, sitting up slowly.

“I am,” Harry says. “First, wine. Then food. I’ve got my priorities all lined up.”

Louis laughs as he throws the covers off of himself and goes to face his bag and scattered belongings from where they tossed it off the bed earlier. He ends up in a sweater and a pair of jeans with his puffy jacket over the top and a pair of gloves shoved in the pockets. Harry is almost the same except he’s given up his Vans for a pair of heavy black rain boots with shearling on the inside. The boots looks like they belongs in an editorial rather than a mountain but Louis doesn’t mention it.

The walk to the lodge is short but enough for them to get a whip chill from the breeze and for their noses to turn red before they find the entrance to the restaurant. Inside there’s a swarm of low conversations with live piano filtering into the gaps from the far corner. The walls are all wooden and the lights are antique chandeliers, each table spaced to create a sense of private dining with booths spread along the walls. The host shows them to a table with a smile, pointing out a hook for their jackets and the wine menu.

They hang their jackets and take a moment to defrost before they order a bottle of wine and the three course special from the centerfold of the menu. It’s a heightened level of romance than their usual meals but they don’t miss a step as they share the wine and talk about food, skiing horror stories from their youth, and compare snow-related injuries.

Dinner starts with small salads followed by crab cakes for the main course and banana cream pie for dessert. By the end, they’re stuffed and the piano player has left recorded music in his place as the restaurant slowly clears out. They aren’t in a hurry and linger over their last glasses of wine, savoring the warmth and company. “I’m not sure what your plans are,” the waiter says as he delivers the check, “But at nine they put on fireworks over the west edge of the mountain. The best view is from the bar upstairs, if you’re interested.”

Louis isn’t sure if he’s just after a bigger tip on the bill but thanks him all the same as Harry’s eyebrows pull together. “Fireworks in February? That’s going to make me want a hotdog and a beer.”

Louis smiles as he takes a sip of wine. “Should we skip it, then, Miss America? Are fireworks so sacred we can only have them in July?”

“I’ll make an exception.” Harry smiles as he licks the last of the banana cream from his fork. “And no more calling me Miss America. I prefer Miss Congeniality.”

“Yeah? Only if you know how to play a song using half full water glasses.”

Harry raises his eyebrows as he reaches for his wine. “I can’t tell you all my secrets.”
“Of course not.” Louis smirks. Harry smiles as he swallows, eyes dancing in the candlelight.

Once they finish, they find their way to the elevator to check out the bar. Louis feels the red wine like a warmth, his cheeks rosy to match Harry’s; his smile easy. The elevator doors slide open to a room seemingly made of glass, all of the windows starting at the floor and reaching the ceiling connected only by thin metal frames. It makes it feel like a virtual reality ride, the mountain stretching out in front of them lit by the moon shimmering off the snow. “Who cares about fireworks?” Harry says as they step off the elevator and look around. “I feel like the waiter buried the lead on that one.”

“Honestly,” Louis says, eyes tracing the high ceilings and open floor plan.

They order another glass of wine each and snag a tall table nearest the window. There’s a distinct chill by the glass and they consider moving before determining the coolness is more refreshing than startling. It turns out the piano player who disappeared from downstairs has moved up here and makes the atmosphere distinctly higher class than a casual mixed playlist. Louis drinks slowly because of it, his focus on Harry and the view out the windows, tuning out everything else around them.

Harry is midway through a story about his very first time drinking tequila in college - the weird night it had led to - when Louis is overcome by the realization Harry is still his best friend. It comes rather out of nowhere, something about the way Harry laughs at himself before he tells the punchline of the story. Louis isn’t sure if he thought that fact would change throughout the last thirty-eight days. Yet, here they are: still friends plus something more. All Louis wants is to listen to Harry laugh at himself for hours and maybe kiss him somewhere between that. How, he wonders, could he possibly let this go? He blinks as he watches Harry’s smile fade, his face turn oddly serious. “What?” He asks, tapping his finger on the top of his glass. “What is it?”

“Do you know what I just said?”

Louis replays everything he’s heard but it starts to fade somewhere around when Harry laughed a moment ago and he swallows, self conscious. “Would you believe me if I said I was admiring how handsome you are?”

He gets the pleasure of watching Harry’s cheeks flush as he glances away, his smile gently pulling his lips apart. “Maybe.”

“Well I wasn’t,” Louis says. He grins when Harry looks back at him in slight shock, his lips rounding out in a perfect circle.

“What’s your excuse then?”

“Can’t give away my secrets,” Louis says with a wink and he laughs as Harry rolls his eyes. “You are very handsome though, by the way.” Harry actually blushes this time and Louis doesn’t think he’ll ever be tired of watching it happen.

They don’t end up paying much attention to the firework show after all. Their attention only catches briefly when the bar is cast in red from the reflections of the lights but then they spot the dimly lit trails around the lodge and decide to brave a night walk instead of finishing the show.

Even with a thin alcohol blanket, they end up with their hands shoved in their pockets and chins tucked into their coats. The paths are mostly smooth, only slick in some spots, with lights placed on either side of the walkway. The dark trees seem to make everything spooky, the clear and inky sky overhead letting the stars add some light. A few times Louis manages to freak Harry out by pretending to hear a bear rustling the trees. He stops after the second time when Harry jolts, slips,
and quite nearly knocks Louis over in the process. Right when they begin to wonder if they’ve wandered too far, the path curves to head back toward the lodge.

“I’ve been thinking about something.”

The way Harry says it takes Louis back to the night in Central Park when he threw the idea of them dating out like a baseball, waiting for the impact. Louis glances at him, “Yeah?”

“Like, how this was my idea.”

Louis gets a swoop of unease, unsure where Harry is going with this. “I mean, you brought it up first,” he says, “but obviously I was on board.”

Harry rolls his lips together and Louis looks away before he can be caught staring. “If I hadn’t brought it up, I’m not sure it would ever have happened.”

This time Louis stays quiet because Harry has a point. Louis was never planning to acknowledge the way he felt about Harry - in fact before Harry brought it up, he didn’t realize he felt any particular way.

“Anyway,” Harry shakes his head like he’s off track. “What I wanted to say is I don’t want you to feel pressured by any of this.”

Louis blinks as his pace slows. Harry takes a second to slow as well and then they start to stroll rather than walk. “Pressured by what?”

Harry swallows and keeps his eyes pointed straight. “When it comes down to like, deciding,” he shrugs again, “I don’t want you to feel like you have to do anything your heart isn’t in.”

Louis doesn’t follow what Harry is trying to say but he reads it up and down like worry - something they aren’t supposed to be doing with two days left. “Let’s not worry about it,” Louis says which seems to be the wrong thing because Harry’s eyebrows flicker.

He smiles but this time it doesn’t reach his eyes. “You’re right. It’s not important just like, my mind running overtime.”

Louis stops walking and like they’re connected, Harry does too. A storm of possible things to say floods into Louis’s mind - empty reassurances to all out declarations and he gets a slap of fear he’s going to say something he regrets. To put an end to it all, he closes the space between their bodies and kisses Harry deeply, his hands coming out of his pockets to rest on Harry’s forearms. When they pull back so their foreheads touch, warm breath between them, Harry whispers, “I like this better than talking anyway.”

Louis laughs, kisses him quick again and then shoves his hand into Harry’s coat pocket to hold his hand as they start walking back. The talking has to come eventually, he knows, but not right now.

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SATURDAY ~ Day 39

Being surrounded by snow makes morning come quicker, the rising sun reflecting off the ground and right into the wide open windows of Louis and Harry’s room. They’d left the curtains open when they fell asleep last night, something on the bizarre edge of erotic to have sex in a darkened room with the view of the mountain and stars at the same time. At least it was according to Harry who started taking off his clothes when they walked in and then stopped Louis when he tried to shut the curtains.
Now, of course, Harry is the one who acts like a raccoon being hit with a flashlight as he squirms to face Louis and tucks his face against his neck as the room fills up with sunlight. “Told you it was a bad idea,” Louis whispers, his eyes blinking sleepily. He moves his hand to skim over Harry’s side and tucks his fingers just under the waistband of his boxers as he closes his eyes again.

* 

The second time Louis wakes up it’s because of Harry moving around again. Except, this time, it’s distinct rolls of his hips and his hands low on Louis’s ass for leverage. Louis’s eyes open easier this time, mostly in curiosity if Harry is having a violent wet dream. Instead, he finds Harry’s looking right at him, his lip caught between his teeth in concentration. In a beat, his lips curl into a smirk as he rolls his hips slower.

“Hi,” he says and then he ducks down to kiss Louis slowly, his tongue matching the next roll of his hips and sending a wave of heat through Louis.

“Good morning,” Louis says, slipping his hand over Harry’s hip and to his cock, squeezing to watch Harry’s eyes flutter. Louis smirks as he rolls them both, Harry landing on his back. “Actually,” he says, kissing Harry soundly and pushing his boxers down with one hand. “Better than good morning. Excellent morning.” Harry’s hips press up as he laughs, his legs kicking to help get his boxers off quicker. Harry’s right; this is much more fun than talking.

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When they finally decide to get out of bed to start the day, the sky is blue with the sun sparkling over the mountain. They dress in thick ski pants and puffy jackets, heavy boots and socks. Louis feels like he’s gained nearly ten pounds worth of clothing as they head out to catch the shuttle to the equipment rental shop. Luckily, it’s delayed slightly so they can get coffee and bagels from the bistro.

Given the dwindling winter season, they aren’t the only ones who have decided to ski this weekend. Waiting in line for equipment, gearing up and trudging to the lift takes longer than anticipated but they seem to be the only ones not in a hurry. Finally, they’re able to squish into one cart of the ski lift, their skis and clothes taking up more room than they’re used to. They both have ski goggles perched on their heads, chapped lips and red noses.

“I used to have nightmares about this part,” Harry says as they leave solid ground and start to make their climb. “About falling out.”

Just the three words make Louis’s stomach swoop at the possibility. “Like one of those freefall nightmares that wakes you up?”

“Exactly,” Harry says. He adjusts his ski poles so he can hold onto the bar over their laps more securely. “I’d always wake up before I landed, though. I guess that’s a good thing.”

“You’ll be appalled to learn I used to rock the cart on the ski lift just to make my sisters scream.”

Harry laughs even as he says, “You’re a monster.”

“I was kind of a terror, yeah. It was also one of those things where I didn’t think anything bad would actually happen.”

“What made you stop? Did something bad happen?”
Louis grins, “Karma came after me. The lifts malfunctioned and we were stuck in the air while the mechanic came to fix the motor. For two hours I was sat between two little girls who would not stop screaming bloody murder until we were back on the ground.”

“The screaming little girl would definitely be me,” Harry says. “I used to pinch Gemma before she got on the lift. I told her if she shook it, I’d do it again. Like an intimidation tactic.”

“How’d that work out for you?”

“She’d pinch me back in retaliation and I’d start to cry so then she’d tell me she wouldn’t rock it if I stopped crying. It was a formative experience.”

“Being the biggest sibling is the best,” Louis says with calm satisfaction.

“And here I thought being the youngest was,” Harry says, his lips twitching as he kicks his skis gently out in front of him, bumping their knees together.

* 

Three runs down, they listen to their bodies and go find lunch and warmth at the restaurant at the base of the mountain. Louis makes fun of Harry for having chapstick in his pocket to smooth on his lips once they sit down but he ends up stealing it to use once his lips start to feel crackly too. They order cider and sandwiches with french fries as their bodies defrost from the cold.

“What are we going to do tomorrow?” Harry asks once their food comes and he’s eaten at least three fries all at once, if Louis counts it right.

“When? All day?”

“When we make our decision. We haven’t said how we’ll do it.”

The lightness of their ski adventure suddenly turns a little bleak as Louis chews a bite of his sandwich. “Not sure,” he says. The veritable end has been in their sights all week but the suddenness of confronting it is daunting.

“Can we be dramatic?” Harry asks. He smiles tentatively as though he agrees the topic is spiky but they need to discuss it anyway. “Let’s go back to Central Park at like, dusk.”

Louis rolls his eyes, a weight in his stomach lifting just slightly. “You are incredible.”

Harry grins, “This entire thing is ridiculous when you think about it. Let’s go out with a bang.”

“Fine.” Louis laughs, “Central Park at seven.”

Harry smiles but it fades as they start to eat again, as the weight in Louis’s stomach drops. He can tell Harry is thinking about tomorrow, the way his eyes stare at a crease in the table, chewing with his lips pressed tight together. Louis hates not knowing what he’s thinking, hates he’s sitting right here but there’s a wall between them. “Tell me about the tour,” he blurts out to get Harry’s attention. “Have they talked anymore about it?”

Harry swallows and sits up a bit straighter like he’s lost himself for a moment. Something behind his eyes settles and Louis thinks maybe he’s grateful for the abrupt turn in subject. “They’re thinking fifteen cities in the early spring,” he says. “Just for a week at a time, maybe longer in L.A., Chicago, and Miami depending on the reception by the public. I’ll go for at least the first few days of each one to make sure the set-up is consistent. I’ll probably stay longer in the big cities to see the general reaction.”
Louis asks questions like it’s his job for the next half hour and Harry takes them in stride, happy to talk about the rooms again, seemingly happy to have Louis listen. As long as they keep talking, Louis thinks, about everything under the sun besides their relationship, they won’t be forced to confront the elephant in the room. The elephant stomping her feet louder and louder with each passing hour.

They do one more run on the mountain after lunch and then turn their skis and goggles back in and board the shuttle back to the lodge. They get off at the stop halfway back when they see a street fair set up in a large parking lot. It’s a mutual decision made with a simple look - they both love markets.

They hold gloved hands as they wander through, stopping at almost every stand to look through the handmade goods. A few of the stands are local food artisans and they both end up buying nearly everything they sample. There’s artisan cheeses and truffled almonds, homemade jam they both get a bit too excited about. Harry loses his mind over an oil and vinegar stand, buying three bottles of flavored oils and two special-make vinegars. At the same time, Louis ends up at the next stand over buying two loaves of rustic bread - one with garlic cloves baked into it. They both laugh when they catch sight of each other with their finds as they pay the respective shop owners.

“Is that your boyfriend?” The woman helping Louis asks. She doesn’t give him time to answer before she says, “Him buying oil and vinegar while you buy bread makes me feel like you might be soulmates.” Louis laughs and hopes it doesn’t sound hollow.

“What’d she say?” Harry asks as they start down the next aisle.

“Nothing,” Louis lies. Where even two weeks ago, it would have been funny to talk about how people saw them as soulmates, now it seems a bit too much like stacking the deck. Soulmates or not, he knows they need to determine that on their own.

“I’m pretty sure we’ve got all the makings for a cheese board,” Harry says as he looks over the haul in their arms.

The prospect of dinner doesn’t sound appealing after a late lunch but a cheese board always does. “Let’s go make one back at the room and relax by the fire,” Louis says. “I can already tell I’ll be sore from today.”

“Perfect,” Harry agrees with an easy smile.

They wander a bit more but Louis can’t quite keep focus. For all of his brave talk about not talking about the inevitable, his mind seems to have a track of its own. His brain unhelpfully starts pointing out all of the insecurities he’s ever had about himself and his past relationships, lobbing questions about why he thinks now will be any different.

He thinks Harry knows something is up by the way he doesn’t talk to him much on the walk back to the lodge, his usual commentary and questions falling silent. Louis starts to get a bit vicious in his mind, replaying their conversation last night after the bar - Harry telling him not to do something if his heart isn’t in it. Red flags rise as he tries to remember Harry’s face as he said it - if he was just trying to let Louis down easily, hoping he’d balk and be the one to walk away so Harry wouldn’t have to.

He starts to feel like he’s not quite part of his body - his mind floating a few steps behind his feet like he’s been drinking. The fact he is completely sober makes it all the more embarrassing when he stumbles into Harry.
“Are you alright?” Harry asks as he helps Louis to stand straight.

“Must have been a rock,” Louis says before immediately feeling guilty. All along, he’s been honest with Harry, painstakingly so; and he’s trusted Harry to be the same. Now being closed off about the most important part of the whole thing feels like betrayal.

“Be careful,” Harry says with a small smile and soft eyes.

Louis stops suddenly, unable to wait. Harry takes a few more steps then stops as well, retracing so he’s standing in front of Louis. “What is it?”

Louis thinks about asking Harry right then, asking whether they should do this for real or forget about it but he can’t get the words out. “Last night,” he says. “You were saying I shouldn’t do anything under pressure, right?”

Harry’s eyes widen and he swallows, clearly not prepared for Louis’s change in pace from discussing a cheese board. “Yeah.”

“Were you saying that because you don’t want me to choose you? Was that your way of trying to make me like, not say yes to this?”

Harry blinks at him. “What?”

Louis licks his lips and shrugs. “What I just said. Were you trying to tell me you felt responsible for all this as an easy out for me?”

“I don’t -” Harry shakes his head, eyes clouding. “I don’t know where this is coming from?”

He stutters over his words and Louis knows then that he’s wrong but he can’t make himself shut up. “I wouldn’t blame you,” he says. “I’m shit at relationships, I’m well aware. I haven’t held onto anyone in a long time and I get that’s a liability. I don’t blame you if that’s what you were doing.”

Harry looks confused and then it melts into hurt but Louis doesn’t say anything to change his mind, just shifts his feet and bites the inside of his cheek. Harry’s face turns stoic all at once, nodding slowly. “Right. Well, I don’t really think it’s your responsibility to tell me what I do or don’t want, first of all. That’s a decision I can and will make on my own, thanks.” His voice is steady but Louis hears the emotion in the gaps between the words. “Secondly,” he shakes his head and starts walking away without finishing. “I need to take a walk,” he calls over his shoulder. “I’ll see you at the room.”

Louis lets him go; he stands like an idiot and watches Harry walk away until he’s just a spot as he takes a turn off the path ahead. For all his efforts for them not to talk about their relationship, he’s managed to pick a fight instead. “Fuck,” he whispers as he starts the slow and lonely walk back to the lodge.

* *

The room is ice cold when he walks in and he shivers as he turns the lights on. It turns out leaving the curtains open all day has done nothing for the room retaining any semblance of heat. He sets his bread, cheese, jam, and olive purchases on the side table and starts the fireplace, rubbing his hands together. He shuts the blinds and then the curtains before changing out of his snow pants into something warm and comfy - sweatpants and a black hoodie.

After half an hour, he starts to worry about Harry, chastising himself for letting him walk away in a place they’ve never been but then there’s a quiet knock on the door and he knows right away
who it is. He swallows as he opens the door, his chest feeling raw. He’s never fought with Harry like this. They’ve bickered but they’ve never had to walk away from each other. This late in the game, he can admit he’s scared by what might happen next. Harry stands there with his bag from the market tucked in his arm, a bottle of red wine held up in his hand like an offering. “Truce?” He asks, waving the wine around gently.

Louis should be the one to apologize, should do or say something other than taking a step back and saying, “Of course,” as Harry comes into the room. He leans in when Harry kisses him, ignores the way his eyes stay open.

Harry changes into sweats and a zip up sweatshirt while Louis goes about finding a knife for the bread, dishes for the oil and vinegar, glasses for the wine. “I think we need meat to go with a cheeseboard,” Harry observes as he pulls on a pair of thick socks. “Should I call the front desk?”

Louis pauses and lets himself hold this moment. More and more, he’s feeling like everything is the last thing and this being their last night certainly doesn’t help. Yet, sitting on the floor in front of the fire while Harry sits on the edge of the bed with soft edges, talking about meat like everything is normal, makes him never want to let go. “You think they’ll bring us a plate of meat?” Louis asks as he lets the moment float away.

Harry finishes putting the other sock on and crawls over to where the phone sits on the nightstand. “Guess I’ll find out.”

Louis uses the dull steak knife he found in the kitchenette to finish slicing the bread while Harry is on the phone. It’s funny to listen to him talk to other people, funny to recognize how lucky he is to get Harry in the quiet moments no one else does. It’s ridiculous how much of a sap tonight has made him.

“They’ve got the hook up,” Harry says as he sets the phone back in its cradle.

“What have anyone ever told you how charming you are?”

Harry smiles and his dimple pokes in. “A time or two, yeah.”

Louis rolls his lip under his teeth. “It’s something I’ve always known about you but sometimes it’s overwhelming to see it in action.”

“In a bad way?” Harry asks, careful like Louis is a time bomb.

“The best way,” Louis says, partly earnest but mostly campy to make Harry laugh.

Despite Louis’s doubts, the front desk brings them a ceramic plate with all kinds of meat from the restaurant across the street - salami, prosciutto, ham, sausage. They sit side by side on the floor, cheeks turning red from the fire; drinking wine, using chunks of bread to sample the oil and vinegar like they’re professionals, gorging themselves on far too much cheese.

Through their quiet conversation and subtle laughter, Louis can sense a few jagged edges in Harry’s comfortability. He thinks, perhaps, he can only sense them because he sees them mirrored in himself. He feels vulnerable and exposed tonight, knowing what they’re doing is coming to a quick end. Regardless of what happens next, it will never be like this again. So maybe it is like saying goodbye, maybe he does have reasons to savor each moment like cotton candy melting on his tongue.

Harry finishes his wine first and pulls Louis’s foot into his lap sometime later, massaging it with his thumbs like he needs something to do with his hands. Not for the first time, Louis thinks of saying something. Something honest, something reassuring. He doesn’t want to say something
wrong, though. The fear of making Harry’s decision for him, of changing Harry’s mind by saying anything at all, makes him keep his mouth shut, his lips gentle on the edge of his wine glass.

Slowly, Harry moves from his foot to his ankle and up his calf, careful presses of his thumbs and smoothing motions of his fingers. Like a snap, the emotion of the day and the way Harry looks like this is all too much and Louis pulls his foot back abruptly. Harry looks surprised, his hands held in mid-air, lips parted as he glances up. They hold eyes for the first time all day, or so it feels.

Louis isn’t sure what Harry is trying to say with just his gaze so he does the one thing that feels right, the only thing that makes sense in the moment; he crawls over to Harry on his hands and knees and climbs into the space between his legs, his knees on either side of Harry’s hips.

“Let’s not think about tomorrow,” Louis says as he tips Harry’s head back carefully. He traces his finger over the bow of Harry’s lips. “Let’s just do this.” He doesn’t give Harry a chance to say anything as he kisses him but Harry’s quiet sigh into his mouth feels like more than an answer.

Admittedly, they’ve had a lot of sex in the past week or so but Louis can’t remember it being like this. It’s hot but heavy, their bodies slow as they cling to each other. Each piece of clothing is removed without adding space between them, their mouths constantly on each other’s lips or skin. There’s a desperate lull beneath the haze, something that makes Harry dig his fingernails into Louis’s shoulder, something that makes Louis leave a bruise on Harry’s collarbone he won’t be able to cover up. When Louis comes he swears he’s going to cry but he bites his tongue in favor of bringing Harry over the edge.

They lay in a stuck-together mess on the floor, silent and without moving. Louis feels as exhausted as he usually does after sex but he feels a little more undone, too. He feels like letting go of Harry means more than just getting up to get a glass of water so he refuses to do it. He can feel Harry’s heartbeat against chest by the way they lay and it starts to lull him to sleep. It’s only as his eyes blink heavily he realizes there was no laughter or kissed smiles this time. This time they held on like they were hoping they wouldn’t break.

*SUNDAY ~ Day 40

Sleeping on the floor after a day of skiing is, perhaps, the worst idea they’ve ever had. They’re both sore in the morning and not even a warm shower releases the tension in Louis’s muscles. Harry is standing outside the bathroom when he’s done, tired eyes and a bite the size of Louis’s mouth over his sparrow tattoo. Louis smirks as they pass and Harry rolls his eyes. They’re not floating on bubbles anymore but it doesn’t quite feel like walking on glass either. Not yet, at least.

Louis gets dressed and cleans up their massacred charcuterie and cheese board then sets about straightening up the room while Harry showers. He folds their clothes back in their respective bags, grabs his vibrator from under the bed with a slight laugh, and strips the bed so the housekeepers might forgive the questionable stains.

With a couple of hours before the required checkout time, they venture out to a small restaurant on recommendation from the front desk. They haven’t spoken much at all throughout the morning and though Louis wants to blame it on tiredness, he’s pretty sure their conversation yesterday, or lack thereof, and official ending tonight is carrying most of the weight.

It’s more noticeable as they walk the path to the restaurant, when the quietness stands stark in the bright morning and the scuff of their boots is the only sound. Comfortable quiet is one thing but sharp quiet is something else altogether. Louis tries to think of things to say but all of his ideas fall flat before they reach his lips. Finally, he does the one thing he definitely knows how to do, and
loops their fingers together to hold hands. He squeezes Harry’s hand once as they continue walking. He finds he’s holding his breath for the entire pause until, finally, Harry squeezes back.

The restaurant is a small house converted into a bistro with white tablecloths and vases of flowers on each table. The walls are white with wainscoting and the large windows provide a perfectly bright and natural light. The hostess seems pleased to see them as she asks them to seat themselves and then follows with menus. Louis and Harry both give their thanks and then quiet sinks again. Louis doesn’t realize he’s biting his lip as he reads the menu until Harry’s thumb presses lightly to release it. He looks up in slight surprise as Harry pulls his hand back. “Yes?” He asks. His voice cracks embarrassingly from not having used it much.

Harry shrugs and then leans forward to kiss Louis, slow and soft. Their lips part on a soft sigh as they pull back. “Realized I hadn’t kissed you this morning,” he says with half a smile before he goes back to looking at his menu. Louis has to keep himself from pressing his fingers to his lips. The back of his mind twists to wonder if this will be their last kiss. He cuts off the thought with a shake of his head he hopes Harry can’t see.

The waitress brings two cups of coffee before they can ask and then takes their order - a waffle for Harry and french toast for Louis - before fading into the background. Louis takes a slow sip of his coffee, desperate to think of something to say but Harry beats him to it. “I know we’re not talking about work but I have to ask. Did you ever contact Ella?” Louis tilts his head, confused. “At The New Yorker?”

Understanding comes quick as Louis smiles. It doesn’t seem like a week ago he got the business card from Zayn while Harry slept in his bed. It feels like a lifetime ago when he and Harry spent all day in various forms of undress as they watched tv and ate take out. A lifetime compared to now with everything they’ve built hanging over them like a dark cloud. But that’s not what Harry asked about.

“Yeah,” he says. “I sent her an email late last week and we set up a phone call for this week with an editor she wants me to talk to.” He can’t ignore the light in Harry’s eyes, the infection of his smile.

“And you didn’t tell me?” There’s no venom in his voice as he picks up his coffee mug.

“Didn’t want to jinx it,” Louis says. “But I’ll let you know.”

“I’ll be anxious to hear. When is it?”

“Wednesday,” Louis says. It’s the first concrete day they’ve discussed past day forty and it’s not lost on him.

Harry hums and nods, “Whatever happens, you should know I’m proud of you. You’re kind of like, amazing at your job.”

They both laugh and Louis rolls his eyes. He can’t help to analyze the “whatever happens” part. Does he mean with the call or with them? Louis can’t think about it for more than a heartbeat or he’ll lose his breath.

Conversation gets easier after that though Louis finds himself distracted at best. He’s chewing a bite of french toast and nearly spits it out in favor of asking, “Hey, are we doing this for real? Are we saying yes?” but he doesn’t do it. Over a fresh cup of coffee he nearly shouts, “What did you want to say yesterday before you walked away? What was secondly supposed to be?” but he doesn’t do that either. He realizes as Harry pays the check he has no idea how Harry would answer and the fear is too much for his soft, beating heart.
“Are we in a hurry to get back?” Harry asks, setting the pen down after signing the check. “I thought it might be nice to walk around a bit more.”

Louis shakes his head. “No hurry,” he says, smiling lightly. “That would be great.”

“One more cup of coffee,” Harry says and Louis thinks he might be about to cry as he nods. He’s freaking out behind his small smile and gentle nod. He’s losing his mind with questions, doubts, answers he doesn’t want to acknowledge.

Before they get up to leave, Harry scrolls through his email and Louis watches him, his eyes boring into the top of his head. He shouts questions into the silent void of his mind: Are you going to choose me? Am I it? Is this what we’ve been waiting for? Is this what everyone talks about when they say what love should feel like it? But Harry doesn’t look up.

They walk in a big circle around the lodges and loop up onto the snowy foothills but there’s only so much they can do before they’re forced to check out of the hotel and go home. “I’ll drive,” Louis says as they toss their bags in the backseat.

“Are you sure?” Harry asks. He puts his sunglasses on and pushes up the bridge on his nose. “I could learn to drive in the snow, I bet.”

Louis snorts, “Let’s leave that for another time. I’d like to get home some point today.”

“Thought we weren’t in a hurry,” Harry says over a funny smile as he gets in the passenger seat.

If Louis had it his way, they’d never get home. Day forty wouldn’t end and they wouldn’t have to face the inevitable of tonight. As it is, the miles between Windham and New York City fall away on a Sunday afternoon on the open road. He goes exactly the speed limit, sometimes under it, but it doesn’t stop their steady march to the city. Harry hums along to his playlist but doesn’t try to make any small talk as he stares out the opposite window. Again, Louis wants to ask him what he’s thinking but he bites his tongue. He’ll wait for tonight; he’ll play by the rules even if it kills him.

At the halfway point, Louis tries to rationalize the scenarios in front of them and it goes like this:

They can both decide to stay with each other or they can both decide to walk away. He can stomach those possibilities; all in or all out. The other option is if they choose opposite from each other - the option Julia posed to them two weeks ago. She told them to think about it but Louis closed it off like a bad dream.

He thinks he could take it if Harry said no and he was the one to say yes. He thinks he could heal it like any other heartbreak and move on without sour feelings. He almost laughs out loud at the blatant lie. He’s opened himself up to Harry in every possible way, for Harry to decide he doesn’t like what he sees would break his heart to pieces. Thinking of it makes him take a deep breath and tighten his hands on the wheel.

Harry glances over at the movement, smiling as he lip syncs to Lorde’s “The Louvre”. Louis smiles back and nods like Harry has asked a question before focusing back on the road. Harry doesn’t have the face of someone who would hurt him but, then again, no one usually calls their demeanor by their face. Sometimes we hurt people without trying at all.

Louis swallows as the last option comes rolling in to his mind: the chance Harry says yes, and he is the one who walks away. He can’t picture it other than to know it would break Harry the same
way Harry saying no would break him. The worst part, perhaps, is he knows Harry would pretend it was okay. Harry, beautiful, wonderful Harry would smile and push through. He’d tuck away his heartbreak the way he always does and it would take a trained eye to know how badly it hurts.

Unfortunatley, Louis thinks as he shifts in his seat, he has the trained eye; if he hurts Harry, he’ll know exactly how bad. The question, if he could live with being the one to do that, lingers under his tongue.

All too soon, they’re back in Manhattan and in front of Louis’s apartment. They both get out of the car and meet on the sidewalk; it takes all Louis has to not turn and run. For some reason running seems easier than this - facing Harry for a quiet goodbye before they part ways to figure out what they’re doing.

“Well, we did it,” Louis says with a pasted grin. “Forty days.”

“Almost,” Harry says, his smile matching Louis’s but not reaching his eyes.

“Almost,” Louis agrees with a nod of his head. They hold each other’s eyes but Louis looks away first in case Harry can read the turmoil there. “Thank you for this weekend. It was,” he shakes his head “Really good.”

“Really good,” Harry agrees with a smile. “Thank you for coming with me. The whole thing. Forty days, this weekend, all of it.”

“Of course,” Louis says, a sudden lump in his throat making the words come out harder. “See you tonight?”

Harry nods, his lips pressed together tight. “Central Park at seven.”

Louis smirks, “You weirdo.” He doesn’t wait to see what Harry will do next just reaches for him. His hand slips to the side of Harry’s neck as he kisses him, his thumb running along his jaw. The kiss is over far too soon and Louis does his best not to overanalyze the slow way Harry kissed him back.

“See you,” he says, waving as he takes a step toward his building. He adjusts his bag and Harry just stands there watching him. Louis pauses to see if he’s going to say something but nothing comes so he heads into the lobby. When he gets on the elevator, Harry is still standing on the sidewalk but his eyes aren’t on Louis. He’s looking up at the sky, his hands tucked in his pockets. If Louis was religious, he’d swear he looks like he’s praying.

*

Inside his apartment Louis is like a trapped cat. He can’t sit down and think for more than a few seconds and pacing in front of the kitchen island gets boring quickly. He unpacks his bag and drinks a beer, makes his bed and tidies his bathroom before he grabs his jacket and keys and leaves his apartment altogether.

His instinct is to go to Harry; Harry is his go-to, his default. If this were any other day, that’s where he would go without question. One phone call and he’d be on his way.

Not today.

He can’t talk to Harry about this, he can’t let Harry know the distress the decision is causing in his heart. Harry needs to make a decision without a messy Louis on his doorstep. So, he goes for the next best option as he heads toward the subway. He calls Zayn.
Niall is out for the afternoon and Louis is at once thankful and sorry. He loves Niall like a brother, as much as he loves Zayn, but he needs someone to be real with him and he knows, out of the two of them, who that’s going to be.

Zayn answers the door with his phone tucked to his ear and he pulls it away as Louis walks in. “Niall,” he explains as he disconnects the call. “I told him to stay out awhile longer. That you’re having a crisis.”

“Thanks,” Louis says, running his hands back through his hair and letting them drop. “Hey,” he spins to Zayn, “I’m not having a crisis.”

Zayn tilts his head, “Sure.”

Louis plops himself on the couch with his elbows on his knees. His stomach feels like he’s in a free fall but he’s not even moving. He doesn’t know why he thought Zayn could help; he needs someone else and he knows it like a truth.

“How was skiing?” Zayn asks as he sits in the armchair on the far side of the couch. “Everyone made it home in one piece?”

“I think I’m falling in love with Harry,” Louis say loudly, the words running forward like knights with their swords drawn.

“Falling in love?” Zayn repeats.

Louis opens his mouth and then closes it, his mouth dry. “Might have already fallen.”

Zayn slumps back into the chair at the same time Louis covers his face with his hands. “Want to start at the beginning?”

Louis doesn’t have time to start at the beginning so he starts somewhere in the middle of the story but it doesn’t quite make sense spoken out loud. So much of what has happened between them has happened in the tiny spaces between everything else: the way Harry laughs and looks at him, how they touch each other, how they read each other’s thoughts and finish sentences, all of their inside jokes. It’s in how Harry is the last thing he thinks of each night and the first each morning, it’s all the secrets they’ve told each other, the way they’ve turned each other inside out. It’s the secret moments no one else knows about, it’s the smiles tucked against necks and the wishes pressed to collarbones. It’s everything all at once and none of it can be summed up in words.

By the time Louis finishes his explanation, he’s not sure he’s got it right. He doesn’t know how to explain that he fell in love without trying, found himself slipping in deep with nothing to hold onto. Nothing but Harry.

“And tonight you need to tell him?”

The confusion in Zayn’s voice tells Louis all he needs to know about his failure to tell the story right. He nods. Zayn rolls his lips together and his eyes are weary. “I don’t think anyone can tell you what to do here, Lou. It’s got to be your decision.”

“I know,” Louis says. “And I think I know what I want to say to him.” Suddenly he knows it with every beat of his heart.

“Right.” Zayn takes a deep breath, “Do you know what he’s planning to say? If he wants to date you?”
Louis deflates slightly. “I think I know but I’m not sure. When I say we didn’t talk about it, we really didn’t.”

Zayn nods again. He clasps his hands in his lap and Louis immediately thinks of Julia. “I’m going to tell you exactly what I would tell Harry if he was the one sitting here, if he said all the things you just said.”

“Okay,” Louis says slowly, hesitant.

“You need to look out for each other,” he says, echoing his sentiment from the night of Harry’s birthday. It’s not what Louis expects to hear. “I know you both went into this together and you want to get something real out of it but you need to think about protecting yourselves from, well, yourselves.”

“What?” Louis shakes his head. It’s not a video game, there’s no reason for protection.

“It’s gotten messy, Louis.” Zayn shrugs, resigned, “There’s emotions involved you didn’t know would be there. Have you really thought all of the possibilities through?”

“Yes,” Louis says, defensive. “I’ve been through every scenario twice.”

“Have you thought about day forty-three?”

“What?” Louis rolls his eyes, “No. It’s a forty day experiment.”

“I know,” Zayn says, his voice losing it’s steady patience. “But have you thought about saying yes tonight and then breaking up on day forty three? You save your friendship now only to ruin it on Wednesday?”

Louis blinks in the silence, his stomach shaking. He only had four scenarios in the car - he didn’t let himself get to the fifth. What happens if they say yes tonight and then it falls apart? It’s inevitable their relationship wouldn’t last, isn’t it? They aren’t good at keeping things together - neither one of them. They know it, they’ve admitted it out loud. So what if they make it past day forty - it doesn’t matter if they lose each other anyway. It just prolongs the inevitable.

“Oh my god,” Louis says, his heart falling as he presses his palms to his eyes. “What did we do?”

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Lou. Neither one of you did. You still haven’t.” Zayn’s voice is soft but Louis is scared to see his eyes. “But you need to think about the risk and decide if it’s worth it.”

Louis looks up again, emotion welling under his lungs. Zayn looks sad like he didn’t want to be the one to break the news but Louis knows he needed it. He needed someone to open his eyes wider; he just didn’t realize what he would find.

“I’m sorry, Lou.”

Louis shakes his head and stays quiet. Julia tried to warn them and now Zayn has said it again: they aren’t good at relationships and just because they’re best friends doesn’t change that. Hurting each other is inevitable, whether they do it now or later. The truth stings and Louis thinks he might break down right here on Zayn’s couch if he’s not careful.

The sky is already starting to get dark outside as Louis stands up and he knows there’s no more time to mull things over now. He has to go meet Harry.

“Louis,” Zayn says, standing as well. “I don’t want to be the one to decide for you, yeah? Don’t
let what I say make up your mind. I just want you to look at all the different sides of it.”

Louis nods, his eyes blank. “No, it’s good to have more, uh, perspective, I think.” He tries to smile but Zayn’s strained grimace tells him he does it wrong.

He grabs his coat from the kitchen counter and pulls it on, his mind a scattered mess as his heart beats sporadically. Niall is opening the door just as Louis goes to turn the knob and Louis gets to watch his surprised smile melt to alarm as Louis presses past him without a word. ”What did you say to him?” Niall hisses to Zayn but Louis can’t even find it in his heart to laugh. He presses the elevator button without looking back, already positive his heart is breaking deep inside his chest.

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He takes his sweet time walking to Central Park. It could be like a movie, he thinks. The slow walk is the perfect time to replay the last six weeks with Harry but he doesn’t let himself do it. This isn’t a movie anyone would want to watch.

He purposefully keeps his mind blank, his eyes cast down. He keeps going back to what Zayn said about protecting each other. How, he wonders, can they protect each other by saying yes tonight and then letting themselves fall apart in a day, week, month, however long it takes. It’s inevitable. The end is inevitable, it just matters where they cut it off. Someone has to show them mercy before the cut is painful and jagged, infected. They need it to be clean.

By the direction Louis comes into the park, he can see Harry pacing in front of a bench. Dusk has thrown shadows around but the streetlights are still bright enough to keep the pavement from going dark. Louis slows his walk as he watches Harry walk back and forth, his hands clasped behind his back. Louis tries to see his face and when he catches a glimpse he finds Harry biting on a smile. He knows the smile intimately - the way he looks with big news or something exciting to say.

In that moment, he realizes he already knows what Harry is going to choose. Louis can read it on him like words on a page. Harry is going to say they should keep going, he’s going to look at Louis with bright eyes and a dimpled smile. He’s going to point out how easy it is, the way it’s never been like this with anyone before. For a moment, Louis wants to let it happen. He wants to hear what Harry has to say and let himself fall into his arms without question.

He can’t. He knows it now.

He takes a deep breath as he gets ready to round the corner and come into Harry’s view. The only way to cut this cleanly is to be the one to talk first. He needs to break Harry’s heart all while pretending he’s not stabbing himself at the same time. It’s the role of a lifetime and he’s just been cast in the lead act.

He lifts his chin as Harry spots him, his face lighting up in the way Louis knew it would. He doesn’t match his smile the way he usually does, he holds his face passive and bored. Harry’s smile melts away and it’s the first crack in his armor; little does he know Louis is about to blow it away.

Louis isn’t sure what he’s going to say until he’s right in front of Harry and then the words get in formation right at the back of his throat. He has a breath of a pause where he can still make the whole thing stop but he lets it pass. *I’m so sorry, baby* he says silently just before he opens his mouth to speak out loud.

“Should we even do this part?” He asks, a smile that’s not his slipping over his lips. It’s the sad opening when it could be the best - *Do we even need this? He should say, Do we need to stand...*
here like it’s The Bachelor just to decide this is exactly what we’ve been waiting for? Harry swallows, his eyebrows flicker and Louis keeps on smiling like a maniac with a match and a can of gasoline. “Or should we just admit this has been fun but there’s no way it actually works?”

He watches each word as it washes over Harry, the surprise in his eyes because he doesn’t get it. “What?”

“Us, H.” Louis feels acid tripping down his throat. “We don’t work. This has been,” he shakes his head so his voice doesn’t crack but it does anyway. “It’s been incredible.” It’s the first true thing he’s said yet. He raises his chin and hardens his words. “But we need to look at this realistically. Just because we’re best friends doesn’t mean we should date. We gave it a shot.” It didn’t work.

He can’t get that part to come out because it’s the lie that tastes the worst. Of course it worked; they fell in love. He could read it on Harry weeks ago but never gave himself the chance to acknowledge it.

The confusion in Harry’s eyes flashes to pain as he starts to understand it; his lips part but then clamp tight and all at once and he looks defeated. Louis has treasured his responsibility in Harry’s laughter, pleasure, happiness over the last six weeks; but he hates his part in this. “God damn it, Louis,” he says, disgust in his voice and a scoff over Louis’s name.

Louis looks at the ground because he thinks, even now, if Harry looked in his eyes he might still see the truth.

“Why are you doing this?”

Louis grits his back teeth. Harry is a book few people can read and he counts himself lucky to be one of the few; he has just never acknowledged Harry could read him too. Slowly, he looks up. “It’s easier,” he says. “Otherwise it’ll be messy, you know?”

Harry’s face crumples and then he shakes his head again. He runs his hands back through his hair and throws them both by his sides. He looks like he’s going to fight and it’s without much permission that Louis says, “Right? We’re on the same page here, right?” He can hear the desperation in his voice and he hates it. Still, he’s giving Harry the line if he’ll grab it.

Harry looks at him, green eyes hard and jaw clenched. Slowly, he shakes his head and like a light dimming, Louis knows he’s given up. There was a flash where he was going to fight but something pulled it back. “Same page,” he says, voice quiet. “Yeah.”

Louis clenches his fist against the urge to yell, “I’m kidding! Of course I’m kidding.” He swallows. This is the hard part. If he can get through this, they’ll be okay. Ripping off the Band-Aid. The initial sting is always the worst. “We’ll still see each other,” Louis says. “It’s not like our friendship is over or something.”

Harry nods but there’s nothing in his eyes. Louis can claim responsibility for that, too. “Right.”

Louis nods and this, he thinks, may be the worst part of the worst part. Standing here in the silence as darkness falls and the chill picks up. Where it started is where it ends. He didn’t think the poetic irony would hurt like this.

“I think—“

Louis looks up at Harry’s voice, something about it is odd.

Harry clears his throat, “I think I need a few days.”

Louis nods and Harry looks away quickly. It is as Louis watches his eyelashes flutter he realizes
his voice is thick with the attempt not to cry. Louis swallows and realizes the lump in his throat is the same emotion. Harry looks back, lips parted like he’s going to say something else. Louis waits patiently in case it comes but silence lingers. Louis could say something more but he thinks he’s said enough. He doesn’t want to hear his own voice ever again if he can help it.

Without another word, Harry turns and walks away. No good-bye, or see you tomorrow. Just silence trailing after him like a fog. Louis is pretty sure he deserves something much worse. He stands there a while longer before he turns the way he came and starts the walk back to his apartment. He doesn’t realize there are tears on his face until one slips over his lips, salty and bitter. He wipes it away like a traitor and sniffs once. He keeps walking.

All along, they said it would be okay at the end. No matter what happened, they’d be friends. “It’s you and me.” How many times has Louis said it in the past forty days? He bites his lip as he walks through the crosswalk of a busy intersection. He can’t help but feel like it was a lie all along. The way the broken pieces of his heart are still pulling away from each other, the way he finds it hard to catch his breath, he doesn’t think it’s going to be okay. Not at all.

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Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

"One Day At A Time" - Sam Smith

"Let’s turn off our phones tonight
And rely on the stars.
We’ve been so lost lately,
We forgot who we are
But I got everything I need, baby
In the palms of your touch.
In a world of dark distractions
It can all get too much."

Louis thought the worst part of the whole thing would be telling Harry he wanted to end things. It only takes two days for him to realize how wrong he was.

Sunday night after he leaves Harry he doesn’t sleep. He lays in bed and stares at the ceiling too scared to close his eyes. Each time he does he sees Harry’s smile when he walked up to him at the park - the complete openness in his face, the answer to every question written in his eyes. Somehow, that’s more painful than replaying the way he cursed Louis’s name and walked away. This far along, Louis is used to disappointing the people he loves. It’s the brightness in his eyes, trust in his smile he doesn’t think he deserves.

He calls in sick for work on Monday like a coward and lays in bed until noon. He works on a couple of projects and stares out the window at the grey sky. He finishes a bottle of wine on his own and finds it easier to sleep but not easier to breathe.

Tuesday is a joke. It’s the first taste of spring weather and people jump on it; the entire city seemingly outside and ridiculously happy. Louis thinks it’s cruel the way the world has kept spinning while he crumbles inside. At work he closes his door with the excuse of still being sick. The dark circles under his eyes keep anyone from doubting him.

He only gets through Wednesday because he has the conference call with the staff at The New Yorker. They ask if he could do some art - possibly for a cover or for the inside page of their fiction issue - and he smiles for the first time in three days. The second he hangs up, he wants to call Harry and it sends the world spiraling again. He’s had a broken heart before, he’s been devastated by boys and girls alike. He’s never felt like this: like the earth has slipped out from under his feet and left him in zero gravity.

Thursday night is when he cries. He decides to do his laundry and finds Harry’s UCLA sweatshirt among his other clothes. He stares at it like it’s an alien specimen before his vision clouds and his heart constricts in his chest. He walks away from the washing machine and doesn’t get the strength to try and wash his clothes again for the next couple days.
Friday, Zayn calls to ask how he’s doing. Louis only has himself to blame for the way he snaps over, “Not good, Zayn. Not good.” He hangs up without adding anything further to the conversation. That night, he lays on his couch and watches the entire season of *Queer Eye* on Netflix without pause. He hates how he wants to call Harry and tell him to watch it, he hates he wishes Harry was with him watching instead. “You’re the one who fucked that up,” he says out loud. Not even his new friends on television tell him he’s wrong.

And so it goes.

Everything feels painful until he feels numb instead. Days pass slowly and then in a hurry and then it’s been ten days since he’s last seen or talked to Harry. It’s the longest he’s not seen him in years and maybe that’s the first real sign things aren’t going to go back to normal. Not that normal for them is anything but laughable now, though. Louis can’t even picture it - how he could possibly be in the same room as Harry without feeling his heart stutter and a dagger drawing up under his ribs with each breath.

Beyond the heartache is the boring way life looks alone. Without their forty day experiment, Louis finds his days empty. Without Harry as a friend he can always turn to, he finds himself lonely. It’s not one of those things where you don’t know what you’ve got until it’s gone; instead it’s a painful awareness of all the ways Louis has let the best thing he had already go. Even when he tries to throw himself into work, he comes up feeling empty. There’s nothing to look forward to, if he’s brutally honest.

He can feel the extra tension on his relationship with Niall and Zayn - the way their normal group of four can no long stand to be in the same room. Louis declines most of their invitations the first couple of weeks; he doesn’t want to see their pitying faces, he doesn’t want them to ask questions, he doesn’t want to hear them mention Harry’s name.

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Eventually, it’s Niall who gets him to socialize. It’s a Saturday after almost two weeks of Louis’s quiet isolation when Niall all but forces him out of his apartment for a night at Max’s. “Who’s going to be there?” Louis asks in a way he never has before. He usually doesn’t care - not when he knows Harry will be there anyway. Now that’s his biggest fear. Niall tries, bless his heart, to bury Harry’s name in a list of random acquaintances but Louis hears it like a gunshot. And isn’t that the worst part - even the sound of Harry’s name against Niall’s lips is enough to get Louis to spiral. “You need to come,” Niall says when the silence drags. “This isn’t healthy, Lou.”

Louis scoffs and hopes it doesn’t sound vicious. It wasn’t healthy to play pretend and date his best friend for forty days, it sure as hell wasn’t healthy to actually fall for him, and it may prove fatal to have walked away like it was nothing at all. “I’ll be there,” is what he ends up with. Zayn texts him to come over early but Louis makes up an excuse to be busy. Zayn, who hates emojis, sends the rolling eyes one. Louis doesn’t respond.

That night, Louis finds himself staring at his reflection in the mirror as the designated time to meet passes by. He blinks when he hears his phone vibrating against his bed but makes no move to answer it. He just swallows and studies the circles under his eyes, his lips dry from rubbing them together too much. He looks like hell and he thinks he deserves it; he just wishes he could look a little closer to normal before facing Harry. Alas, betrayal and heartbreak never really shape up to be anything but ghostly so Louis has to leave the bathroom the same as he walked in.

He sends for an Uber as he turns the lights out in his apartment, his heart starting to pound like a death march. He doesn’t even know if Harry will show but curiosity pushes him into the elevator. He has to know, has to see with his own eyes, if Harry is holding up, if Harry can bear to even look at him.
Old habits die hard and when Louis walks into Max’s an hour late, it’s no exception. Even in the crowded bar, his eyes fall to Harry first, before he even realizes it’s him. He’s standing at the bar with his back to Louis. If Louis didn’t know the intimate curve of his shoulders and back he might have gotten away with not spotting him immediately. As it is, it’s the back of Harry’s head that gets him, the way his hair has grown even in two weeks, a few curls brushing along the back of his neck.

Louis starts to back through the doorway, overwhelmed and helpless already. Someone else comes in the door first and before he can excuse himself, he hears the familiar, “There you are. I was outside trying to call you.” Louis tries to smile at Niall’s grin but it falls somewhere near a grimace. “Come on,” Niall says, slinging his arm over Louis’s shoulders. “You gotta face the music at some point.” Louis feels acid curling in his stomach as he swallows.

The group they’ve collected is a motley one but Louis knows almost everyone which makes it both better and worse when he slips by most of them with a small smile, eyes on Zayn in the corner. There’s an empty chair next to him and though Louis would assume it’s for Niall, he claims it himself. Zayn gives him a small smile before introducing him around to the people nearest them.

The night draws on and Louis pretends he’s not going to look at Harry but he can’t help himself; his eyes have been subtly tracking Harry’s position at the bar since he walked in. He stares at Harry without interruption; the way he laughs at something the person next to him has said, the way he drinks his beer slowly before licking the corner of his lip. His skin is smooth and his dimple curves in when he smiles. He doesn’t look at Louis and Louis feels sick just watching; he has no idea why he came here.

“Stop it,” Zayn says, shaking his head when Louis starts to move to stand. “You’re staying.”

Louis doesn’t know if he’s written his intentions all over his face or if Zayn just knows him but he falls back in his seat all the same. A moment later, Niall slides a drink at him with a wink and Louis smiles on the pleased side of grateful. He assumes it’s whiskey and gets a surprise when it’s tequila and lime instead. He doesn’t know if he’s supposed to laugh or cry.

Time passes slowly after that though Louis drinks quickly. He keeps waiting for Harry to see him, keeps waiting for the reaction when his eyes flicker over - if it’s going to be surprise or disgust, maybe both. It doesn’t happen. Harry doesn’t look over or come closer. It’s like there’s a magnetic field around Louis keeping him way.

Louis tries to keep up a conversation with Zayn and his downstairs neighbor Chris, but he’s a terrible participant at best. He doesn’t follow much of what is said and his monosyllabic answers and nods leave a lot to be desired. His mind just keeps wandering away to Central Park and he’s too tired to try and reign it back in.

He thought Harry was lying when he agreed they were on the same page that night but it’s starting to fall together now they’re here. Harry doesn’t look like he’s been in a rollercoaster with no seatbelt the past couple of weeks like Louis does. He looks calm and, Louis hates to admit, he looks happy. He knows he’s an asshole for hating the way Harry smiles but he’d hoped to see him struggling, even just a little. Louis is the bad guy and this is probably what he deserves - having to watch Harry’s casual laughter and easy smile - while his skin bubbles in agony across the room. Another drink down, and he is well aware he’s being melodramatic.

Louis doesn’t move from his spot through three drinks - one tequila and lime followed by two whiskeys he orders from a passing waiter. He can’t help but find bitter humor in the way they kept repeating how they wouldn’t change regardless of what happened between them, how their
friendship would stay the same. Now Louis can’t even get up to order a drink from the same bar.

Eventually, Louis needs to use the restroom and he has to tell Zayn three times he’s not going to sneak out the back door though he would rather do that than face anymore time in this newest version of his personal hell.

He knows he’s drunk by the thickness in his tongue, the way his eyes reflect red in the small mirror over the sink as he washes his hands. He looks like a wreck and he’s suddenly glad Harry hasn’t seen him. Now he knows Harry is okay maybe he can move on. He can go home and do all the things people do in movies: join a gym, throw out all of Harry’s stuff, light sage candles and do some sort of cleansing ritual. Maybe he can take up yoga. Maybe he can pack so many new things in his life he’ll forget about Harry at all. He’ll casually become a Louis no one knows and their friendship will just fade quietly - as if it’s not already taking it’s dying breath.

The door to the bathroom careens open while Louis is still staring at his reflection, dreaming up his new life and all the ways he plans to reinvent himself. He shifts his eyes to look over his shoulder and finds Harry there, his hair all pushed up and his green eyes locked on the reflection of Louis’s blues. Louis’s stomach sinks, his heart collapses and his lungs forget their job. So much for his budding reinvention. He hadn’t even had a chance to imagine Harry’s reaction for when he transformed into a new person.

Harry pulls his eyes away before Louis can read them. “Need to piss.” If Louis was a happier person, he’d laugh that these are the first three words they’ve said to each other in weeks.

Louis stays motionless at the sink while Harry does his business, water running over his hands pointlessly. He should leave while Harry has his back turned to him. He’s drunk and the way Harry had a different drink each time he saw him tonight leaves little to believe he’s anywhere near sober. Louis turns off the water and grabs a paper towel as Harry flushes and turns to face him.

“You keep staring at me,” he says. Louis know his guess is right - Harry is drunk and getting toward wasted, his words slurred together.

“What?” He says as Harry comes up to the sink next to his and turns it on.

“Out there,” he says with a nod of his head at the door, “You keep staring at me.”

Louis is wrong on that one, then. Harry knew he was there all along, knew Louis couldn’t take his eyes off him. Louis doesn’t trust his voice so he shrugs, like a shrug has ever explained anything.

It’s quiet except for the rush of the faucet and Louis still knows he should leave but he doesn’t want to. He never wanted to leave Harry in the first place, and especially not now when the world has turned fuzzy and he’s the only thing to make sense. Maybe they can just kiss right here in the dingy bathroom and pretend nothing is wrong, pretend they aren’t destined for disaster, if they just hold onto each other tight enough.

For a moment, he thinks he’s said something out loud by the way Harry looks over at him. They hold eyes and Louis suddenly sees the lie behind the dimple and smile at the bar. Harry’s eyes have no light behind them, the dark circles on top of his cheeks match Louis’s perfectly. He’s just the better actor.

Harry turns off the water and reaches for Louis. Louis gasps lightly before he realizes Harry is trying to get a towel from the dispenser near his shoulder. The sound gives him away, though. Regardless of how he wants to play it, how confident he hopes he looks, that sound is the underline and exclamation over his feeble control of his emotions.
Harry pulls his eyes away and dries his hands with a singular focus before tossing the towel in the garbage. He looks at Louis again and his eyes narrow. He takes two steps forward and Louis matches in reverse, his back hitting the tiled wall next to the door. Harry holds himself up by putting his hands on the wall on either side of his shoulders like a cage. Louis has been here before; he used to love it. Now his stomach shakes.

“H,” he breathes. He stares at Harry’s adam’s apple as he swallows. Harry leans in further and Louis smells whiskey on his breath. He wonders if Harry smells the tequila on his. There’s only a breath of air between their lips; the second one of them inhales to steal it, they’re going to kiss. They’re like magnets being drawn together, their eyes saying all the same things. Louis holds his breath.

Harry pulls back abruptly. “We can’t.”

Surprise must flicker over Louis’s face, somewhere tucked between the poorly concealed desire. Right now there’s not much he wouldn’t do to kiss Harry on the mouth, to bite his neck, hold his hips. Maybe they can’t talk with words but their bodies would know what to do and he wants it; god he wants it. Except Harry is shaking his head and Louis swallows.

“This is what you chose, babe,” Harry says. His voice isn’t quite his - the pace and cadence are but not the sound. It’s hard and a little broken if Louis places it right.

Louis shakes his head as the words settle and he ignores the voice. “I thought you did, too.”

He doesn’t say it like a question but suddenly he wonders if it should be one. He stares right into Harry’s eyes so he sees when Harry’s eyelashes stutter and he catches the tightening of his jaw. They stare for so long, Louis is the first who has to blink. He keeps his eyes closed a moment too long; trying to get his bearings and figure out what he’s missing. By the time he opens them again, Harry is gone and the only thing left in his wake is the closing of the bathroom door.

Louis slumps against the wall, realizing he’d been holding himself up to avoid melting forward into Harry. He wouldn’t call it a weakness but an oversight in the strength of desire.

He replays what just happened but there’s not much to work with - maybe it hinges on Harry’s words: this is what you chose, babe. Louis stares at the dirty tile under his feet. There were two of them in the park - he pulled the plug first but Harry didn’t try to fix it. That’s what he meant when he said, I thought you did too. Harry didn’t fight him on it; he walked away. Louis is the bad guy but Harry certainly wasn’t a hero. They’re both to blame.

Except.

The way Harry looked at him just now wasn’t like a man who agreed with him. It was like a man fighting against words on the tip of his tongue. Louis is suddenly desperate to know what those words are.

He flings open the bathroom door with something close to vengeance. “Harry,” he says loudly, his drunk feet managing to get him where he needs to go as he presses back into the crowded bar. “Harry,” he says again, his eyes tracking the people nearest him in a rush. He licks his lips and looks harder, narrowing his eyes.

For the second time tonight, Niall pops into his vision unexpectedly. “He’s gone.”

Louis blinks as he focuses on the face in front of him. “What?”

“He left,” Niall repeats the same information in a new way but Louis hears it the same. He takes
two steps to go after him but Niall grabs his shoulders with two hands and holds him still.

“Ni, let go,” Louis says, trying to fight the grip by moving his shoulders.


Louis stops fighting it and lets himself settle. There’s anger and confusion and worry racing through his blood along with too many drinks. He feels defeated and sad all at once. “Okay,” is what he says out loud.

Niall doesn’t let go of his shoulders. “Let’s get out of here,” he says. “I know a diner nearby.”

It’s like a collapsing universe as Louis remembers his very first night in this bar four years ago, the way that night ended at a diner too. Niall leads him out of the bar and Louis wonders if he’ll laugh about it with Zayn later. The way they spent their night taking care of Louis and Harry because they’re not capable of taking care of each other. Louis ignores the lump in his throat at the thought.

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The first day after the night in Max’s is spent nursing a hangover so intense Louis lays on the ground between the kitchen and edge of his bedroom just to try and quell nausea. This, perhaps, is the worst part of no longer being twenty-one. The good thing is he’s in too much pain to think about Harry. His one ounce of solace is knowing Harry gets worse hangovers than him these days and is probably in just as much pain a few blocks away. Serves them both right, he thinks.

By Monday, the hangover is gone but Louis remains a mess of emotions

He knows there’s anger in the pit of his stomach. Anger at Harry for not speaking up, for swallowing whatever it was he wanted to say in the park and then again in the bathroom. Louis is the one whose done all the talking and Harry won’t try to shut him up. Replaying the way Harry looked at him in the bathroom makes him angrier; mostly the way Harry so casually said, “This is what you chose, babe,” like Louis was the only one with a hand in it at all.

There’s a feeling of awkwardness beneath the anger. Especially after Max’s, Niall and Zayn treat him like a time bomb. He knows they put effort into not mentioning Harry out loud around him, he can see it on their faces. It’s easier to pretend they aren’t missing a piece of the puzzle than acknowledge it, he gets it. He knows they still see Harry without him; he finds his hair clip in their couch and his sweatshirt on their counter. He’s not sure if it makes him feel any better.

The truth is, he misses Harry so badly it aches. That’s the feeling that is most pervasive; the one tucked under his ribs and filling his lungs like smoke. He misses Harry in ways he should have always expected. He works on his art for The New Yorker and still wants to call Harry to tell him about it. Zayn lets it slip the room exhibition will leave for tour in April and Louis has to physically walk away from his phone so as to not call Harry and wish him good luck. He misses hearing about Harry’s day and watching his face light up with his accomplishments. He tries his best not to think who Harry shares those bright moments with now. He only hopes they react the way he did; it will always be what Harry deserves.

He misses the way Harry laughs and the way he snores; he misses the way he kisses and the way it feels to have his face pressed to his neck at night. Louis misses the way he eats - tongue first - and the way he has to have a record playing when he makes dinner or does the dishes; the way he tucks his cold, bare feet under Louis’s thigh, the way he listens like there’s nothing more important to him in the moment. He misses the way they fuck, he misses how they hold each other.
He misses the way he fell in love with Harry; the champagne bubbles and butterflies, the heady rush. He misses the scary parts too. He misses the innocence, the trust. It was forty days - too fast in the scheme of things - but it was four years of build up, too. Four years of having no idea they belonged together, forty days of figuring it out. Ten minutes to tear the whole thing apart.

Louis thinks he gets stronger; hopes he does at least. There are still times he feels like a mess of a person, like getting out of bed isn’t all that worth it. He’s not sure anyone understands it, he’s not sure he always understands it himself.

But it goes like this: He fell in love with his best friend. To protect their friendship, he broke their hearts. Now it’s spring in New York and the city is alive with sunshine and butterflies and Louis can’t help to feel that he has nothing left. His sunshine, his butterflies, rested solely with one person. He wishes he could have figured that out before they made this mess.

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“Can you grab me another beer, babe?”

Louis looks up from lazily scrolling through Instagram to see Zayn dangling an empty bottle by the neck with a puppy dog plea on his face as he looks somewhere over Louis’s shoulder. Louis sets his phone down and takes a sip of from his own beer.

Niall comes into the living room and refuses to give Zayn his beer until he kisses him, both of them smiling as Niall plops down on the couch next to Louis. Louis doesn’t even let his lip curl in protest - he doesn’t have the energy.

“How’s work?” Zayn asks, perhaps noticing the bored way Louis stares at him and Niall. He’s happy to have been invited for dinner but he can’t admit to being the best company lately. He hasn’t found a way to regain all he lost in the past month. It’s the last day of March so thirty-three days since the last night in Central Park, fourteen since Max’s. Not that he keeps count.

“Good.” Louis picks at the wrapper on his beer and tries to think of something else to add. “I submitted my draft to The New Yorker staff. If they run it, it’ll be a fall issue.”

Zayn nods and Niall half smiles. “Cool.” Louis tries not to miss Harry’s voice in the group, his excited smile that would fill in the lackluster gaps.

“How’s Harry?” Louis asks the question before it can move through the quality control filter of his brain. He can’t help but be curious, can’t help but still care.

“He’s in San Francisco actually.”

Two things at once: a stab at not knowing Harry was out of the state, another zip of concern for him to have gone home. “For what?”

“The rooms tour is starting there,” Zayn says. He scratches along his jaw like he’s debating how much more to say. Louis knows it’s for his own protection; everytime he finds out something new about Harry through them, he wilts just a bit.

“He’s staying for the week,” Niall says with a glance at Zayn. “To see his family and everything.”

“Nice,” Louis says. He takes another drink. He lets himself imagine, just for a split second, he and Harry never forced themselves apart. He knows he would have gone with Harry to San Francisco, no questions asked. He would have loved to be there on his opening night.

Silence falls again and Louis hates it. There’s been too much silence in his life lately and it’s
starting to hurt. “I’d imagine that’s why you invited me over tonight?” He raises his eyebrows, “Since Harry is on the other side of the country?” Zayn and Niall share a look of shock and wide eyes. Louis laughs loudly, shaking his head. “I’m kidding.”

“Asshole,” Zayn says, as he takes another sip of beer to hide his smile; Niall laughs gleefully right out in the open.

Acknowledging the elephant helps to preserve the status of their zoo so talking comes a bit easier, laughter not as taboo. Niall has made a roast with mashed potatoes and grilled veggies for dinner and they all eat at the kitchen table over the bottle of wine Louis brought. No one mentions the fourth empty chair. “I don’t know if you’re interested,” Niall muses as he cuts up his slice of roast. “But there’s a couple of girls at work I could set you up with. Guys, too.”

Zayn speaks before Louis can. “Are you kidding, Ni?”

Niall shrugs as he chews. “I just want him to be happy, babe. H, too. This is miserable.”

Louis smiles, “I’m sitting right here, you know.”

Niall looks at him, right in the eyes. “You’re not happy. This is miserable.” Niall raises his eyebrows, “See, I can say it to your face.”

Louis laughs and rolls his eyes but the jokes feel good for once, even at his expense. “Yeah, alright.”

“You miss him,” Zayn says, quieter than Niall and Louis’s laughter.

Louis shrugs and pokes around at his dinner. “We’ve been friends for along time,” he says as he looks up.

Zayn blinks. “You miss dating him, Lou.”

Louis gets hit with a unprompted slideshow of Harry his brain has decided to dig up: morning hair, pink socks, making coffee in just his boxers. He inhales sharply and tries to disguise it with a cough.

“Don’t do this to yourself,” Niall says.

“Don’t do this to him,” Zayn says and it’s not a sympathy war, Louis knows. They’re both equal missing parts of this group.

Louis takes a sip of wine and sets the glass down slowly. “We’re doing it to each other, you know. I tried to protect us because I didn’t want to hurt him but I did it anyway. And I don’t really know what he’s thinking because he won’t fucking talk to me but something tells me he thinks I’m the one to blame.” His voice has gotten louder and it feels good to say something for once. “Why won’t he just tell me I’m wrong, if that’s what he thinks?”

“You know this is hurting you more than anything else possibly could, right?” Zayn’s eyes look so sad Louis can hardly take it. “You don’t even talk anymore.”

Louis doesn’t have a response above going back to eating. The only thing he could possibly add is what they already know: He misses Harry with a constant ache in his stomach and that’s nothing to say of the ache in his heart.
It’s a Thursday night the first week of April when Louis sees Harry again; not even a month to the night in Max’s. Louis isn’t looking for him when it happens, he’s just popping into Whole Foods for some groceries before going home. He didn’t write a list so he’s absentely scanning each aisle for things that perk his interest. When he accidentally finds Harry in the refrigerator section his stomach bubbles like he’s seen a ghost.

He stands at the end of the aisle as Harry focuses on something behind the glass door in front of him. Louis stares like it’s the last thing he’s going to see: Harry’s loose sweatpants and zip-up sweatshirt, a beanie pulled low over his ears. He straightens up with a frozen dinner in his hand and Louis sees the patchy, unshaved scruff on his jaw. He looks messy in a way Louis rarely sees and it feels like he’s invaded something private.

As if he can sense it, Harry starts to turn and Louis backs out of the aisle. He walks two aisles down and tries to steady his breathing. When he glances up he catches his reflection in the metal edging of the dairy display. His normal scruff is a borderline beard, his hair looks greasy and his eyes look hollow. He closes his eyes and sighs.

They don’t deserve this. Neither one of them has done anything wrong besides becoming friends and then giving themselves permission to fall in love. They can’t blame their hearts and punish themselves for something so cosmic they didn’t ever see it coming.

Louis starts walking confidently toward where he last saw Harry. He wants to talk to him. He wants to tell him they’ve hurt each other but their friendship means far too much to fade on a whimper. He wants to hear his voice if only for a second. But when he gets to the aisle, Harry is gone. It feels like a sign he didn’t really want to receive.

He finishes up his shopping rather quickly after that. A few times he considers grabbing his phone to text Harry but he’s not sure what he wants to say. Confronting him in the grocery store seemed so much easier than a premeditated text.

At the check out he realizes he’s bought two cups of Fage yogurt and stares at they’re scanned and placed in his bag. It’d become a habit during the forty days - buying them when he saw them at Whole Foods as if it was disproving Harry’s distaste for the chain. He hasn’t done it the last couple of shopping trips and he wonders if this is supposed to be another sign - the fact he bought it tonight. He doesn’t know what it would really mean as a sign, though; it’s just yogurt, after all.

He takes his bags from the cashier and heads out into the night. It’s spring but it’s early; the sky still darkens before seven, paints the city dusky. There’s someone pacing on the sidewalk and he moves to step around them but when he looks up he finds familiarity that turns his heart out. Harry pauses when he meets Louis’s eyes, a paper bag of groceries in the crook of his arm as they stare at each other.

“Hi,” Harry says. He lifts his chin like he’s proving a point. “I was going to say something in the store but I didn’t. I don’t even know if you want to talk to me, I guess.” Whatever bravado was there fades as his lips twitch into a sad smile.

Louis’s mind is like a firework show - thoughts exploding and fading with newer ones to replace it. None of them really make sense as he tries to figure out what to say. He swallows. “I bought your yogurt.”

It’s a stupid thing to say and it makes Harry blink like he’s waiting for a punchline before tilting his head. “What?”

“I didn’t mean to,” Louis explains. “But when I saw it, I remembered I didn’t have any and I just wanted to have it in case you came by. And wanted it.” He licks his lip and feels like an idiot,
“The yogurt.” This is not how he foresaw this interaction going. Not at all.

Harry laughs and the sound isn’t right; it’s half chewed and quiet. “Um, thank you? I think?”

Louis is pretty sure Harry thinks he’s nuts so he figures he should go all the way. “Would you want to come over now? For yogurt?” He doesn’t think it’s going to work especially when Harry stares at him in silence.

The world moves slowly around them as the moment hangs. Then Harry’s lips twitch in the way that is heart stopingly familiar as he tries not to smile. “Sure. I’d like that.”

They’re quiet on the walk to Louis’s apartment and he doesn’t realize his hand is shaking until he goes to put his key in the door. He hopes Harry can’t see.

Once he gets the door open, he does a cursory look around to make sure everything is in its place. It’s not like he can do anything about it now but it would be nice to have some sign of his life not being a total wreck. He almost laughs; he’s pretty sure Harry can tell by looking at him is life is something of a wreck at the moment. Personal appearance aside, his apartment looks okay and at least his laundry is put away, no dirty clothes connecting the kitchen to his bedroom.

“Let’s put your groceries in the fridge,” he says as Harry comes in behind him and closes the door softly.

He leads the short path to the kitchen, an awkward cloud settling over them. Harry fucked him for the first time on that couch, Louis sucked him off against that wall, they kissed with morning breath at that cupboard. And now they can’t even think of what to say to each other.

Maybe that’s not wholly true. Despite the ghosted memories standing all around them, they manage to laugh as they arrange Harry’s groceries in the fridge while wedging Louis’s purchases in all the other available gaps. By the time they manage it, they stand there with their hands on their hips admiring their handiwork like it’s much more than a refrigerator.

“I think I promised you yogurt,” Louis says regretfully considering he just wedged the cups in the very furthest corner.

“Oops,” Harry says and even from the side Louis can see the way his dimple curves in his cheek. “I’ll get it.”

Louis tries not to openly stare as Harry attempts to get the small tubs back out of the fridge. They’ve found themselves in far more ridiculous situations but Louis has to smile at this one in particular. Harry’s voice is muffled from inside the refrigerator and then he stands up straight; one cup in each hand, mouth curving in a victory smile.

“You didn’t have to get both,” Louis says. “You know how I feel about that stuff.”

Harry raises his eyebrows. “It tastes like cold jizz?” They stare at each other a silent moment before they laugh, something shy about it. Their smiles stay as the sound fades, the dull light of the refrigerator casting them both in soft white. They’ve been here before, too.

“Can I show you how to do something with it?” Harry asks, tentative. “I think you’ll like it.”

Louis nods, curiosity getting the better of his sensibilities; there’s no way he’s actually going to enjoy plain yogurt. Harry hands over the two cups with a small smile and then turns toward the refrigerator.
“Going back in,” he says and Louis wonders if he says it just to make him laugh; either way, it works. This time Harry is only getting something near the front so it’s not nearly as dramatic as he finally steps back with a carton of raspberries in his hand. “Just wait,” he says at Louis’s unimpressed stare.

Louis sits on the barstool at the counter as he watches Harry; the refrigerator humming idly in the background is the only sound. First, Harry tears off the foil lids of the yogurt and then shuffles around for two spoons and a packet of Splenda sweetener from the cupboard. Louis is only slightly alarmed Harry knows where to look for Splenda considering he doesn’t even remember buying it. Harry splits the sugar evenly between the two cups and then rinses off a handful of raspberries and dries them on folded paper towel.

Louis likes the calm way Harry goes about things, methodical and easy. He also likes to be able to look at him. After a month of only memories, seeing him right here, in his kitchen, feels a bit like make believe.

“Then you put the raspberries in,” Harry says as he splits his handful in the two cups. It’s the first part he’s narrated but suddenly Louis can see him having a cooking show; albeit a ridiculous, yogurt-centric cooking show. He stirs the yogurt, sugar, and berries together gently and then puts his hands on his hips. “That’s it.”

“That’s it?” Louis tilts his head. “You think that makes it acceptable?”

Harry laughs, “Just try it first.” He slides one cup across the counter with the spoon tucked inside. Louis mashes the spoon around a bit before lifting a small bite. “Get a raspberry,” Harry tells him, eyes watching him carefully.

“Bossy,” Louis mumbles without any intention. He makes sure to get a raspberry on his spoon and then squeezes his eyes shut as he puts it in his mouth. The texture is still there, still not great, but the flavor is fruity and sweet, a lot like frozen yogurt. When Louis swallows and opens his eyes, he finds Harry smiling at him. He tries not to be startled by the pretty way his mouth curves.

“Good, yeah?”


Harry looks pleased as he comes to sit down on the barstool to Louis’s right. He takes a heaping bite as Louis takes another smaller one. As soon as quiet falls again, it’s a reminder of what they still haven’t really said, the elephant of a month apart sitting on their toes.

“How are you?” Louis asks, the first to talk. He’d convinced himself he would say something while he was in Whole Foods and now they’re face to face he doesn’t want to take it back. The second the words are out of his mouth, though, they sound weak. Doesn’t he already know the answer? Harry looks back at him, a tinge weary and Louis revises. “Zayn let it slip you were in San Francisco for your opening?”

It’s easier ground and Harry must agree as he nods. He takes another bite of his yogurt while Louis waits. “Yeah, it was nice to be able to do that and see my family, too. I think they were impressed.”

Louis smiles, thinking of it. On paper the rooms sound a little far fetched but coming to life they are something else. “And everything went okay? No damaged room or glitter explosions?”

Harry laughs and shakes his head. “No, none of that, thank god. I added a few local brands to each installation for some good exposure so it was stressful getting them all set up.”
“It’s not fun unless there’s a little stress, right?”

Harry shrugs as he takes another bite. Louis chews the inside of his lip as he watches him, the way his throat moves when he swallows, his lips parting like he’s going to say something before he closes his mouth again.

“What?” Louis asks, giving away the fact he’s been staring.

Harry rubs his lips together like he’s deciding if he wants to share. “My favorite part was being there on the first day and seeing all of the people coming in and exploring. Seeing all of their excitement and what they took pictures of.” He smiles, “Afterward, a lot of them posted on Instagram and stuff and a few of them tagged me because they knew it was my exhibit and I like, couldn’t stop smiling.” He smiles and Louis realizes he’s staring back at him with his own ridiculous smile.

“That’s incredible,” he says, trying to keep his voice from gushing. “I’m so glad you got to be there to see it. And for them to recognize you? It’s like you have fans now.”

“I did get a few new Instagram followers,” Harry says and he does the thing where he pretends to flick his hair. Louis laughs too loudly.

“Where’s the next one?”

“Portland,” Harry says, “Next week.”

“Do you have one in Seattle?”

“Week after that.”

Louis grins, “My old stomping ground, you know. I’ll have to tell everyone I know to go see it.”

“Free publicity,” Harry says, a smile tugging on his lips.

Their laughter fades to quiet again; a sound Louis is learning to hate. It’s not the comfortable kind he’s used to with Harry. “I got the gig with The New Yorker,” Louis says just to fill the silence.

Harry bites his lip and then lets it slide into a smile. “Zayn may have let that slip to me.”

“Damn it,” Louis says, his lips twitching. “Beat me to it.” It’s an odd thing to say considering he didn’t plan to tell Harry anything about it prior to tonight.

“You can tell me about it, again,” he says. “I’d like to hear.”

Louis hesitates, wondering if they’re blurring lines they’ve barely drawn in the sand but he stops. For tonight he has his friend back and he’d like to indulge himself. So, he does.

He tells Harry about his call with the team, the open-ended assignment, his creative block, how it’s started to come together. When he finishes, there’s no lull so they keep going. They talk more about Harry’s trip home - how his sister and her husband are trying for a baby, and his mom has taken up painting. They discuss the new Lorde record and the Gucci collection that came out last week. Harry tells Louis he came up with his yogurt invention after too much ice cream and Louis shows Harry a new brand of wine he’s obsessed with and tells him he wants to go to the winery this summer. Under no circumstances do they talk about the experiment or the ways they’ve hurt each other.

“I should go,” Harry says when silence finally does fall again. Their yogurts are gone - even Louis
managed to finish his. Louis nods, not even pretending like he can ask Harry to stay.

Harry gets his groceries from the fridge and then sets them on the table while he puts his shoes on. “Lou,” he says as Louis reaches for the front door handle.

Louis lets go of the handle. “Yes?”

Harry stands slowly but makes no move to get his grocery bags again. “Can we do this again soon?”

Louis doesn’t hesitate, “Of course,” he says. Maybe this is how they’re supposed to address the elephant, by bumbling around it. “We’re still friends first, right?”

“Right,” Harry says, his voice hollow.

Louis takes a deep breath and tries to smile. His heart is aching again because he’s not sure how they get through this other than one painful day at a time. It has to stop hurting soon, he thinks. Hopes.

They stare at each other for a moment and then move all at once, Louis slipping his hands around Harry’s waist as Harry’s arms loop over his shoulders. They hug tight without space between them and Louis tucks his fingers in the longer curls over Harry’s neck. He feels Harry inhale against the side of his head and he pulls back quickly. They’re on a thin line, they have to be careful.

“Get home safe,” Louis says, pulling open the door abruptly.

Harry nods as he gets his bags from the ground. He shuffles them in his arms and looks oddly vulnerable for a heartbeat. Louis swallows hard. Once Harry steps into the hallway, Louis shuts the door without watching him go to the elevator the way he used to. He rests his forehead against the door jamb and takes a deep breath.

He imagines it going like this: Harry getting in the elevator and then walking home slowly since it’s a nice night. Harry putting his groceries away in the kitchen in his flat, humming to himself. He can nearly see him brushing his teeth, turning out the lights and undressing in the dark; slipping under the covers. He wonders if the extra toothbrush still sits in the holder; the one that belongs to him.

A knock at the door startles him from his reverie and he jumps, his heart taking off at double time. He opens it without looking through the peephole first, eyes landing on Harry in the hallway. He can’t even get the words, “Did you forget something?” out before Harry starts.

“I miss you and it’s not getting easier,” he says like it’s all Louis’s fault. “That’s what I wanted to say to you before you bought me yogurt. I miss you and it hurts.”

Louis feels like he’s shaking even though he’s standing still. He wonders how far Harry got before he had to turn around and say this, if he was already off the elevator in the lobby. “I miss you, too, H,” he says though his words feel thick. “More than anything.” It’s painfully honest but it’s what he’s been wanting to say. “You’re still my best friend.”

Harry blows air through his lips, “Right. So we can’t go a month without seeing each other again, okay?”


Harry stares at him again and Louis is reminded of that night in Central Park, the way he looks
like there’s something else to say. “Is this the right way to handle this?”

Louis swallows. Is it? he wants to ask in return. Is it best to just pretend nothing ever happened as long as they can stay friends, is it better to bury any shred of feelings so they can still have each other - he doesn’t know the answer. He shrugs instead of fumbling for the right words. “I don’t know.”

Harry smiles sadly, “I can’t help but feel like we’re ruining it all anyway.”

Louis bites his lip as his mind races for words. “We’ll try harder,” he says.

Harry looks at him like he’s speaking a different language and then he nods, soft understanding washing over his features. “Okay.”

This time Louis watches him go, watches him get in the elevator and then disappear. For a moment, he feels like he should go after him but it passes like a cloudy summer day. If he did, he doesn’t know what he would even say.

* *

For a few days following the yogurt night, Louis debates how and when he should text Harry. They’ve given themselves permission to hang out, to cut through the awkwardness, but they aren’t doing it. To be fair, Louis isn’t sure they’ll ever fully cut through the awkwardness until they put everything out on the table and acknowledge it for the ugly truth. Right now, it’s a holding pattern. Actually, right now it’s stagnant because neither one of them is reaching out and trying harder, the way they said they would.

It’s right as Louis thinks it his phone lights up on his desk. He pretends to not be excited by Harry’s name on the screen but he’s only lying to himself. Lunch? Harry says. I’m back in my office, we can get the good bagel sandwiches.

Louis tries not to groan out loud. He’d forgotten about the bagel sandwiches with Harry being in Hearst Tower for so long during their experiment. Experiment gone wrong, he thinks somewhat bitterly. I’m in he texts back just as he clicks on his calendar to cancel his lunchtime meetings. He says he has a doctor’s appointment; what the team doesn’t know can’t hurt them.

Vertigo rushes in when Louis gets to the bagel spot to meet Harry. He sees him waiting in line and has to force himself to smile instead of walking right up and kissing him on the mouth. Lifting his hand to wave makes his feet feel unsteady as he takes a deep breath to center himself. Then, like everything else, the vertigo passes: Harry smiles and Louis joins him in line.

It goes like that for a couple weeks and Louis finds himself surviving it. They grab lunch a couple more times, go to the new History of Fashion exhibit at The Met, and get brunch in Chelsea on their own after Niall and Zayn cancel on their usual group date. “Rude,” Harry says when he sees the group text after they’re already at the restaurant. “I can’t believe they cancelled right when things are getting bearable again.” Louis pauses with his mimosa glass against his bottom lip to glance at Harry but he seems to be joking so Louis laughs.

It gets easier, Louis will admit. They’re still not talking the way they usually do; the abrupt questions and honest answers. But they’re talking. And, for now, that’s what Louis will take.

Harry goes to the Seattle opening and sends Louis pictures of the exhibition being set up. Louis doesn’t want to bother him by texting too much but he has an incorrigible smile whenever Harry sends him bits throughout his day. He does the same when he goes to Los Angeles the following weekend and Louis loves it then, too.
Louis gets a little drunk one night - off his new favorite wine - and starts to get a little dreary about the fact it’s no longer appropriate to call Harry and tell him goodnight. It gets drearier when he realizes he never did that when it was appropriate. That, more than much else, gets to Louis. All the things they didn’t do in the forty days, all the things he wishes they would have.

He should have called Harry when he woke up without him; his scratchy voice used to be his favorite part of waking up and he should have indulged in it more. He wishes they wouldn’t have spent the first week or so fighting themselves on how to act. Nearly seven days of trying to stop the inevitable, Louis thinks now. He wishes they wouldn’t have fought on the last night, at the ski lodge. He wishes they could have enjoyed the full weekend without the decision of day forty hanging so heavily over their heads. He wishes they could have used the vibrator a bit more. He stops himself there before he gets carried away. He empties his wine glass and gets in bed, closes his eyes and ignores the visions of Harry in all forms of undress, all states of ecstasy, all shades of pink and red suddenly dancing through his head. If he ignores them, they’ll go away. Or so he tells himself.

For the times he wishes they could have done more in forty days, there are still times he wishes they could have done less. One night he’s at Harry’s apartment, before they go to the movies, wishing they could have realized they didn’t have romantic chemistry instead of the opposite. Then, he wouldn’t have to think twice about where he sits while avoiding the couch where they first made out and the coffee table where they ate dinner; where Louis started to fall in love. If they’d realized they were only compatible as friends, he wouldn’t have to second guess every move he makes or word he says.

And then there are times when he wishes they never would have tried it at all; Harry would never have brought dating up. It’s worse on the nights he can’t sleep and tries to imagine Harry in his bed again, or on afternoons they walk around Washington Park and he wants to hold his hand so badly he can’t think straight. If Harry never brought it up, they could have kept going the way it always was - they wouldn’t have to re-learn how to be friends now. They never would have had to find out what could have been; they wouldn’t have known it existed.

At the end of April, Harry’s exhibit goes to Nashville and Niall takes vacation time to go with him which makes Zayn and Louis both wildly jealous for two different reasons. One of the nights they’re there, Niall video calls Louis from a bar, screaming into the screen as people sing and dance all around him. Niall is endlessly cheerful and it makes Louis laugh from his perch on the couch, a book on his lap.

“Where’s H?” He asks and then again when Niall can’t hear him. “Harry,” he ends up yelling into the phone.

“Oh, Harry,” Niall yells back nodding. He looks somewhere over his shoulder and then shrugs as he looks back at Louis. “Not sure. Last I saw he was flirting with some guy.”

That’s when Louis really wishes they’d never done the forty days at all, that Harry would have kept his mouth shut that night in January. Because then he’d laugh about Harry potentially hooking up with a stranger in Nashville; as it is, he hangs up the phone and feels like he just might crumble.

A week later, the first day of May is a stunning and sunny Friday so Niall makes a reservation for dinner on the patio at Otto’s which is, perhaps, the best place to get tacos in the entire city. The sun isn’t even setting as Louis walks over from his apartment, a pleasant buzz in the air as everyone celebrates the end of another week. He meets Zayn as he turns the last corner and they find Harry and Niall at the table already, an order for margaritas already placed.
It’s gotten to the point where their foursome no longer feels awkward the way it has for a couple of months now. No one has really acknowledged why this is only their third time all together since the end of February and Louis isn’t going to be the one to bring it up. Instead they eat tacos, talk about Harry and Niall’s trip, and sip margaritas as the sunset casts the city in shades of burnt orange and pretty pink. If Louis could stop monitoring how hard he laughs at Harry’s jokes and whether he stares at him too long, things would be perfect.

Once they’ve exhausted the tacos and margaritas, they move onto Charm - a new bar near Greenwich Zayn wrote a review on. They split a cab and Louis is distinctly aware of where the side of his thigh and knee matches alongside Harry’s in the backseat. He must stare for too long because Harry finally catches his eye with a hesitant smile and Louis looks away.

Charm is a cute spot though Louis usually doesn’t like to associate cute with the bar scene. Still, even with the ceiling covered in different sizes of chandeliers and a black granite bar top, it manages to feel casual as they make their way to order drinks. They keep their tequila trend from dinner with a round shots and then Harry goes for his usual tequila and lime. He glances at Louis and changes his order to two as Niall and Zayn opt for fruit drinks with curly straws.

Louis accepts his drink with a quiet thanks and then leads the way to a high top table they can all stand at. Even for a new bar, it’s already getting crowded and a little warm as people converge on all sides. They try to chat over the noise but it’s difficult in the setting regardless of how close they get. It doesn’t help Louis finds himself staring a bit harder at Harry with alcohol in his system, particularly when strangers come in close to him or start casual conversations. He can’t even focus when anyone talks to him because he’s so concerned over whether Harry likes whoever he’s talking to, whether he’ll let them take him home.

He’s not used to caring so much, worrying about who Harry talks to, wondering where he’ll spend the night. It’s just that now he knows. He knows the way Harry kisses and the way he sighs, the way he likes to hold hands when he’s getting sucked off, how his stomach crunches when he moves, what his eyebrows do just before he comes. And though none of those things belong to Louis anymore, he feels as though they should. Like those pieces are his to keep, along with what little of Harry’s heart he managed to snag in their whirlwind of forty days.

His last thought coincides with a girl with dark hair and pretty eyes bumping into Harry as she navigates the crowd. Louis can’t say if it’s on purpose or not but it works for the moment, Harry turning away from the three of them to chat with her. Louis turns the opposite way and slips through the crowd toward the bar; he really needs another drink to make it through tonight.

He’s leaning against the bar to get the bartender’s attention when a low, “Do you like gin?” interrupts him. He looks over at the question and gets jostled a step closer by the crowd surrounding him. “I do,” he says, a little confused. The guy who asked is tall and handsome, dark hair and strong jawline, scruff a few days old.

“Will you do a shot with me?” He asks.

Louis hesitates, almost looking over his shoulder to see what Harry’s up to. Instead he nods, smiles. “Sure.”

Stephen, as the guy introduces himself, is an investment banker who works on Wall Street. His smile is perfectly straight and his arms are bare of any ink. It’s not until Louis notices he’s not wearing rings that he realizes he’s cataloging all of his differences from Harry. He bites down on a smile as he asks Stephen who he came here with - idle small talk as their shots are poured. Once upon a time, he used to be kind of good at this. Once upon a time this was the easy part; the hard part came with developing an emotional attachment, a desire to see the same person more than a
couple times a week.

Times have changed, it would seem.

Stephen is kind and his blue eyes match Louis’s but Louis can’t get his heart to go along with it, not even after a couple of shots together. It’s not his night and he can’t say for certain when his night will be again. At a lull in the conversation, he puts his hand on Stephen’s forearm and squeezes gently before he can ask Louis to take another shot or take their conversation elsewhere. “I should get back to my friends,” he says. “Thank you for the drinks.” He smiles and then leaves without waiting for a reaction.

Back at their original table, Zayn and Niall are engrossed in each other, their faces so close as they talk they can’t possibly have fresh air to breathe. Harry is still talking to the girl from before, a half-empty drink in his hand, small smile on his lips. All at once, Louis is just... done. He’s tired and tipsy and not in the mood to embrace either one. He doesn’t want to stand around watching Harry or be the nagging thorn in Niall and Zayn’s sides. He doesn’t want to try and hook up with anyone, doesn’t want to put the effort into someone new. “I’m gonna go,” he says out loud to no one in particular.

Somehow Niall hears him anyway and though he turns around like he’s going to fight Louis on it, his face is soft. Zayn has one arm around Niall’s waist, his chin over his shoulder. He pouts his lip but doesn’t say anything as Louis gives the bored old excuse of, “Kind of tired.”

“You’re leaving?” This time it’s Harry, his body twisted as he tries to keep his shoulders toward the girl, his eyes on Louis.

“Tired,” Lous says loudly over the noise, trying to smile. He gives Harry a thumbs up like he’s wishing him good luck with the girl even though he wishes the ground would open up and swallow him whole. Someday he’ll be good at this again. Not tonight.

He leaves without saying much more, twisting his way through the crowd of happy drunks. The sky is still blue outside, the deep and clear way it gets this close to summer. They’ll have a few more rainy days before they make it to actual summer but it’s close enough to taste now. It’s comfortable enough to walk home so Louis sets himself off in the correct direction, leaves the sounds of Charm behind him.

He likes walking past bars and clubs at night, each open door a whoosh of noise and then quiet for another half a block. It’s a calming rhythm as Louis does his best not to think of Harry. It’s not fair how it’s all gone now. Each moment they didn’t say something is now tucked neatly in a file and untouchable. He thought time would make them brave when it really only added dust to the discarded.

At first, he doesn’t hear the footsteps on the sidewalk behind him but the yelled, “Louis,” he does. He slows and then stops, turning around. Harry is running at him full speed, the bow on his shirt coming undone, his hair losing all sense of complacency as the curls slip over his forehead.

“What’s wrong?” Louis asks immediately. His first thought is something happened when he left, something to Niall or Zayn. He likes to think it’s because he’s a good friend but it’s also the only reason he can find as to why Harry would be running in a pair of YSL boots.

“Nothing,” Harry says as he finally gets to Louis, his chest rabbiting for breath as he puts his hands on his hips.

Louis raises his eyebrows as he watches him. He knows Harry is athletic but he also knows he’s drunk and uses his inhaler every once in awhile so, technically, he has every reason to be worried.
“You okay?”

Harry nods, swallowing. “I’m fine.”

“How are you running, then?”

“Wanted to make sure you were okay.”

Louis smiles at the coincidence though it’s short lived. He’s getting to be okay but he’s not there yet. So, he says, “Yeah, I’m good, H.”

Harry stares at Louis like he’s trying to read his face though his pupils are blown and his blinks are lazy. They’re both more drunk than they realize.

“Go back to the bar,” Louis says like it’s an order. “I know you were having fun. With that girl,” he says when Harry tilts his head. “She’s pretty.” It’s not a lie but it sounds strangled coming from his lips.

“I’m not,” Harry shakes his head, “I wasn’t.”

Louis shrugs, “I don’t care, H. Do what you want.”

He doesn’t think those are fighting words or particularly triggering but suddenly Harry is on him, hands coming up to his face as he kisses him. Louis doesn’t react at first, shock and alcohol slowing his brain to a fizz. Harry doesn’t give up, kisses him harder until Louis opens his mouth to his tongue, giving back as good as he gets. “I don’t want her,” Harry is saying when Louis focuses in on his words instead of lips. He may have said something before that but Louis was lost in the ecstasy of having Harry’s mouth again. “I don’t want her.”

“Okay,” Louis says, his hands on Harry’s waist like a reflex. He squeezes and pulls Harry in closer without thinking, fighting to breathe as they kiss again.

“What about the guy at the bar?” Harry says when he pulls back. His cheeks are faintly pink in this light, his eyes wild.

Louis nearly laughs. “He’s nothing,” he says, wondering if this is how Harry is saying he’s jealous. He pulls back even more and Harry leans to chase. “What about Nashville?”

“What about Nashville?” Harry repeats.

The tequila and two shots of gin are the only things to help Louis say, “Niall said you were flirting with a guy.”

Harry shakes his head, his hands still on the sides of Louis’s neck, thumbs on the corners of his jaw. “I don’t know what he meant,” he says. “I wasn’t.” He swallows and blinks slowly, “You’re all I think about, Louis.”

Said like that, Louis loses his mind. He presses forward to kiss Harry again, tongue and lips and teeth all colliding at once. “It’s only you,” Harry says. Each word is said between kisses and Louis is hardly following with the pauses. All he can think about is how Harry tastes like tequila and home all at once. “All I want is you,” Harry says, borderline babbling now. “At night, I can’t stop thinking about you.”

Louis drops his hands to the top of Harry’s pants, his hands brushing over his ass as his thumbs slip under the waistband. He just needs Harry closer.
“Want you,” Harry whispers and there’s molten lava in his voice, something that scoops up the bottom of Louis’s stomach and flips it.

All he wants is Harry, all he’s wanted for the last two months is to have Harry like this again; Harry’s mouth on his, their bodies pulsing together. Louis kisses along his jaw and then bite down his neck, pulls him in closer, rolls Harry’s hips against his own. He knows Harry is hard, knows he’s never had whiskey dick in his life and the stutter in his breath tells Louis he’s right.

“Need you, oh my god,” Harry gasps and Louis wants to take him home more than anything he’s ever wanted. He wants to lay him out on his bed and strip him bare. He wants to kiss each exposed inch of his skin twice, he wants to worship his body: pink nipples, strong stomach, soft hips.

But. He can’t. With a gasp Louis falls back, separating them with space. Harry steps forward and then stops.

“We can’t,” Louis says, exactly what Harry said in Max’s in March. All the visions of taking Harry home fade as he watches him catch his breath, his eyes quickly shifting to sad sad. He looks like he’s been kicked and debauched all at once. “We need to talk first.”

Harry blinks. “Now?” His chin is scratched from Louis scruff, there’s a mark blooming on the edge of his jaw and the bow that had previously tied his shirt together has come undone.

“No,” Louis says. He knows they need to talk and do it for real, put everything out on the table regardless of what it means. He steps closer and takes Harry’s hands in his, his thumbs resting on Harry’s rings. “Next week, okay? I’ll call you and we’ll figure it out.”

It takes a second but then Harry nods, squeezing Louis’s hands. “Okay.”

Louis presses in close and kisses him softly for just one more taste. “Okay. Now, are you going back to the bar or do you want me to get you a car to take you home?” He doesn’t even offer for Harry to walk home with him; he’s had the strength to go this far but he can’t possibly leave Harry at his front door.

“Back to the bar,” Harry says. “I left my phone and wallet on the table.”

Louis can’t help his smirk as it slips to a smile. “You’re an idiot.”

Harry smiles, small. “I was in a hurry.”

“Probably scared the shit out of Niall and Zayn.”

Harry nods, “Probably.”

“Go,” Louis says before he gives up and just decides they can stand there all night looking at each other. “I’ll call you.”

Harry licks his lips and nods. He dives forward to kiss Louis once more and then he’s turning and leaving without looking back. Louis checks to make sure he’s walking in a semi-straight line before he turns on his path home. They have much further to go still, despite what their bodies think. Once they say what they need to, everything could break again and this night will mean nothing but one last kiss. But, for now, he feels quietly optimistic. The butterflies in his stomach stretch their wings.
It only takes through the weekend for the optimism to turn to nerves and anxiety. Louis can’t stop the nagging feeling they’re going to mess everything up as soon as they try to talk. They’ve barely made it back from the first night they tried to speak their feelings out loud and he can’t admit to looking forward to the same thing happening again.

It’s Sunday evening and he’s sitting at his kitchen counter trying to figure out if, maybe, he should pretend to not remember Friday night, when his phone lights up with a call from Harry. Louis swears he told Harry he’d call him so maybe he’s not even making up the memory loss at this point.

“I can’t talk for long. I’m in line to board my plane,” Harry says when Louis answers.

“What? Where are you going?”

“Chicago,” he says. There’s a voice on the loudspeaker in the background, a round of quiet chatter. “We’re opening there this week but one of the rooms has water damage so I’m going to see what we can do to save it.”

“Oh god, H.”

“And the exhibition starts at eight in the morning, so if we can’t salvage it, we’ll need to postpone the opening.”

“Babe,” Louis breathes and then, “Harry, that’s awful.” He wonders if maybe Harry is too frantic to notice the babe.

“Yes, it is.” Harry laughs and it’s bitter. “So, I need you to tell me when we’re going to talk. I need something else to think about. Need it.”

He sounds a little desperate and Louis wishes there was something more he could do than ask, “When are you back?”

“Probably Wednesday.”

“Let’s do Thursday.”

He thinks he hears Harry swallow. “Okay. You come to mine, I’ll cook something.”

“What? After the week you’ll have had by then? Let’s just go somewhere.”

“No,” Harry says. “I’m going to spend this flight planning the menu so I don’t eject myself out of the emergency exit.”

Louis laughs and immediately feels guilty. “I’m sorry. That’s a little funny.”

“You know what’s funnier?” Across the line, Louis can almost see his lips twitch as he tries not to smile.

“Tell me.”

“I left my apartment in such a hurry to get to the airport, I’m wearing gym shorts and my running shoes but with pink fuzzy socks.”

Louis lets a laugh bubble from his lips, picturing it clearly. “Oh god.”

Harry laughs. “I didn’t notice until some little girl said she liked my socks during security.”
Louis smiles so hard his eyes scrunch. “A fashion icon.”

“Guess so. I’m next in line but I’ll see you Thursday?”


“Yeah?”

“If you need to like, vent while you’re in Chicago or need my unhelpful advice on water damaged rooms or something, you can always call me.”

There’s a pause where Louis thinks the call has been disconnected and then, quietly, Harry’s voice, “Thanks, Lou.” Louis clears his throat and wishes Harry a safe flight and good luck before hanging up. Even once the screen on his phone has gone black, he’s still smiling down at the countertop.

* Louis pretends he’s not thinking about how he gets dressed on Thursday night but when he changes his outfit for the third time, he knows he’s lying. He takes off his blue jeans and pulls on the black pair he had on in the first outfit and goes back to his closet for a shirt.

His nerves are at an all time high with still an hour before he’s supposed to be at Harry’s. All three days Harry was in Chicago, they talked each night and text throughout the day. It was nothing heavy or serious but mostly to take Harry’s mind off the disastrous Chicago show with some flirting mixed in between. It felt like they were teenagers or something, far worse than when they were actually supposed to be dating for forty days. He can’t explain what it was that made the past few days so different only that perhaps the tentativeness made it sweet and the sweetness sent butterflies all up and down his chest.

Now, though, he knows what’s coming next. They have to face the demons they put in the closet eight weeks ago, the ones who still poke their faces and sharp hands out every once in awhile. He knows there will be relief in the truth, in understanding, but he can’t stop himself from thinking of all the ways this can still go wrong; all the ways he can lose Harry again.

Once he settles on the fact there are no new shirts hidden in the back of his closet, he takes out a green button down and cuffs the sleeves over his forearms as he turns out the light. It’s best to just leave before he changes his mind again.

He has plenty of time to walk to Harry’s and pick up a bottle of wine so he does both. Then he takes a lap around Harry’s block because he still gets there too early. He feels like he’s going on a blind date with the cute guy he’s only met once and he knows he’s being ridiculous. “Get it together,” he says to himself as he finally convinces himself to step inside Harry’s lobby. Tonight isn’t going to be easy and he needs to have his game face on.

Harry opens the door with a soft smile, his clean hair fluffy and pushed back from his face. He’s wearing a dark blue shirt with buttons down the front and a pocket over the chest, the black jeans Louis loves on him and a pair of white socks because he’d never wear his shoes in the house. He looks beautiful.

“Hi,” Louis says as steps inside. “Smells good in here.”

“Candles,” Harry says, motioning around vaguely. “One cinnamon, one sugar, one cupcake.”

Louis notices three flames spread throughout the main room and the smells make sense; it’s like a fucking bakery. “That’ll do it,” he says. “And here I thought you made dessert.”
“I did,” Harry says, smiling. “But it’s a surprise.”

Louis sighs, “Fine.” He holds up his wine bottle as he steps out of his shoes, “I’m sure you have wine but I bought this on the way over.”

Harry takes the bottle as they walk toward the kitchen. “Perfect. I’m making steak so red will be best.”

“You’re making steak?” Louis’s eyes go wide. “You literally had the week from hell, H. I wouldn’t be disappointed if you scrapped the whole thing and made Postmates bring in McDonalds.”

Harry smiles, his dimple curving in. “No way. This is all I thought about in Chicago. Every time things were going shitty, which was a lot, I would just tune out and think about what I was going to cook for you.”

Louis is so endeared Harry might as well have given him a ring. “So what are we having?”

“Steak with sautéed mushrooms, smashed red potatoes, and grilled veggies. The perfect summer meal.”

Louis smiles, imagining Harry on a cooking show again. “Great. Tell me how to help.”

This time Harry actually lets Louis help him make dinner; pressing a seasoning rub into the steaks and boiling the potatoes. They work in a quiet tandem, bumping each other in the kitchen and talking idly. They each have a glass of wine and Louis feels like he’s at peace even with a certain conversation looming in front of them.

The only problem is the conversation doesn’t seem to come.

When dinner is ready, Harry suggests they eat on the rooftop patio so they take their plates and fresh glasses of wine up to the top level. The evening is pleasantly warm as they sit across from each other at the rod iron table with cushioned chairs. They eat slowly and talk plenty - about all sorts of things that don’t matter. Louis even tells a story about his childhood cat, Panda, and wonders if they’re both avoiding the same thing. He’d like to think they’re just enjoying each other again.

The only time they get close to talking about it is when Harry apologizes for Friday night out of nowhere. “I feel like I ambushed you on the street,” he says as his cheeks turn a faded pink in the dull light of sunset.

Louis raises his eyebrows, remembering the way he’d held Harry’s hips and rocked him forward. “You’re kidding.” When Harry doesn’t move, he laughs. “Obviously I was into it, too,” he says. Here is where they can loop closer to the whole point of tonight but Harry pulls away. “Zayn and Niall were not into it.”

“No?”

Harry laughs, “They were freaking out when I walked back in.” And on the conversation goes. Harry’s new phone case, Louis’s obsession with Queer Eye, their mutual joy in it nearly being Friday.

Back downstairs they do the dishes and play more volleyball with softball topics: how taste buds change every seven years and why that explains Harry’s current love of lemon bars, Bon Iver’s
tour announcement, Cera Vie as a preferred chapstick for moisturization. Louis is convinced they could go all night.

When the wine is gone and each dish has been cleaned and set aside to dry, there’s a hazy quiet over the apartment, blue tones of late evening. Louis has his arms crossed, back against the refrigerator and Harry is bent over with his elbows on the counter, their eyes meeting in the silence.

“Do you want to go for a walk?” Harry asks.

“Sure.”

Harry leaves the lights on in the apartment when they leave and for some reason that’s when Louis gets nervous. He doesn’t think it’s about the lights but more about approaching the inevitable all over again. How much easier it would all be if he would have said everything he wanted that last night in February instead of having to face this all over again.

The inevitable gets pushed a little longer as they walk and Harry points out where he’s heard they’re putting in a new sushi place and the smoothie shop he tried last week. Louis does more stalling of his own as he talks about where his twin sisters are applying to college.

Through their meandering conversation they end up in Central Park and Louis realizes it with a sinking weight and a glimmering sense of responsibility. They need to do what they said they were going to do tonight; they need to put some things on the line and see where they stand. Whether it’s an omen or good luck they end up in the park of all places, Louis is about to find out.

He glances at Harry and gets a rush of the first night they were here and started this whole thing. It was cold and brittle, snowing. They had alcohol running through their blood and rosy cheeks. Louis looked at Harry and thought there was no way he could date him; not when he knew so much about him, not when he was his best friend.

He blinks and remembers the night in February, after everything they’d been through. When he looked at Harry and decided they couldn’t possibly be together, not when they stood to lose each other in the aftermath.

And, now, here they are. He sees Harry’s jaw flex as they walk, not realizing Louis is staring. He sniffs sharply through his nose and Louis studies the way it scrunches. It shouldn’t be anything near adorable but somehow it is. As he looks at Harry now, beautiful in May, he can’t see how they can deny themselves the chance to see what happens. He takes a deep breath.

“What happened?” He doesn’t add context already knowing Harry will understand.

It’s like Harry has been waiting for him to speak, not missing a step or slowing down as they start to curve around the duck pond taking up this half of the park. Harry shrugs a shoulder and then pauses. “You said we couldn’t do it.”

Louis stops walking slowly and Harry stands still when he does. He doesn’t want to have this conversation with the side of Harry’s head; not now. “What if I hadn’t said that, though?” Louis looks right into Harry’s eyes like it’s going to reveal something before his lips do. “What would you have said?”

Harry smiles but it’s sad, not reaching his eyes. “That I think I fell in love with you somewhere between day twenty and twenty-one or maybe it was earlier. I’m not sure.”

Louis swallows and nods. It hurts to hear now, two months of heartache later. “Why didn’t you say that anyway?” He asks. He hopes he sounds curious and not demanding; god knows he took
control of the conversation first that night. “Or when we were at Max’s?” He adds, remembering Harry’s face in the bathroom.

Harry takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “I learned a long time ago not to beg for anyone to love me. It’s too painful.” He gives a wry smile, “Clearly, I’m still trying to get better.”

Louis is confused and he feels his eyebrows start to press together. “What are you talking about?”

Harry glances away and when he looks back he doesn’t meet Louis’s eyes. “Cornering you in a bar, chasing you down on the sidewalk, forcing you to talk about all of this all over again.” He smiles again, “What can I say? I’m a work in progress.”

Everything freezes in that moment just as each word slips into Louis’s brain and settles. Harry doesn’t want to beg him to love him but still thinks he’s on the edge of begging in some form or another. With a rush of heat like panic, Louis realizes: Harry never knew Louis loved him in the first place. All this time, he thought Louis made a conscious choice that night to end things because he didn’t love Harry, didn’t share the same feelings. He didn’t tell Louis he was wrong or he was lying because, all along, he thought Louis’s brutal words were the truth.

Even now, Harry doesn’t know.

“You wouldn’t have had to beg,” Louis says. He doesn’t know how else to put his mistake in words so he comes right out with it: “I lied.”

Harry blinks but doesn’t speak and Louis wishes he could see inside his head, read the turmoil.

“I thought I was going to protect you, protect us, by saying we should just be friends.” Louis realizes his hands are trembling as he curls them into fists at his sides. “I just figured you thought we weren’t worth fighting for.”

Harry opens his mouth and then closes it, his lips pressed tight together. He does the same thing again and then finally manages the words. “Of course we’re worth fighting for,” is what he lands on. “I just thought I’d read you wrong. I thought you didn’t care.”

If Louis had the energy, he might scream. As it is, he is so emotionally drained from the past two months all he can do is a take a stuttered breath in disbelief. “Turns out I couldn’t stop caring,” he says.

“Why did you say that though?” Harry licks his bottom lip and then leans in slightly closer like it will help him understand better. “Why did you think we had to stay friends?”

Louis should have known the question was coming but it still sends his thoughts fluttering as he fights for words. “I started thinking about what would happen if things went, you know, downhill. I was talking to Zayn and he asked what happens on day forty-three if we decided to break up? I’m not blaming him,” Louis says quickly as though Zayn can hear the conversation. “But I got in my own head about it. Neither one of us is very good at the whole relationship thing and we did good for forty days but there’s no guarantee things would keep being that good.”

Harry blinks at him. “Few things in life have a guarantee Louis. I could get hit by a car in the next hour and die.”

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Harry blinks at him. “Few things in life have a guarantee Louis. I could get hit by a car in the next hour and die.”

Louis shakes his head, “Don’t say that.” He puts a hand on his heart at the very thought. “That’s fucking morbid.”

“Sorry.” Harry rubs his lips together, “You get my point?”
Louis nods. “I’m rarely friends with exes. That’s not intentional but the way it’s always turned out. I don’t want to not have you in my life. And if I had to keep you as a friend instead of a boyfriend,” he shrugs. “I figured it would be alright.”

“And was it?”

He’s sure Harry knows this answer but Louis humors him. He shakes his head and half smirks. “No, not really.”

Harry smiles and then his face gets a bit more serious. “I don’t care about any of that stuff. Day forty-three, day one-hundred, week thirty-six. None of that matters. I tried life without you in it, and I didn’t like it.” He smiles, “Hated it, actually.”

“It’s risky,” Louis says, “Dating your best friend. We’re doing good now, aren’t we? We’re getting back to normal.” He feels that fight or flight bubble in his stomach again and he knows what one he’s choosing. Again. He can’t seem to stop himself from running at every turn.

“It’s not normal, though,” Harry says, calling Louis on the bluff. “It’s not ever going to go back to normal. When I see you I want to kiss you, I’ve spent almost every night wanting to call you just to fall asleep to your voice. I want to tell strangers you’re doing a commission for the fucking New Yorker and I want to wake up next to you. None of that is normal and I don’t really care. I don’t want it to go away. I don’t want us to be normal again.”

Louis swallows. “If we start dating and something happens, I don’t think we can come back twice. I can’t lose you, H.”

“I don’t know what might happen and I can’t pretend I do,” Harry says. “But I choose you. I should have yelled it at you that night because, it turns out, there’s only one person I know who is as stubborn as me,” he shakes his head, and tries not to smile, “It’s you.”

Louis smiles for him. “I thought I could save us from heartbreak,” he says. “And then I kept thinking I would get better. Eventually, there would be some morning where I’d wake up and not miss you anymore. But it didn’t happen.”

“We deserve a chance,” Harry says. “I know you’re scared and, god, I am too. But I can’t possibly keep going without giving us a chance to do this.”

Louis slips his hands over Harry’s and twists their fingers together needing to feel connected to him. “A chance to do what?”

“A chance to be idiots,” Harry says, squeezing Louis’s hands. “And fall in love for real.” He smiles over the last part like he’s a sitcom actor but Louis likes him enough to keep him anyway.

“You’re so dumb,” Louis says, pulling Harry closer so their bodies touch.

“Look who’s talking,” Harry says, his voice going high with incredulity.

“I think you like it,” Louis says just before he kisses Harry, right on the mouth. Harry smiles against his lips and Louis hears the unspoken, “I think I do,” in the taste of his tongue.

They go get ice cream on their way out of the park because, as it turns out, things like ice cream sound even better when the persistent weight on your heart is lifted and you’re holding the hand of a pretty boy. Harry gets vanilla with Oreo cookie while Louis gets mint chocolate chip and they sit on a cement ledge overlooking the park, hiding their smiles into their spoonfuls. It’s not all that
Louis holds Harry’s hand when they get up to leave and doesn’t even comment as Harry starts to lead them back to his apartment. Once inside, they let their bodies do what they tried to do a week ago, relearning each other through taste and touch in the dark twilight sparkling through the window. They kiss all the way up the stairs to Harry’s bed and then make out like teenagers before they start stripping each other naked.

It’s raw and sensual, like the first time all over again but with something else pulsing between them, something familiar. Louis swallows Harry’s sounds and memorises the way his face moves, a flutter in his heart of all the times like this to come. Where the last few days of their forty felt like saying goodbye, this feels like hello, I’ve missed you, I’m here to stay. Their bodies move together seamlessly with the same bitten off moans and fingernails down each other’s skin. It’s everything Louis has been missing and then some because when their both chasing orgasms, eyes wide open and mouths panting, he can press forward to kiss Harry and whisper, “I love you.”

After, when they’re sticky and too tired to go downstairs, they trace each other’s skin in the moonlight as their heartbeats calm. “Did you really fall for me between day twenty and twenty-one?” Louis asks, his palm flat to Harry’s heart. Harry is curled into him with their faces level on the pillow. He loves the way Harry can be small like this, so he can hold him.

“What if we had got in the cab that night and it was empty?” Harry says. “We could have gone to a diner still, said all the same things, but if it was just us, it might have ended up being a date instead of friends.”

“Hard to tell,” Louis says. “Zayn was in the cab.” He wouldn’t trade Zayn for anything especially not now he has Harry naked and next to him again, their hearts tied together.

“Get our hearts broken.”
Harry smiles wryly, “Break some hearts.”

“Get better jobs,” Louis says, laughing.

“Figure out what we wanted out of a partner.”

“Then what?” Louis asks, his smile going smaller but his eyes shining.

“We had to play a dumb game for forty days to see if we could really take each other as more than friends.”

“We didn’t do so well at that, huh?”

“We didn’t at the end, no,” Harry says with a scrunched up nose.

“But we didn’t give up.”

Harry raises his eyebrows knowingly, “The universe wouldn’t let us.”

Louis laughs, gleeful. How lucky he is to get to fall in love with someone like Harry and be loved back. “Maybe that’s true.”

Harry bites his lip, “Anyway, back to what I was thinking.”

“Yes, darling?” Louis runs his thumb over Harry’s jaw, never sick of touching him.

“I might have realized I loved you between day twenty-one and twenty-two but I think it started on New Year’s Eve four years ago.”

“Slowest fall in history,” Louis says, smiling.

“Worth it,” Harry says with a grin.

“You’re such a sap,” Louis says loudly, breaking their quiet moment. “And you say such embarrassing things.”

Harry leans forward and bites Louis’s jaw and then scrambles to press him to the bed, knees falling to either side of his hips as he perches on top. “Better get used to it,” he says, smiling so wide his dimple pops.

Louis takes a moment to look at him like this: naked and happy with bite marks from Louis’s teeth on the inside of his thigh. “Why’s that?”

Harry smiles like Louis has set him up with the perfect pitch for a homerun. “Because I’m yours,” he says, softly and confidently. His voice fills Louis up from the inside makes his heart beat double time.

“And I’m yours,” he says back, hands coming to rest on the top of Harry’s thighs. “Now get down here and kiss me,” he says just as he tugs Harry’s knees to make him collapse in a heap, their laughter echoing up to the ceiling of the apartment and dancing around them like glitter in the air.
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