



# Dry Drowning

A LOVE STORY CONTINUES

## *Dry Drowning*

*Sky Burton*

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# SPOTIFY PLAYLISTS

*I selected music specifically for each chapter. Titles in the playlist are in the order of the chapters (list on the website):*

*<https://skyburton.com/>*

*Other songs are included in the playlist on Spotify because they were the other favorites considered for the book.*

*Although your taste in music may vary significantly, I hope you enjoy the music and the book.*

*Spotify Public Profile:*

*<https://djlynn-music-of-us.link/DJ-Lynn/pf4>*

# DISTRACTION

His t-shirt draped casually off the back of the chair that stood in front of the window. It was there I stripped him of it last night, pulling it off his chest and over his head like it might have been on fire. My lips on the curves of his neck. His hands in my hair. The night began and ended with us in each other's arms, as it had so many times before. I held the shirt up to my nose and between sips of coffee and staring out across the dunes to the beach beyond; I breathed him in and lingered on the faint smell of cardamom and his musky sweat.

The night before, I sat across the kitchen counter from him and watched him cook Indian food while we laughed at a few random comments and gifs on Twitter and talked about nothing much at all that was important. I playfully complained about the gecko he found and fed pieces of his orange and expressed concern that he might burn his ass if he continued to lie out naked by the pool. His eyes the color of lapis marbles with the whites of a curved moon holding them up looked up at me as he smiled and winked.

It was those little things that were embedding him in my heart. Every time I looked at him, he crept further into me until it seemed there could be no more room. He had taken me over heart and soul.

It had been five months since I first met Josh at the cast meeting for the movie—a romance between two men filmed in Santa Cruz, California, and the day that changed everything for us. For the first two months, we spent nearly every moment together, filming during the day and growing into each other every night.

Cast as the leads in the steamy film, our on-screen romance quickly evolved into an intimate bond and ignited an off-screen passion. After the filming ended, the producers decided not to cut parts of the sex scenes and suddenly we had an R rating and a popular movie with the early pre-release screeners, but the media and critics believed we lied to get the parts and were eager to find fault—or at least a steamy story good for a few news cycles.

At the time, we didn't know that. We hadn't even seen the final movie edits. But it didn't matter anyway. Josh panicked. The more our intimacy grew, the more afraid he became. Rebecca, his former girlfriend of six years, was quick to offer a solution. Start a new life with her in Seattle. And suddenly, as quickly as it started, Josh left me to go with Rebecca. Heartbroken and depressed, I decided to go to Portugal for some time alone. At least that's the way it started.

We had come to the edge of a cliff. Were we just two straight men having fun? Well, there was some debate about that. Josh had never had a relationship with a man before and I had just one, just for one week. David, the young gay singer songwriter for the movie score, introduced me, quite accidentally, to a different world. Accidentally? I know how that sounds. I called that into question myself. I was lonely, frustrated with my life, and unable to form a serious commitment to my long-term semi-girlfriend, Ellie. And he was there that night at that party. And he was beautiful and so subtly seductive. A few weeks later, I met Josh at the cast meeting. By then, something inside me had reorganized like the footprints I made when I hiked. Every step behind me was disappearing, and each one forward was creating a new path.

What do you do when you reach the end of the beginning? It all seemed simpler to me. Josh was my best friend, and I loved him—physically, heart and soul.

Two weeks ago, he found me after begging my sister Ashley for my location. He left Rebecca and found me in Portugal depressed and lonely, confessed his love and wanted the entire world to know. Whatever fears he had before, he had left behind.

Soon after Josh arrived, we packed the few possessions we had with us and drove to Algarve, about three hours south of Lisbon, to the southern beaches, and found a private villa near Manta Rota. Dozens of tall coastal and stone pine trees, with their mushroom-shaped canopy, surrounded three sides of the property, providing a private fortress around the pool and back of the house. A dozen more pines framed the view across the two hundred meters of dunes that spread peacefully in front of the villa and just a short walk to Praia Verde beach.

I reached over to Josh's lounge chair by the pool and took his hand. We hadn't left each other's sight for the past two weeks, both of us afraid to open our eyes and realize we were in a dream. He took my hand, squeezed it, looked at me and smiled.

Only two people knew where we were and for the rest that called our phones or reached out on social media, we seem to have disappeared. We left Santa Cruz behind, at least for now, and hadn't spoken of details or plans or commitments. Expectations of the future were hard to imagine. At some point we would talk about them and try to figure out a path for us, but for now we were content to lay in the sun, spend time at the beach just steps away, cook dinner together, drink a few beers, play in our pool, listen to music, and make love. Any life past that was abstract, but we would soon

need to move on. We were expecting a call any day from the movie director about requirements for post-production promotion.

There were people and family that didn't know about us, and the thought of those conversations was putting us off thinking about it. How long could I delay before my mother would not accept Ashley's explanations regarding my whereabouts? Plus, time was running out on my visa—I had been in Portugal for nearly ninety days; we would need to leave the country soon.

I spoke to my mother over the phone every few days, but my explanations were either vague or a clear lie. But I still hadn't put together what I was going to say to her about our relationship. Josh was having similar feelings. What would his mother say, let alone his father, who he barely spoke to, anyway? My sister Ash (everyone else called her Ashley) and Ellie (my childhood best friend and off and on ex-girlfriend) were the only two people that knew how to reach us with an address and the only ones that knew we were together at the same address. No one else knew we had become a couple during the filming. Why would they? We were supposed to be straight men playing the two leading roles, and at the time we were cast, it was not a lie.

Josh's friends believed he had moved to Seattle. My friends were blowing up my social media and text, wondering why I wasn't joining them for the usual drinks and parties or why I hadn't been seen surfing.

Ash called Friday while I was in the kitchen getting us iced tea. "Chris has been trying to reach you. Are you not answering your phone for him?"

Chris Coulter was the movie director and didn't fit the typical stereotype. His hair was always disheveled, and it looked like he

wore the same pants most days—ill-fitted tan khakis. He was serious about his craft. He understood people and knew how to get a movie made that would sell—at least in the past. It had been just over a year since the pandemic started and that had changed the movie business—maybe permanently.

“Do you know what he wants?”

“Yeah, post-production is complete, and they want you, Josh, and David for a meeting with the media people about promotional activities. He didn't go into detail with me, but he's worried he can't reach you or Josh, so he called me. I didn't even know he had my number.”

“You're my emergency contact. I'll call him back. I was anticipating this, although that was faster than I expected. Maybe they've pushed up the release date and decided to take it straight to streaming. Thanks Ash. How's mom doing?”

“Not good. You're going to have to talk to her, Ryan. She knows there's something up with you and she thinks you're terribly depressed and she doesn't know why. The other day she wanted to go to your house, and I told her you had gone to San Francisco for the day. It's only a matter of time before she's going to drop over and wonder why you're not there. You need to figure out what you're going to do; you two can't hide in Portugal forever.”

“I'll talk to Josh tonight.”

Back outside by the pool, Josh had flipped over onto his stomach and lay naked on the lounge chair. A red football cap had been reassigned the duty to shield the edge of his ass from the Portugal summer sun while beads of sweat pooled in the crevice of his lower back. I leaned over and licked the sweet and salty sweat, and he reached his hand over to stoke my leg. I adjusted my AirPods,

picked up his phone and tapped the share app to see what he was listening to.

“*Golden*. Harry Styles. Have I told you that you have a smile like Harry that does surprising things to me?”

“Surprising? That sounds like a Disneyland ride.”

“More like X2 at Six Flags—a mind-body thrill ride with a soundtrack, heartbeats, Metallica. Only longer. Deeper. Harder.”

“Oh,” he laughed. “That’s better. How about Harry’s voice?”

“Umm. No. But we can listen to him while I fuck you.”

Josh turned over, moving the red cap to the front as I sat on the cement close to his face.

“Sounds good, but you’ll need to put it on repeat.” He reached his hand to stroke my cheek. “I was just thinking about the time we went to that waterfall. When we get home, I want to go back there or maybe we should explore some hikes in Europe. All those places we saw years ago with others, I want to see again new with you. I want to go everywhere with you. Just visualizing how the sun lit up the water spray that day; it looked like you had stars streaming down your body. That was our third time together. I was so hot for you that day I didn’t care if anybody was watching.”

“I remember, and I’m quite sure we’re on someone’s phone video. Twice.” I stood up, swung one leg around the chair, sat lightly on his upper thighs and leaned in to kiss him. “I have news from the front. Ash called to say that Chris called. I saw his call come in the other day and I meant to return it. Post-production is over, and he needs to see us.”

“He knows we’re here together?”

“No. The only people that know are still just Ash and Ellie. He tried to call you too.”

“Oh. I didn't notice,” said Josh. “I put my phone on silent a week ago. My mom called last week. She still thinks I'm in Seattle with Rebecca. I feel bad—lied and said I had to go to a seminar, and I'd call her soon.”

“We need to deal with this. My mom is freaking out. She thinks I'm depressed and doesn't know why. She's going to drop by my house and the housekeeper will tell her I haven't been there in three months.”

“Okay.” He leaned his head back on the lounge and closed his eyes. “How about we deal with this on Sunday? Let's go to the beach tomorrow. One more day to just forget the world.”

I wanted to forget the world—to watch the reeds on the dunes sway in the sun and listen to the tiny distant voices of the children on the beach playing and laughing. Their voices would synchronize, and their giggles raise a harmony that blended with the slow roll of the waves, producing a sound like the rhythms of a song. I liked hearing them. They were a reminder of the life that was going on all around us—a reality we would soon be forced to face. Sunday we would do that, but right now, I wanted to touch him, look at him every day like this. I wanted his weight over me and mine over his, to watch his face when I pushed inside him and hear his soft moans that would climb the walls and rise to the ceiling. We were recreating each other day by day—finding something new in each little thing. I took him into my mouth every day and sometimes I made him come on my chest so that I could watch his face move in ecstasy—eyes open and looking at me.

The thing about sex with Josh is that it was often a surprise. Sometimes he wanted to first run on the beach, tackle me, and kiss me there in the sand. He didn't do it if there were people around, but it still embarrassed me. Or he would just tackle me and whisper something in my ear that would always make me laugh or love him more. Was that even possible? Sometimes he would move easily and slowly and other times it seemed he could barely control himself, catching himself up in me and our intertwined bodies. Sometimes he would bury his face in my neck and just stay there whispering words I wished I could write down that moment or tuck away somewhere in my head so they would never get lost in my years.

He was face up on the lounge chair. Tanned skin. Wavy hair the color of almonds. Dimpled cheeks. Sweat beads running into the crevice of his belly. I placed my finger in the valley of his neck and circled it slowly over the dunes of his chest, along the waves of his ribs leading down to the dark ridge of his abdomen to the edge of the red cap that shielded his cock from the sun. I looked up to see his eyes open and looking at me just before I removed it.

# UNBUTTONED

My phone rang again just as we got to baggage and saw the car service waiting for us.

“Ash, what's up?”

“Where are you right now? I have an update and I don't have long to talk.”

“We're just getting into our limo in Monterey.”

“You have a limo? Nice.”

“Let's just say our budget was increased; the movie promotion has taken an upturn; I'll explain later. What's going on?”

“You should put this on speaker,” said Ash. “Josh will need to hear this, too. Mom got to my house about two hours ago and I told her that you were going to be here tonight and, of course, she was excited. She immediately wanted to go to the beach house—your house—to make sure that Maria had been there and that the place was clean for you. I said that was unnecessary—that I had been checking on things, but she insisted. She already knew you weren't there, so I didn't see a problem. As we are pulling up to the main gate, I see a television van and several people standing around that looked like reporters; they had cameras. Must have been maybe eight people in all. I pulled up to the gate, and they immediately crowded around the passenger side where mom was and started asking questions. *Do you know Ryan and Josh? Do you know when they'll be home? We want to talk to them about the Portugal incident.* Apparently, the reporters had been there most of the day and had been questioning neighbors that went in and out

of the gate and there was an assumption made that you and Josh lived there together.”

Ash continued to tell us about the press outside the gate and how she got rid of them by promising them an interview the next day.

“So, at this point, she hadn't seen the article?”

“No, but now she's worried; she thinks there's been an accident or something.”

“Reporters already? Didn't expect that.”

“You guys are locals and I'm sure they're keeping track of the movie information since it was shot here. But I am surprised that they knew where you lived.”

“So, you got mom inside, but she still doesn't know much.”

“Not at that point. She hadn't seen the papers or the news, but just FYI, it's on YouTube already.”

“Well, I'm on my way and ready to clear all this up...”

“No, wait. There's more. So, we get in the house and there are three messages on paper laying on the kitchen counter. It's a Monday, so Maria was there this morning and left the messages. There were also twenty-six messages on the home line.”

“Okay...”

“The messages on the counter were to you, of course, and from a Ms. Cooper and Maria had written in parentheses, *Josh's mom* and they were marked urgent. You must understand, Ryan, that she's concerned. The last time she saw you was three months ago when you were super depressed and said you were going to Portugal, and you didn't know when you'd be back. You have not updated her on anything, and she's been very worried. You know I

love you, but I've had to manage her, lie to her—and it's not been easy.”

“I know and appreciate it. I'm taking care of it tonight.”

“There's more. She was going for the house phone, but I picked it up first and listened to a few of the messages. There were several reporters, Chris from several days ago, a bunch of your friends and two more from Josh's mom. While I was doing that, mom got on her cell phone and called Josh's mom. I didn't even notice until I heard her talking. So, they chat for a couple minutes and apparently Josh's mom saw the Portugal article and news clips. She had no idea Josh was in Portugal, let alone with you. Her name is Lydia, right, Josh?”

“Yes,” said Josh.

“So, mom tells Lydia to hold on, and she turns to me and says, *are Josh and Ryan coming in on the same plane?* I don't even know how to lie about this anymore, so I said yes. Lydia is on her way here right now. I'm outside by the gate waiting to let her in, and I wanted to make sure the television van was gone.”

Josh started laughing, and I was smiling. “Josh thinks this is funny.”

“It's kind of funny,” said Josh. “A week ago, we were laying on a beach doing nothing. Then chaos—the near drowning incident. Then we hear from Chris, who is frantically trying to find us and needs us in Los Angeles right away. Then today we had a very candid meeting with management and the publicity people that lifted a huge weight off me. A week ago, I was worried about what I would say to my mother. Today, I'm not. I love your brother and I'm going to tell her that and I'm not going to spend hours explaining.

So, I find it funny that the two of us are going to face the two of them at the same time. It seems like an appropriate way to do this.”

“That’s so sweet,” said Ash. “I have tears in my eyes! I’m so glad you guys are doing this. Oh, there’s a car pulling up and I think it’s Lydia. Gotta go.”

“Get them liquored up and we’ll be there in about thirty minutes.”

I found some paper in the back of the car and scribbled my address, leaned forward, and handed it to the driver. “Change of plans,” I said. “We’re going to this address.” He nodded, and I closed the privacy screen.

I turned to Josh and smiled. He was smiling back and pushing AirPods into his ears. He took my phone and tapped Spotify for a playlist. “How about Will Young and Avicii? I feel like dancing. This is good. I’m ready. Let’s tell our moms we fuck.”

“You’re not actually going to say that, right?”

“I don’t know about your mom, but mine is no prude. She loved George Michael and knew he was gay—always making comments about who George was singing to in *Father Figure*.”

“But you’re not actually going to say that, right?”

“Okay. I won’t use those words. How about if I just tell her how much I love to run my tongue all over your body until...”

“I dare you,” I laughed. “Close your eyes and sit back.”

I got on my knees in front of him on the floor of the limo, pushed in between his legs, and began unbuttoning his shirt. I pulled it open and pressed my lips to his chest, moving my mouth on the smooth curves and my tongue across his nipples, gently biting his

pink skin. He moaned softly, shifted on the leather seat, and leaned forward to kiss me.

...

*And Later...*

I reached over and found the soft wetness of David's upper thigh and stroked his leg. I felt his fingers wrap around my hand like he did that night under the water in the hot tub. I smiled at the memory—a sweet memory that was fading slowly like an old photograph.

David got up and threw me a towel. “Back in a minute. I'm going to get us some water.”

I wiped off my neck and chest and turned to look at Josh. He had the weirdest smile I've ever seen, like he wasn't sure about what he had just experienced. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Very Okay.”

I crawled up to his face and kissed him. “Was this a bad idea?”

“No, but I know now.”

“Know what?”

“I know how much you mean to me. I mean, you know I love you, but now I know how deep that goes.”

I put my head on his chest, took his hand, and held it against my heart.

*And Later- waiting for the press conference...*

“You guys can wait in this room,” said Kristen, almost breathless. “I’ll be back in about fifteen minutes to get you. We’re setting up for the press conference; it’s a little more complicated this year because it’s hybrid.”

Kristen was on the verge of hyperventilating with nervous energy. What used to be a normal press conference for her had become an ordeal with the pandemic. Rooms had to be sanitized and tables spread apart. Rules and regulations that had never applied in her lifetime had become a new normal. Everything was taking longer. All reporters, media and camera crews entering the room had to be checked for a legitimate vaccination card and once in the room they weren’t allowed to leave except for the nearby restrooms that were also being monitored.

Josh sat in one of the leather chairs and I the other. I leaned my head against the back and closed my eyes, hoping I could calm my nerves. This was the beginning of what chaos lie ahead. By tomorrow, we would be exposed in newspapers and news feeds, YouTube videos and social media—some supportive, some grossly critical, others crude. All invasive. Wasn’t the U.S. more enlightened by now? I’d read the numbers after Aaron said it only seemed that way. Ever since 2017, not better. More divided. More cruel.

I let out a sound I didn’t recognize from myself—something between a groan and a sigh of frustration, partially because of the music from the hotel speakers that surrounded the room. It wasn’t that I didn’t like the music, in fact I did like it. It was One Direction.

“What’s the matter? Are you getting nervous?”

“Just a little annoyed about answering a bunch of personal questions. It’s not that I mind people knowing about us. You know that, right? You also know that I don’t like being labeled and I prefer some amount of privacy.”

“Then why did you continue acting?”

“By accident. I did some commercials when I was eight years old for my dad’s finance company and the next thing I know, I’m in a movie about a kid and his dog. I thought it was fun then, and I liked all the attention, but I was a kid. But I was just thinking about the music. That song reminded me of something.”

“*If I Could Fly*? What about it?” said Josh.

“Are you aware of the fandom thing that’s going around about them—and apparently has been for many years?”

“What fandom thing? They split years ago.”

“It’s mostly about two of them, Harry and Louis. Apparently, their fan base claims many of their lyrics and photos reveal they’re in love and something is keeping them apart. It’s not just that song. *Two Ghosts* and a lot of others, even many current ones.”

“Oh. *Two Ghosts*... Humm... I can see that, but that was years ago.”

“The belief is that they fell in love as teens, but they’ve been kept apart ever since by their contracts or the music industry because they can’t or don’t want to come out as gay. And now Aaron’s voice is in my head.”

“Well, I don’t know about Louis, but Harry’s been dancing around with pride flags, and he went full nude in that gay movie that’s due out any day.”

I turned to look at Josh. “Oh, right.”

Josh smiled at me and nodded his head. “You want to see Harry naked, don't you?”

“Like you don't.”

“And I think it's coming out streaming, so I can fuck you right after.”

I laughed. “Or during.”

“So, the fans claim they're still in love even though the band split, Louis has never said anything like that, and they're never seen together now?”

“I don't know. When you left me, I hung out with Ellie until I went to Portugal—needed a distraction. Movie theaters were closed, so we did what we used to do which is lay on her floor and listen to music. And the answer to your next question is *no*, I didn't have sex with her, although she made an impressive effort.”

“I actually wasn't going to ask that, but okay.”

“One night she makes me watch three long YouTube videos—over three hours! Those, and a hundred others, in astounding detail, supposedly prove this.”

“I went to several 1D concerts back then—VIP box at the urging of the female models. How did I not know this?”

“Because you don't go on social media much and watch the millions of videos, tweets, and posts about this.” Suddenly, I felt tired. The whole thing bothered me, or maybe it didn't. Maybe it was just my mood and frustration of the day.

“Well, if it's true, it would be the greatest love story of the century, but that doesn't mean they want to talk about it. Maybe they just want their privacy. But things change. They're adults now and adulthood creeps in and rains its crap down on all of us and destroys youthful innocence. People change—explore relationships,

test boundaries, and frequently fuck things up in the process. You're still young. You might decide you don't want to do this anymore."

"You think I'm going to change my mind about you? I don't believe this will ever change for me. Shit, isn't that why we're going through all this—telling the world? I mean, there's no coming back from this."

"So, this Harry-Louis thing. I don't understand. These fans—they *want* them to be together? That seems counter-intuitive for a fanbase that is primarily women hoping for a Bruce Springsteen moment—to be pulled up on stage for a dance or surreptitiously selected out of the audience for a naked evening with one of them."

"I asked Ellie that. And you know Ellie, she's not shy. She contacted a bunch of these content people and asked. She said it's a mixed bag of reasons. Of course, many fans don't believe it at all and believe them to be straight, as the media portrays them—leaving open the possibility some girl-fan might get lucky."

"Even though Harry is dramatically dancing around on stage with the pride flag?"

"Apparently."

"Others believe they're both gay and closeted by the industry and fans just want to be supportive. It's sweet, really. Another group feels very protective of Louis—like a mother instinct. Even sweeter."

"Protecting him from...?"

"Harry? The music business? Peanuts? I don't know."

"Well, I never thought of Louis as needing protection. Wasn't he the kick-ass one, the outspoken tough guy?"

“More like support, not protection. But I had to stop listening to her; it all got complicated, and I was very depressed at the time because my lover had left me.”

“You know I’m so sorry about that. It hurts to think how much I hurt you.”

“I know. You’ve apologized a hundred times. Anyway, I told her to stop sending me links. Seems like an invasion of their privacy. If they want to support Louis or Harry, then make them richer, buy the merch, go to the concerts, and flood social media with hearts and sweet comments and leave their private life alone.”

“How did she take that?”

“She said I was right, but it won’t stop until they make it stop.”

“Can they do that without upsetting large portions of their fanbase? Maybe they should just leave it alone. Sounds like great publicity to me. See, this is one of the things that I love about you. Things like this bother you. You always want to make things right.”

“And this is what I love about you. This kind of stuff doesn’t bother you. You’re the other half of me. But I’m not worried about them. Right now, it’s about our privacy. We’re going out there in a few minutes, expected to answer a bunch of personal questions, and I’m already pissed about that.”

“Reporters are just doing a job. People are voyeurs and women like to fantasize about men having sex, just like men fantasize about women. Let them have it. I guess it doesn’t bother me as much to answer a few personal questions. But if it bothers you, I’ll take those questions, but you can’t look angry at the press. Do that smile thing that you do that gets you all those hearts and comments from the girls on social media.”

“What smile thing?”

“You know exactly what I'm talking about. Maybe you should have worn that ripped up t-shirt that gets women hot and bothered.”

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# WHAT'S NEXT FOR RYAN AND JOSH?

*Book 3 - the story continues*

Ryan and Josh are finally together. After a year of discovery and some moments of heartbreak about themselves and their courage, Ryan and Josh decide to follow the mystery discovered about Ryan's father. The mystery takes them to Italy, where they finally find some peace away from the movie and media spectacle, or so they think. But along the way, they discover some disturbing family secrets and encounter challenges from old lovers. They may be on the trail of a mystery, but that won't get in the way of their steamy love for each other.

Book One Title: The Music of Us.

Book Two Title: Dry Drowning

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