Lonesome When You Go

by 13ways

Summary

Harry, Louis, Niall, and Liam are surgeons-in-training at the most prestigious program in the United States.

More than that, Harry and Louis have a history unknown to the others, a history that involves dogs and God, anatomy lessons, food fights, vinyl jazz records, and one hell of an oyster tour.

A story of trust and friendship, of poetry and rock and roll, pink-tinged dawns and the darkest nights.

A tale of portraits, tattoos, and everlasting love.

Notes
A huge thanks to my friends who proof-read this work. I am grateful for your encouragement.

All characters and incidents are fictitious. Please do not copy, reprint, or translate without permission.

All mistakes are my own.
The faint, gray light seeped through his eyelids. Harry recognized it as easily as a reflex: he was in his dream city, in his illusory house, by the lake, in the city of infinite searching.

It was a recurring dream he often had just before waking, a reveille from a subconscious muse, deep in his mind. In this enraptured state, Harry was half-awake, disembodied, suspended, weightless, time stretched before him, a non-linear time of looping, retracing, regrets, and desire. He was young and old, he was a child and a man, he was a pauper and he owned a kingdom. He was Harry Styles; he was no one. His identity was elusive. The dream was chaos, but always the same.

In his mind, Harry was alone, self-sufficient. He belonged to this house, but did not find it. The house had found him. The how and why of it were an enigma. It was a spacious, elegant, historic Victorian on a hill; a large sitting room was framed with four columns in the corners, topped with a high ceiling, a panel of windows facing the boundless lake. The acoustics would be perfect for high fidelity vinyl records, he thought, once carpeting and acoustic dampers were fitted. John Coltrane, Louis Armstrong, Ella….

He wandered through the house, green and blue light filtering throughout, luminescent and soft, as if underwater. In the spectral interior, he was also aware of his mortality—the dust motes swirling around him deathlessly—ashes to ashes. Around a corner, a door hung slightly ajar, and through it lay another, darker interior, the furnishings faded, a table with settings for a family, the silverware cast haphazardly aside, waiting for owners. Every time Harry came through this part of the house, the thought would fly into his heart: the space was haunted. Whoever had been here had vanished like ghosts. The house was waiting for its family.

And then he was outside. A path ran along the aquamarine lake. A whirling, cold breeze fanned the white-capped waves. Harry crossed the front lawn to stand by the walk separating him from the lake. The air was crisp and crystalline. He could almost stretch his hand out and touch the horizon.

A sea nourished with loving tears.

Sailboats canted on the water. A few runners and bikers passed him, nodding their greetings. He walked across the path, to the edge of the lake, along its shores, and then down toward the city.

Harry’s heart always lifted when he entered the city. His dream city lay next to the lake/ocean, and it was a mishmash of New Orleans, New York, Barcelona, Baltimore, all the big cities he had known in his young life. He drank in the noises of cars and motorcycles, the brightly mirrored windows of the skyscrapers, the fantastic canyons of illumination that poured down between buildings, the shifting dance between solar and neon lights, the people who wore their passions and stories in their faces and on their bodies. Life was performance art in the city. The city blocks themselves knitted into a kind of tale, in the peculiarities and idiosyncrasies of the neighborhoods—the odd ethnic shops, the vintage stores, the record shops that kept vinyls of original jazz and blues recordings, the sass and personality of store signs. Harry loved it all.

Walking down the sidewalk, he was aware of someone walking just in front of him, someone
ducking in and out of shops, just out of reach. A crowd of pedestrians blocked his progress, but Harry wanted to—needed to—catch this person. Whoever it was, he was light on his feet. Then he came out of a shop, paused, and turned obliquely toward Harry, holding his hand toward Harry.

It was a man with a cinnamon-colored fringe, crowning his head like a feathery halo. Harry couldn’t tell whether he was inviting him to come, or holding something out to show him, and Harry started to walk quickly toward him. The man then raised a hand to cover a laughing mouth, palm facing out. And then he skittered away, toward a sunset so bright that Harry had trouble seeing. He ran away from Harry, following the sun.

Wait! Harry thought. Don’t go. I want to be free too.

He always woke up then.

Harry knew exactly who this man was. He was real. And soon, Harry would see him.

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Louis scooted into the booth so that Niall could slide in next to him. Liam and Alice took their seats opposite, and everyone opened their menus with an air of exhaustion.

“A dozen beers, please,” Louis exhaled. “And maybe something for the rest of you. And after that, we can start drinking for real. Four rum milk punches for me, to start, one for each limb. If they even know how to make one.”

“I don’t know about you,” said Liam, “but I could inhale a rack of ribs.”

He raised his hand to signal the waitress. The restaurant was busy and the staff hurried back and forth from the kitchen. They sat in the Trestle Tavern, a bar and restaurant in the Back Bay neighborhood of Boston. The neighborhood was spread out in wide, tree-lined avenues between the historic Beacon Hill and the slow, wide, winding Charles River.

“I could eat a whole cow,” Alice exclaimed. The boys looked skeptically at her petite frame. “What? Nebraska born and bred,” she pointed a thumb to her chest. “Omaha Ag Fair, junior rodeo champ, 2006. I’m not gonna have a salad.”


Alice smacked him in the arm.

“Well, whatever the best day of my life is,” Louis said, “this isn’t it.”

“But seriously, though,” Niall asked, “why don’t apartments in the Back Bay have elevators?” His face knitted in consternation. “What kind of old-timey, quaint colonial fuckery is that? It’s the goddamned twenty-first century.”

“I doubt those buildings were colonial,” Liam said. “You know most of the Back Bay is landfill? It used to be all underwater. Commonwealth Avenue used to be a swamp. Read that in A History of
“Well, I don’t think my arms will ever move again.” Niall stretched his arms, turning his elbows out. His face was a combination of real and mock agony. The friends looked at him in sympathy, too tired even to grunt approval.

“You’re right, Niall. My legs are so wasted, I might need transplants before we even start,” Liam said.

“What about those roundabouts?” Louis sighed. “F*cking annoying.”

“I think you mean rotaries?” said Alice.

“Whatever,” said Louis. “The collective mind of people who can tolerate these things—I mean, they are fatal menaces, aren’t they? Really pure, unadulterated evil. Half the time the cars are trying to muscle in when they shouldn’t, and the other half of the time, they’re playing goddamn chicken trying block you.” His voice rose higher and higher, ringing like a bell. “And to root for the Red Sox and the Patriots! Northerners. Don’t even get me started.”

Liam said, “Well, at least there’s good ice cream. And oysters.”

Louis peeked up from his menu, menacingly, “Oysters? Oysters? Are you even serious right now, Payno?”

Liam looked as if he had stepped on a landmine. “I mean, supposedly Boston is known—“

“I’ll trust you to keep a civil tongue in your mouth, Payno,” said Louis, stern. The expression on Liam’s face was enough to send Niall into giggles. “Say it with me. The mild brine of the Louisiana Gulf oyster has no parallel in the oyster world. I would sooner eat shoe leather than the mealy mess they call an oyster around here.” Louis shot a venomous glance at Liam.

Liam laughed, “All right, spitfire. You eat your Louisiana oysters, I’ll stick with a burger. Did the waitress not see me? My hand’s been up for ages.”

“I, for one, just want to say a big thank you for helping me today,” Alice looked at her companions. “I could’ve never done it without you guys. Seriously, I’m so glad we connected on Facebook. If I had any energy left, I would kiss each one of you. You guys are the best.”

“You know, Alice,” Niall leered suggestively, “we could take an I.O.U. on that kiss, if you know what I mean.”

Alice groaned and slapped his hand playfully. “Stop flirting with me, Niall. You know I’m too smart to be your type.”

“Ooooh, that hurts, Al,” Niall replied. “Did you know that I’m a feminist? I lust after all women equally.”

“He’s an equal opportunity pervert,” added Louis.

“This is what I get for hanging out with boys.”

“Al, you know I’m only joking. We respect you, we respect your brain,” Niall said. “Just because you look like Natalie Portman means nothing to me. Your frontal lobe is the most attractive thing about you. All right?”
Niall cocked an eyebrow and winked at her. Liam and Louis looked at each other, and then back at Alice to see her response, amused.

“Alice, are you going to take that sitting down?” prodded Louis, adding fuel to the fire. “Rando dude, trash-talking your frontal lobe?”

“My mom always said good girls never show their frontal lobes on the first date,” Liam added.

Louis and Liam high-fived each other, while Niall grinned.

“God, boys and their heteronormative patriarchy,” Alice said, pretending to be disgusted.

“Oi!” Louis laughed. “Showing off your frontal lobe! What a tease!”

Niall added, “I see you, Alice Miller, as a surgical scalpel, extra sharp. Satisfied? We worship your MCAT scores. Your shiny hair and good smell are dead to me.” Niall leveled his hand. "Dead to me."

“Nialler, come on,” said Alice. “Your mama raised you better than that. You don’t need any playboy credentials—you’re a doctor. And you’re going to be a surgeon. A surgeon!”

“Hell,” she continued, “surgeons have so much machismo, even I can date any girl I want, all right? We’re the bad boys of medicine, the Axl Roses and the—the Kurt Cobains, or whatever. Sorry. I don’t know too many ‘bad boys,’” she made air quotes. “But you get what I mean. God, we’re practically—even me—exploding with testosterone.” The boys giggled at her words, and Louis bit the back of his hand, laughing. “You’ll all have ladies chucking phone numbers at you in no time, whether you want them to or not. Besides, we’ve got to stick together. We’re all in this together, sink or float.”


Alice looked displeased, but was secretly very pleased with her new friends. They were respectful and funny and supportive; they were good guys. She knew they were all going to get along.

“All right, Alice,” said Niall. “You win for now. No more sexist jokes. I’m sorry if I offended you, but old habits die hard. What’s a man supposed to do? Pretend pretty girls don’t exist? Come on. I’m not dead. Just kick me whenever you feel appropriate, all right?” Alice rolled her eyes and smiled. Niall’s face flushed, happily.

“Yeah, speaking of which. You all better get your sexual kinks in now,” said Liam.

“Why?” said Niall.

“Before we’re all royally screwed by our surgical internship.”

At that inopportune moment, the waitress came and set down a plate of tiny gherkins, which had them all laughing again. She took their orders, and Niall stood up to punch a few tunes into the jukebox.

The Pixies came on, followed by The Cars and then Aerosmith. The Trestle Tavern was nothing if not Bostonian through and through; it was almost a crime to drink anything but Samuel Adams. The friends were not feeling it for Boston—a city with more one-way streets and restricted parking spaces than actual cars, with streets that changed names from one side of a bridge to another, with drivers who were positively sadistic playing chicken with pedestrians, who walked with their middle fingers
raised inside their windbreakers. As much as they wanted to burst out laughing when the waitress explained the soup of the day was “clam chowdah,” none of them had the energy. The city and the prospect of their careers weighed down on them.

In two days, they were to start their general surgery internships at Massachusetts State Hospital, one of the most prestigious surgery programs in the country. The four had contacted each other through the interns’ Facebook page, since they were all moving into the same neighborhood, and had volunteered to help each other move in.

Liam was from Johns Hopkins University, Alice from the University of Nebraska, Louis from Tulane, and Niall from Northwestern.

They knew no one else in the city. In the last two days, they had moved four televisions, dozens of boxes full of books and clothing, dressers and tables up dozens of flights of stairs. It turned out that Niall and Louis were in the same building on Commonwealth Avenue, with atrocious parking out front and a narrow lane in the back where the door to the freight elevator was. They barely had time to talk or to get to know each other. They knew that altogether, there were twenty-two interns. About a dozen had joined the Facebook group, but no one knew who the others were.

The waitress put a basket of hot bread on the table. The comforting, buttery aroma made Niall tear into the loaf like a predator.

“Horan, are you even evolved at all?” Louis looked at him with mock disgust.

“Are you going to eat your share, Tommo? ‘Cause if not…”

Louis gestured for Niall to help himself. Liam took the other end of the loaf and offered some to Alice.

“Ugh, no carbs,” Alice said. “I might die this year, but I’m not gonna die a blimp.”

Niall said, “Hey! I thought we said no sexist stereotypes! Besides, you’d be a cute blimp, Alice, in any shape or size.”

“Alice, it’s a surgical internship,” Louis said, ”not a beauty contest.”

“Yeah, right, Tommo.” She turned to Louis. “Look who’s talking.”

“Hey—“

“Mr. Moody Cheekbones? ‘Please-don’t-touch-my-fringe?’” She imitated his slight Louisiana drawl, and pointed to his legs. “Anal-compulsively pressed J. Crew pants?”

“They’re pants,” Niall snorted. “‘Course they’re gonna be anally pressed!”

Liam broke out giggling and Louis stifled a laugh, too.

Louis said, “Give me a break, Al. I’m a natural beauty.” Louis gestured to himself. “I don’t have to work at this shit.”

Louis didn't know whether to feel complimented or affronted. Despite his casual appearance, he took care of himself; he always worked out even with a busy schedule. He dressed down—no need to gild a lily. But he was effortlessly cool and beautiful, a person blessed with never having to worry about his looks. He looked good in a suit. He looked good in workout clothes. He looked good in baggy pajamas. He was guaranteed to be the best-looking person in any photograph. It wasn't vanity,
“Everyone works at this shit, Lou,” Alice replied. “It’s internship.”

“Some more than others,” Niall said. “Right? We all want to get fucked in the right ways.”

Alice rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Oh, boy.”

“C’mon, Alice,” Niall said. “I’m kidding.”

“He’s right, you know, Al,” Louis said. “Work hard, play hard. Gotta have a balance.”

“I suppose,” Alice said.

“Hey, what made you all decide to come to MSH?” Liam asked.

“Funny you should ask,” Alice said. “I’ve got a little story about that, but I don’t want you to think I’m whiny.”

“Too late,” Louis laughed. “We already do, Alice. So spill it.”

“Well, when I was doing clerkships at the U of N as a med student,” Alice said, “I had an advisor who was notoriously misogynistic. Everyone knew he would never support a woman for a surgical specialty. I want to be a surgeon, but I also wanted to come to the best program. So when I got into MSH, I could tell him to kiss my behind.”

“Started at the bottom, now they’re kissing your ass,” Niall said.

“Alice, did you really say that?” Liam asked.

Alice shook her head. “No, ‘course not. I mean, I just hope I can be a mentor to young women someday. All through school, people would ask me what I wanted to do, and I’d say I want to be a surgeon. And they’d laugh and say, oh maybe you’ll get to work with surgeons someday, wouldn’t that be nice? It just pissed me off so badly.” She took a sip of beer. “But I had this high school chemistry teacher, Mr. Thompson. He was kind of ancient and shriveled and crotchety, kind of looked like Ebenezer Scrooge. He told me, Alice, you can do it, my girl. Do whatever you want. What he said meant a lot to me, you know?”

“You just needed one person to believe in you,” Louis said.

Alice nodded.

“I always did want to come to Boston,” said Liam. “I’m a bit of a history nerd. This is the place where general anesthesia was used for the first time, where Golden worked on his cardiac bypass machine. It’s mind-boggling, really, what’s been done here.”

Liam saw Louis roll his eyes in an exaggerated way and put an L on his forehead for LOSER.

“I can’t help it. I just really want to be part of it. Don’t you all feel the same way? It's the MSH!” Liam exhaled in reverence. “The MSH.”

“Me, I was just happy to leave the Chicago winters,” said Niall. “Boston will be tropical in comparison. Besides, isn’t half the city Irish?”

He laughed. Niall’s Irish background was a four-leaf clover that threatened to blossom out of his chest when around other things Irish.
“First day in the city, I went to The Black Rose, ordered myself a pint of Guinness and a shepherd’s pie. Felt right at home.”

Louis looked down. How could he say why he was really here? His mother was Professor Johannah Deakin, head of vascular surgery at the Tulane University School of Medicine. MSH was where she had trained, where she had started her academic career. He had been playing with doctor kits since he could walk. There was never any question that he would be a surgeon, the best surgeon, at the most competitive program in the country.

“It must have been a fluke that they let me in,” Louis said. “I’m going to be one of those who drop out, I bet.”

“You, Louis?” Alice raised her eyebrows. “Never.”

“I second that,” said Niall. “You’re too smart, Tommo. We’re all going to be working for you some day.”

Louis laughed at that, but inside he was a bundle of nerves. He was a salmon who had leaped every barrier so far to arrive home, to come to a place where he was supposed to feel safe and happy. The internship had not yet started, but he was already full of doubt. Was he accepted because of his mother? The department chair knew her, of course; they were professional colleagues and had trained together.

Louis knew he was a good candidate; he had done his prep work. He had excelled in his class and had reasonable research experience in his resume. He knew he would do well, but these other factors—his mother’s position, his anxiety about her opinion, her possible influence on the MSH residency committee—nagged at him. He wanted to feel that he was here on his own merits.

“Did you hear,” Niall was saying, “one of the interns is a guy who supposedly has his own National Institute of Health research grant?”


“I don’t know exactly. I overheard a conversation when I went to get my I.D. badge the other day. Two secretaries were talking about it, and one went on and on about the paperwork, what a hassle it was to fax things back and forth to the N.I.H.”

“I think I know who it is,” Liam said. “He’s a good friend of mine. Not really my peer, because he’s like, a whole other level of super doctor. We might as well all hang it up next to him.”

Since Louis knew that Liam had graduated from Johns Hopkins, his stomach began to do flips.

“Yeah,” Liam continued. “He didn’t come to Hopkins until after second year, from Tulane. You might have met him, Louis? Before that we were living our happy little lives, thinking we were hot shots at Hopkins, for Pete’s sakes.”

Louis felt light-headed and sweaty. He watched his hands on the table as if they were inanimate objects. The fingers trembled in the slightest way. Louis knew how to control his facial expressions, and in most situations he was more than capable of displaying a placid flatness when required. But he also knew that he had weaknesses in certain interior places, certain deeply-seated, taped, wrapped and bandaged places where wounds leaked and seeped and festered in a most inconvenient way. Please don’t let it be him. Please. But he knew. It couldn’t be any other person. It was inevitable. It was definitely him. It had to be, definitely was—

“Harry Styles,” Liam said. “He’s a force of nature. You’ll see when you meet him.”
“Is he a total asshole or what?” Niall asked.

“Oh, no,” Liam laughed, shaking his head. “Harry’s the best. He’s, like, how do I put it?” He gestured wildly with his hands. “I can’t even describe him. Like Einstein in James Dean’s body? Wrapped up in Mother Theresa or something? I know, it sounds stupid—but I’m telling you, he’s magnetic. Like no one you’ve ever met. Nobody is immune to his charms,” he shook his head in mock solemnity. “Nobody.”

“Is he Jesus fucking Christ?” Alice asked. “What’s so special about him?”

Louis hoped that no one would notice. He stayed quiet, pursed his lips, and looked down, trying to be inconspicuous.

Liam raised his eyebrows earnestly. “I’m not saying Harry’s perfect. He has his flaws like everyone else. But he has this intense—likability; it’s hard to describe. You meet him, you want to root for him. He’s oddly compelling. Here,” he said, pulling out his phone, typing into the screen. “Take a look at this.”

Niall and Alice leaned in to see.

In the center of a phone was a professional studio photo of a man’s upper torso, nude, lit from above. His long wavy hair curled languidly around his collar bones, and he gazed up to stare into the distance, through the viewer. A leather collar circumscribed his neck. His chest was marked with the tattoos of two swallows in flight, one on each side, facing each other. On his luminous skin, the swallows looked expressive and alive. His muscles were smooth, slender and taut. A large, detailed butterfly tattoo lay midway between chest and belly, its sensual curves contrasting with the defined rectus abdominis muscles. His right hand stayed loose by his side, pinky separated from the other fingers, a stethoscope wrapped like a serpent around the hand. His left hand cradled the back of the neck, exposing more tattoos along the arm: an anatomic heart, a book, a lock, three nails. The photo was slightly overexposed, giving an illusion of light from inside the subject. It was a pose of classic beauty, shockingly intimate, languid, seductive, a private moment captured on film.

Apparently it was on a website called “The Hopkins Annual,” a student-run publication of art and literature by medical students. The page stated unequivocally that the issue was sold out. “Please do not call our office. No further issues will be printed.”

“Good-looking dude,” Niall said casually.

Alice gulped, and said drily, “Oh, my dear fucking God. Now that. Is. A. Man. No offense to those present. How does something like that even, like, exist?”

“Now who’s objectifying?” Niall elbowed her. “Something like that.”

Louis shrank back, hoping no one noticed his ashen face, the tremor of his lips. He felt as if his whole body was quaking. His heart raced.

Alice said, “Well, you have to pick your humiliation, Dr. Horan. Seems wasted on little old me, but this—Harry Styles or whatever Renaissance marble he’s chipped from—he is worth some loss of dignity. I mean, look at him. He’s gorgeous, on a whole other level. He’s like perfection itself, God. I can’t even—What is that around his neck though? Is it a leather choker?”

Niall was looking very amused at Alice’s lack of dignity, that she totally lost her feminist mind when she saw a hot guy’s naked body.

“It was a collar,” said Liam. “A restraint collar. Like, a bondage collar. Harry refused to talk about
Alice’s mouth opened in a silent O.

Niall asked, “What kind of research does he do?”

“Niall, you see a man this sexy wearing a restraint collar, and you think research? Research, Horan? For real?” Alice asked.

Niall shrugged. Harry Styles was all right. He seemed interesting enough. Might be cool to meet him. Beyond that, Niall really didn't care.

“I think it’s some kind of micro-robotics—“ Liam started.

Louis nudged Niall’s side, “Excuse me, Ni. Need the bathroom; do you mind?”

Louis practically ran to the bathroom. Inside, he ran a sink and splashed cold water over his face. He saw the bright lights of the bathroom sparkle grayish and black, and felt himself spinning, falling. He held on to the sink with both hands, but the walls continued to spin. Louis hadn't eaten anything yet but felt like throwing up. He could not stop shaking even though he felt calm inside. He breathed slowly, counting to five each time. His visual fields shrank into pools of darkness; he held the sink tightly and closed his eyes.

Harry.

His Harry.

It had been two years. Louis had almost succeeded in convincing himself that Harry had been a phase, that he wasn't important. What was past was past. Harry had left Tulane two years ago, on invitation to do research with Dr. Ulysses Nestor at Johns Hopkins, the pioneer in cardiac micro-robotic surgery. Since then, Louis hadn't heard from him, nor had he initiated communication. He assumed that Harry had moved on. Those were the facts. Everything else was confusion and complication.

The truth was, Louis wanted that to be true. He had almost no memorabilia of Harry at all, save one, nothing on public display. You would find nothing, even, after a thorough search of Louis’s personal belongings. A casual glance at Louis and his apartment would show he was a messy, carefree, happy-go-lucky bachelor at the peak of his dating potential. He was a real doctor now! X-box games filled a shelf neatly under the TV. Medical textbooks were scattered across the living room, opened to various pages of human anatomy. The fridge had a twelve-pack of Stella Artois and a gallon of milk. Condoms and lube were in the nightstand, ready to go. Okay, so they were never used. So what? He checked the expiration dates and replaced them, like a responsible professional.

He was the furthest person from romantic; he didn’t consider himself a nostalgic type. But whenever his heart had steeled itself, whenever the wound of Harry had seared close, here was fate again, slicing him open. Why? Why was he so vulnerable?

Harry had changed drastically. A quick glance at the photo would not have even reminded Louis that it was his Haz. He was no longer the ingenue, the awkward lamb with fluff and whiskers. He had broken through his chrysalis in his metamorphosis, and had become a strange, original, iconic paragon, an artist who was also art.

Would Louis even recognize him on the street? Would Harry even acknowledge Louis? Even though it had only been two years, the transformation was so drastic that Louis felt Harry had passed through the looking glass—he crossed a boundary that Louis could not hope to follow.
Have I changed so much? Louis was sure he was exactly the same, a static, uncompromising, person who had chosen to end it all. The unforgiven one.

Louis almost wished he could make Harry disappear. He wasn’t being fair to Harry, he knew. Harry deserved to have the best training. He was going to be a leader in medicine, a big name. Harry deserved to be here. But Louis wasn’t sure he could face him, wasn’t sure whether the awkwardness would kill him.

Louis told himself he didn’t believe in soul mates. He was a trained scientist, for fuck’s sakes. He had passed his medical boards with flying colors. He believed in systolic and diastolic pressures, in chromosomes and endoplasmic reticula, in liver enzymes, in the limbic system. He believed that drinking alcohol not only 1) built up one’s hepatic tolerance, 2) was a neurological depressant that paradoxically made one temporarily happy, and 3) helped him focus on anything besides Harry fucking Styles.

Besides, Harry was playing at another level now. They weren’t remotely on the same playing field. Jesus Christ, an N.I.H. grant. Harry was on the Olympics team, and Louis, or so he felt, was playing kiddie scrimmage games. His mother may have helped him get here. Harry had his pick of training programs. Harry could have gone anywhere. He chose MSH.

Yet here they were.

Here they both were.

Doesn’t matter, Louis resolved. We’re both here, we’re adults, we don’t have to be friends. It was all a long time ago. Let it go. He didn’t contact you. He didn’t tell you he was coming. Maybe this is a chance for closure. Avoid him—you’re pretty good at that, aren’t you, Tomlinson? Maybe, after you meet him and realize you meant nothing to him, you can finally just fucking move on.

He ran a hand through his hair, blinked a few times. The world returned to him, one granule of light at a time.

Hazza.

His Hazza.

Louis stepped out of the bathroom and took a deep breath.

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Harry closed the car door and pressed the lock button on his key.

So this was it, the first day. He was in Boston, standing in the garage of the legendary MSH. His whole life lay in front of him.

Back home, when he was packing for Boston, he had scrolled absently on the interns’ Facebook page in his old room. Somehow he had absent-mindedly forgotten to join as a member, but he noticed he wasn't the only one. He hadn't slept in this room in ages. In fact, his Star Wars action figures (Episodes IV through VI, naturally) were still on his dresser, and a Lego Millennium Falcon sat slightly dusty next to them. Maybe the strangeness of being back in his room was the reason he had had his lake house dream. It was odd, though, to dream about searching for home, or having a haunted home, when he was already home, in his parents’ house. This house was where he grew up after age 3, after moving here from England.

He felt American. The few times he had been back in the U.K. had been great fun—visiting his cousins in the north, sightseeing in London. His parents relaxed into their British ways when they were in the U.K., but Harry himself was only a visitor. He felt self-conscious in his American accent, with his casual T-shirts and jeans and his preference for shorts. He liked coffee, not tea. He liked his Nestle Tollhouse chocolate chip cookies. He liked the Green Bay Packers and the Cubs. He always rooted for the United States during the Olympics. At home, he blended into the background. He could be a slob. He was inconspicuous and he liked it.

The only person who made him feel completely at ease in the U.K. had been his Gran Beryl. Her small body had captured an enormously warm heart. She told Harry silly, wonderful jokes that he would tell himself at night, long after he left the U.K., imagining her rosy cheeks and gentle laugh. They both loved lemon drops, puns, and dogs, and puns about dogs.

Harry remembered Gran’s naughty expression as she asked him, “Why is Christmas chocolate like little Putt-Putt? Because the bark is better than a bite!” Then her eyes would sparkle with satisfaction. Her dog Putt-Putt was a skittering ball of fluff. She sat on Gran’s lap like a guard dog, ready to defend Gran from any enemy, even though she was all of a handful. Harry missed her inordinately. Nostalgia, he thought. Nostalgia was for good people. Nostalgia was spiritual. Nostalgia was being visited by friendly ghosts.

One thing that Harry tried to keep constant was his journal. Even though he worked with micro-robotics at the cutting edge of medical technology, he hated digital media. Harry loved a battered, worn book. The physical deterioration meant that someone had loved it, torn it apart, consumed the words and internalized them. All of his ideas came from his journals. The journal was, in fact, part of his thinking process. The faint lines encouraged him to delve deeper, to think differently, to branch out from the ideas of other brilliant minds and arrive somewhere strange, somewhere original.

As Harry scrolled down the page, he noticed an exchange between some people about connecting in Boston to help each other move in. He had scrolled past the message, but now he came back.

Had he misread? Could it really be?

His friend Liam Payne was in the group message, but there was another name that caught his attention. If monitors could yell, his would be shouting hysterically: LOUIS TOMLINSON.

He double-clicked on the name. The profile photo confirmed it.

Harry was not prepared for to see Louis’s face. The familiar cut of the cheekbones, his brilliant eyes, the acute angle of his chin—each detail was a sharp ping from Harry’s eyes to his mind, a stinging remembrance.
He hadn’t seen this face for so long, though he didn’t need to. Every curve of Louis’s cheeks, every wrinkle near his eyes were etched into Harry’s memory. In fact, looking at the photo, Harry could smell his scent; his hands felt the softness of Louis’s hair, the texture of his skin.

Don’t be a coward, Harry thought. I was a kid then and now I’ve grown up. I’m a different person now. I have my research, I have a mentor, I have friends. Louis, too. He has his own life. He probably has a significant other. Right? He already made contact with all these people. It’s ludicrous to think someone like him would be single. You remember what he said. How could you forget? However you think about it, he never contacted you after you left. He had your email and your phone number, and he never contacted you. The feelings you had—have, are never going to be returned. He didn’t and he doesn’t share them. It was different for him. Stop torturing yourself.

Harry couldn’t help the tears filling his eyes, despite his inner resolve. His body betrayed him. His body yearned for Louis. Not only Harry’s sexual body, but his eyes, his head, his heart. His intellect and emotions. He knew Louis as well as he knew himself; he wanted all of Louis. Despite the time and distance from their history, his feelings were as fresh as the first day, raw and without reserve. He wanted to see Louis’s face again, all of his familiar angles, his eyelashes that fanned down his cheeks, the way he would purse his lips just before he laughed, his hands that were so beautiful and animated, the sinews and concavities that he could trace in his sleep. Harry laughed and sobbed at the same time. Would it never pass? Was fate just a bastard that laughed at people’s misery?

Get yourself together, Styles, Harry thought. This is not the time. You’re not a child. Grow up.

He came downstairs to search out his mother, to pack some dishes and silverware for the apartment. His dog, Lady, padded by, next to his feet. Harry bent down and rubbed Lady’s face—such a playful face, always up for adventure.

Lady was a mix of English spaniel and terrier, her coat in patches of caramel and vanilla. Harry had said that he named her after Lady, from the Disney movie Lady and the Tramp, and also Lady Godiva, who was always up for fun. But his sister Gemma insisted that it was because Lady Godiva reminded him of Godiva chocolates, which, when added to Lady’s coloring was reminiscent of hot cocoa and caramels at Christmas.

“You’re such a ridiculous child,” Gemma had teased. “Just because you have a sweet tooth.”

“Sweet tooth? Gemma, I’m not going to eat her.”

“But you do admit you like hot cocoa.”

“Duh,” he retorted. “Who doesn’t? You know hot cocoa is best with soft caramels, and you agree that they’re best when listening to Christmas carols.”

Besides, Gemma loved Lady. When Harry first rescued Lady, Gemma had taken care of her, per Harry’s instructions, for two weeks, until Lady was on the mend. It had been in New Orleans, a sweet memory. In turn, Lady treated Gemma like a mother, whining to her to be petted and coddled whenever she was near. Lady was Gemma’s girl.

His mother Anne asked whether he had changed his mind and wanted someone to drive with him. Gemma was working fairly close, as an editor in New York.

“We could go visit Gemma,” Anne said. “Treat her to lunch?”

“Sounds really good, mum,” Harry said. He stole a spoonful of the apple crumble she had just taken out of the oven. Anne made all of Harry’s favorites when he came home to visit. It was always like a
birthday-Easter-Christmas celebration crammed into a week. “But I don't need help. I have nothing, anyway. Won't be but a few minutes to move everything in.”

“Nothing?” Anne snorted. “Harry, your records alone. It’s a monster stash. Do you need to bring them all—how many are there? Three hundred? Four?”

“Seven hundred fourth-two. And—before you ask, I did try to edit them down.” Harry grinned sheepishly. He picked at the apple crumble until it looked like tiny bombs had dropped on the surface. Anne slapped at his wrist.

“Harry!” she scolded. “Get a plate, or stop eating. Now, about your records. You couldn't possibly listen to them all!”

“I know. I just—it's hard for me to let things go, mum.”

Anne put her hand around his waist. He was so impossible, always. In her mind, he was the tow-headed child running around the house with her bra outside his shirt, giggling at the top of his voice. He was the boy who stole a sugar rose from Gemma’s tenth birthday cake before she even had a chance to blow the candles out. He was the boy sliding down the stairs in a cardboard box, who needed stitches on his chin after crashing into the banister. He was the one who starred in the school production of Harold and the Crayon, making all the children and parents laugh with his funny faces, his dimples and charm. Harry the middle school student doing a science fair project about vermiculture. Harry the high school cross country runner. Harry the college engineering student, who built unusual machines to dunk basketballs, cap wine bottles, and play the piano. Such a charmer, and such a menace. Now he was going to train as a surgeon, with his own research grant. She blinked back tears. It seemed like the last quarter century had just flown by.

Anne said, with feigned exasperation, “I don't know why you don't just load music into your iPhone like a normal person.”

Harry sighed. Patience, he thought. “I like the sound, mum,” he said. “I like the crackling and popping. Vinyl is – it sounds like someone actually singing to you, playing for you. In your room. It sounds like someone having a conversation with you, you know? It’s intimate.”

How could he explain it? His ears were a superhighway to his heart, and what he heard evoked an immediate and visceral sensation. Close conversations sparked feelings in him that were raw and fierce. He heard poetry as if on fire. It was too much, it was never enough. Harry the masochist. He spent nearly all his money on a high fidelity system and records. His life could be poor in every other way; so what? Screw the rest. He had what mattered.

Did he, though? Yes, I definitely do.

Anne was speaking. “Hullo? Earth to Harry. Can you fit it all into the car?” Harry drove a green Toyota Prius, custom-painted in a sapphire blue color, with a cerulean racing stripe along the bottom. He had to accordion his legs just to get in. It was lovely shade, and Harry felt a peaceful energy just being near it. The paint reminded him of the light that he loved on the ocean, after a storm.

And, if he must be honest, of a person. But he couldn't think about that. He pressed it down.

“I rented a U-Haul, mum. I’ll drop it off in Boston. I’ve got the address and everything.” He looked at Anne’s face, scrunched in worry. “It’s going to be fine. I’m going to be fine!”

Anne had stared at him with intense love. She was always going to worry about him, even when he was fifty and a leader in his field, even when she was too feeble to take care of herself. She hoped
for the best. She hoped he could weather the setbacks. But here was a wondrous child whose life seemed to be on an endless ascent. She folded him into her body and closed her eyes. He rested his head on hers, for a moment merely her young son. They held each other in peaceful silence, the warm June air shimmering around them.

Their family love was a talisman. *May it keep him from harm,* Anne prayed. *May he never lack for friendship. May he find the honesty in love that he deserves, may he find trust and happiness.*

***

Moved everything in finally. I called mum as soon as the last box was in the door. She sounded relieved. Should have called her the minute I got here, but—was too tired last night—hauled up records until 2 AM—only got half of them up.

*Should have bought another copy of* Rumours *at Mercer Street B & R. Saw a first-press vinyl there and let it go (damn).*

Went for a tea at Bosie’s, got distracted—a funny tisane called Love Potion No. 9, bit of hot milk. *Insane tisane. The way Louis liked to drink it. Yeah, anyway. Got Lady an Earl Grey macaroon. She’s spoiled rotten, like a real penthouse dog.*

*The only copy of* Rumours *I have has a big scratch between Songbird and The Chain, from the last farewell party at Hopkins. Scratches are the auditory milestones of a well-lived life, a living record. Get it? Haha. Sometimes it’s too well-lived, like when your friends borrow your records and carelessly scratch them. First presses don't grow on trees. Bastards.*

*The dampers are all over the floor, the shelves not yet put together. Was it worth it to get the penthouse apartment for the high ceilings? The acoustics are bomb, and there's a view. Can see a tiny bit of the Charles River and the bridge, can also see sidewalks below: can spy on people coming up to the building. Probably can't afford to eat anything but crackers and peanut butter for the rest of the year. Will I be the “host with the most”?*

*Doesn't matter. If I save up for a couple of months, will be able to trade up the pre-amp, and the mid-tones will be spectacular. Ella will image right in the middle of the room, right where I have my chair for one, table for one, bed for one. Lube for one. Haha! JK. Sad lube for one.*

*Anyhow, Stevie sang it better.*

*Now here you go again, you say*

*You want your freedom*

*Well, who am I to keep you down*
It's only right that you should
Play the way you feel it
But listen carefully to the sound
Of your loneliness
Like a heartbeat drives you mad
In the stillness of remembering what you had
And what you lost,
and what you had,
and what you lost

***

Harry walked toward the hospital, a knot in his stomach. The apricot glow of the sun barely peeked over the horizon. Because it was so early, the entrance was almost empty.

On the sidewalk, a thin man in a hospital gown, sitting in a wheelchair, his arm connected to an IV, was smoking a cigarette. A staff member in scrubs stood diffidently next to him. People dressed in various work attire entered the building. Security guards stood just outside the doors.

Harry walked through the front doors and found himself in a great lobby, the Grand Central of the hospital. Sound echoed from the double-story ceilings to the hard floors below. People moved in a million directions. Light cascaded from windows above. A large reception area was bustling with patients and staff.

Harry stood still, breathing it all in. The hospital was a pilgrimage site for doctors all over the world. The lobby was a mixture of modern and antique. Wooden oak molding ran along the ceilings, ending in Corinthian columns. The portraits of the old MSH hung in burnished frames of amber gold. Harry expected doctors in 19th century black waistcoats, like time travelers, to come strolling out of the closed wooden doors. No matter how prepared he was, it was an intimidating place.

All at once, four loud klaxons sounded overhead. A woman’s voice called out on the loudspeaker, “Trauma, level 1, ER. Trauma, level 1, ER. Trauma team to ER.” Harry snapped out of his reverie.

As if wound by the same hand, all around him, people sprang to life. Residents in scrubs ran past him down the hall, toward what Harry assumed was the emergency room.

Meanwhile, receptionists continued working quietly. Housekeeping swept up bits of dust and paper. The volunteers giving directions continued to drink their coffees and read the paper. Remarkably, no one batted an eye at this show of chaos bursting all around him. Apocalypse was happening and everyone kept doing their mundane work. Harry couldn't believe it.

Someone ran by and grabbed his shoulder. Harry jumped from the surprise.
“Are you surgery?”

“What?” Harry was disoriented. Was he a medical specialty? He had been trained always to give the correct answer—but what was the right answer?

“Are you with the surgery department?”

“Yeah—I don’t know—I guess.”

“Then come on. Come on!”

Harry ran with the stranger, who was about his age, down a dark hallway. They turned twice and burst through two double doors marked **EMERGENCY**. Inside, it was clear where the trauma was. A large crowd surrounded a bed with doctors and nurses in moving with speed.

A man in an EMS uniform was speaking loudly and quickly. Everyone else was quiet, moving efficiently.

“…thrown fifteen feet, no seat belt,” the EMS said. “Unconscious at scene. Glasgow Coma Scale 8, no eye opening, no verbal response. One passenger, brought to St. Luke’s, minor injuries. No known medical history. Blood pressure 120 over 80 at scene, breathing on his own. Looks like a closed left femur fracture, ankle, maybe left wrist. Two 18-gauge IV’s placed in antecubes en route, but he’s not holding pressure well. Could be internal bleeding. He was intubated en route, when breathing became agonal. Sats started dropping; pressure too—last one we got was—let’s see—80 over palp.”

Five or six people transferred the patient, on a stiff board and in a hard cervical collar, onto the emergency room trauma table.

“People, people!” A man with a white doctor’s coat, sitting in a chair with a cane beside him, barked loudly. “Let’s get organized. Jess! You wanna call it?” He nodded toward someone on his left. “Okay, Jess is calling it. Listen up, everyone.”

A tall, young woman with her hair in a bun, strawberry blond, her pale complexion dotted with light freckles, moved to the head of the bed. This must be Jess, Harry thought. She must be a senior resident.

“Airway!” she called.

“I got it,” said the resident who had run in with Harry. He took the ambu bag from the EMS and started bagging the patient. “Sats are 84% on 100% oxygen.”

“Get an arterial blood gas,” Jess said. “Frankie, you do that!” The young woman named Frankie had the patient’s wrist prepped with Betadyne, and felt with intense concentration for a pulse so she could draw arterial blood out.

*His oxygen saturation should be higher, Harry thought, on 100% oxygen. The low saturation meant that the lungs were not able to take up the oxygen.*

He ran through a list of problems in his head to deduce why one’s lungs would not be oxygenating. *Infectious, inflammatory, neoplastic, traumatic, idiopathic, genetic, developmental. Hmm, since he’s lying here intubated with his leg sticking out at a funny angle, “traumatic” would be a good bet. Let’s see—atelectasis, pneumothorax, hemothorax….*

The air was frenetic with activity, yet everyone had a courteous, military way of moving, precise, efficient. A feeling of suspended fear permeated the room, as if the group had collectively put their
anxieties into one machine, and Jess commanded this machine like a general in combat.

“Circulation,” Jess said. “Where are we with the EKG, Dave?”

Apparently, the resident who had run in with Harry was named Dave. Dave shouted, “Tachycardic at 180, looks like sinus rhythm, but it’s too fast. I can’t tell about the s-t waves. Too fast!” As if on command, the machine’s beeping bumped up higher in frequency.

“We need lines,” Jess shouted. “André, can you work on that?”

Harry watched as the nurses used trauma scissors to cut away the patient’s clothes. His shirt and pants fell away from him. His skin was pale and blotchy, with fresh blood on the left leg and the leg bent outward, at an obtuse angle. The nurses cut away the boxers and the patient’s genitalia lay exposed like fruit in a farmer’s market. He was naked, yet it was terrifying to see; his nakedness made him change from a person to a thing in the blink of an eye. He was suddenly a thing that was dying, a body. Harry couldn’t look away from him.

André shouted, “He has two lines but one isn’t working.”

“Go for the femoral line if you can’t get the arms,” Jess commanded. “Do a cut down if you need to. His sat’s too low and he’s tachycardic. He’s lost too much blood. Get the IV’s going and let’s give him a bolus. Do we have the O-negative on standby? Two units, guys, when you get the lines.”

The man in the chair watched them without speaking. Occasionally he would spin around to get a better angle on the action. His face was a stoic composition of intelligence and objectivity, hair swept cleanly to one side. He wore wire-rimmed glasses, and a white dress shirt and tie under the white doctor’s coat. All at once, Harry realized. Fernbank. This was the famous Dr. Joshua Fernbank, their residency director.

For a fleeting moment, a feeling of déjà vu passed over Harry, as if he was reminded of something, and then, like a ghost, it left.

“Pressure?” Jess called.

“60 over palpable,” André said back. “Not great. No radial pulse, no dorsalis pedis pulse!”

“What about the other leg?” Jess asked.

“No good. Femoral pulse is barely palpable on either side,” André said. He asked a nurse, “Can I get a cut-down tray please?”

Dave said, “Get one for me too, Miriam, will you please? Can someone come take the airway?”

Jess shouted, “The line that’s working—Miriam, piggy-back a dopamine drip, can you please?” The nurse nodded, opened a cart for a vial of medicine and added a catheter to the running IV. “Set it to 10 cc per hour.”

Adrenergic pressor, Harry thought, to vasoconstrict the peripheral vessels and to increase cardiac contraction. Downside: adrenergic pressors increased the heart rate. That’s why she’s giving fluid boluses and blood, to expand volume, increase oxygen delivery. That’s why his feet look bluish.

Harry felt lightheaded, slightly nauseous all of a sudden. With hypotension, all the peripheral vessels clamped down. Blood preferentially goes to the brain. The brain rests. Sometimes unconscious people describe hallucinating when they’re in trauma, or with near-death experiences.

Harry had read about trauma in medical school. He had even done trauma rotations. Still, it was
sobering to see blue-colored skin on a living person.

Frankie drew out plum-colored blood. “I got the blood gas. Oh, it doesn't look good.” Dr. Fernbank turned his head to look at the dark tube impassively. Frankie handed the tube to another person to send off. She used one hand to apply pressure to the wrist where she had just drawn the blood.

*Radial artery,* thought Harry. *Just inside the wrist, an inch down from the thumb.*

“You,” Jess pointed in Harry’s direction.

Harry looked behind him. He spun around. She was looking directly at him.

“You!” she said again, impatient. “What’s your name?”

“I’m—I’m Harry.”

“Harry, put a tourniquet on his left leg, just at the thighs.” The nurse threw him a rubber tourniquet, which he haltingly twisted around the thigh. “Tighter, Harry. That’s it. Good. Now come up here and bag him. Dave, change places with Harry. Start looking for a vein.”

Harry awkwardly made his way past nurses and residents to stand behind the head of the bed. Dave had handed the bag over to Jess. Jess grabbed Harry’s hands and placed them, in proper position, one on the ambu bag, one on the endotracheal tube.

“Intern, Harry?”

“What? Um, yeah. I’m an intern.”

Jess kept her eyes on the patient.

“Always keep one eye on the tube—that’s your lifeline, you got it? It comes out, you're responsible for putting it back in. Just kidding, Harry. It *never* comes out. Got that? Good. His life depends on you,” she glared at him. “You’re going to bag at 20 times a minute. Press the bag almost all the way down.”

Harry felt the resistance of the balloon as he slowly compressed it. “Watch the screen,” she said. “Keep bagging him every three seconds. You see that line? That’s you, and that line below it is the carbon dioxide. You can see the tidal volume, your saturation, the peak pressures. Let me know if there’s any resistance. *Any resistance,* you understand?”

Harry nodded, “Yes. Doctor.”

Jess turned her head quickly and looked sideways at him. Harry thought he saw a trace of a smile.

Jess moved to help Dave and André open an inguinal incision, and identify the femoral artery and veins. Harry was mesmerized by the mini-surgery taking place, the slash through the skin, the dark pool of blood below, and the steady, meticulous way they went about their task. The overhead light shined on them like a spotlight from the heavens. They worked as if absorbed in the three-inch opening of the body, oblivious to the world around them, focused on the anatomy. They were working against time, but the pressure seemed to make them concentrate and work better, in a calmer way.

*Who were these people?* Harry wondered. *How are they not panicking?*

They soon had a working IV and packed red blood cells were flowing through.
Abruptly, Harry noticed that the EKG had changed its sound. The rhythm was faster and more erratic than before.

At the same moment, he saw a movement in the back of the room, of more people coming in. He saw the tops of their heads, and then, suddenly, as their faces became clearer, he stopped moving. His hands held the ambu bag slackly. It was as if he was paralyzed, unable to think or move, or even to breathe. Only one word ran through his head.

*Louis.*

“Harry!” Jess was shouting at him. “Harry! Look at me. Tell me the rhythm! *What is the rhythm?*”

The world spun around him in slow motion.

Dave shouted, “*V fib!*”

“Harry!”

Harry snapped back, looked at Jess with alarm, his green eyes dark, pupils dilated.

“Harry, keep bagging him! His pressure’s good but his heart isn’t responding. And no cardiac sounds. What the goddamn—“

Dr. Fernbank waited patiently for Jess to run through the algorithms in her head. One second, two seconds, three. He showed no signs of fear or panic.

“Defibrillator,” Jess announced. “Set it up, stat. Ventricular fibrillation. He’s having a heart attack.”

The automated defibrillator pads were placed on the patient’s chest. After it was fully charged, Jess shouted, “All clear!”

Everyone stepped away. Harry watched the scene in slow motion, as if he were watching a foreign movie, waiting for subtitles to come on. Jess shouted to him, “Let go of the bag, Harry! Let it go! Step away from the patient!” Finally, Harry snapped to and hastily stepped aside.

The defibrillator paddles were placed on the chest and jumped in her hands. The patient’s body bounced as if he were having a seizure, or as if he did it intentionally, but he was still unconscious. They waited for the EKG tracing. He remained in ventricular fibrillation.

“Charge!” Jess called. While the machine was charging, Dave and André took turns doing compressions on the patient’s chest.

“Clear!”

This time, Harry stepped away quickly with everyone else.

He raised his eyes and saw Louis come closer with the others. *What was his expression?* It was impossible to tell at this distance. Harry still had his street clothes, a dress shirt and tie, dress khakis. His hair had escaped and was drifting in a sweaty haze around his face, sweat dotting his forehead and cheeks. Pools of sweat spread from his armpits. Curiously, through it all, Jess’s face was unperturbed, her strawberry blond bun intact, hairpins and all, her motions smooth and swift. She showed no hesitation or fear; she was in complete control. Harry admired her immensely, her sangfroid.

“No pulse,” said André. “Monitor’s not picking up a pulse, Jess. The machine’s not registering.”

Even though the heart was back in normal rhythm, the patient’s lips gradually turned more violet than pink, and then bluish. The saturation probe beeped with ominously lower frequency, the sound plummeting like the hopes of the doctors, like the hope of a successful rescue. Harry checked to make sure the endotracheal tube had not slipped out. The monitor told him that his ventilation was the same as before, good tidal volumes and pressures. The oxygen was just not being circulated.

Jess lifted her eyes to Dr. Fernbank. Harry saw a hint of uncertainty. She was asking for help.

“What do you think, Jess?” he coaxed, gently and firmly.

“Heart’s in rhythm, but beating ineffectively. He’s got blood, airway’s good, he’s got volume—”

“And? Remember we’re in blunt trauma.”

“The motor’s running but there’s no strength. We’re in sinus, so it's not arrhythmia. The blood in the heart is going nowhere—” Jess’s eyes were unfocused, scanning the horizon, reading an invisible list. “Pericardial hematoma,” she looked up at Dr. Fernbank.

“What are we going to do, Jess?”

“We have to drain it,” she said. “We have to needle the heart.” She gave a triumphant sigh. “Miriam, 20 gauge spinal needle please, 30 cc syringe.”

“Yes, Dr. Rabenweiler.”

Harry watched as the needle was prepared, as the patient’s life ebbed away.

“Don’t!” said Jess. “Don't don’t don't. Not on the first day. Not on the first day.”

Jess inserted the needle and withdrew a rivulet of dark, viscous blood from the heart, just left of the sternum, above the bottom rib, perhaps even blood cells that had just been transfused. As the blood was withdrawn, the patient’s pulse began beating, slow and thready at first, then steadily.

“Is the OR ready?” Jess asked.

People from the back, in surgical masks and hats from the operating room, moved forward. “Ready,” they said.

“We’ll take it from here, Jess,” a man in scrubs said, presumably another senior resident. A magnetized badge was clipped to his shirt. “Good job.”

“Thanks, Finn,” Jess said. Her face changed at once, becoming smaller, more relaxed, tired.

The patient was transported away, and Harry stood at the head of the empty bed, watching him go. Dr. Fernbank stood up and came up to his side, walking slowly with a hand brace.

“Harry Styles, is that right?”

“Yes, sir.” Dr. Fernbank had an air of familiarity—not in his present capacity, but in his face or mannerisms; something about him felt familiar. Harry thought he must have seen Dr. Fernbank before. He couldn't quite place where.

Dr. Fernbank extended his hand. “Joshua Fernbank, Director of Trauma Services and medical director of the surgical training program.”
“It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir. That was—that was incredible. I’ve never seen anything like it. It’s a lot to absorb.”

Dr. Fernbank’s eyes crinkled in amusement. “Oh, you’ll learn it all, Harry, and you’ll be adept at trauma, too. Jess is a fifth year and she’s experienced—we’re all learning.” He paused. “I’ve been looking forward to your joining us, Harry.”

“That’s very nice to hear, sir,” Harry said. His eyes searched around the room for Louis, but he seemed to have vanished. A few medical students and residents dispersed back to work in other areas of the emergency room. The trauma bay was suddenly deserted, a few people left cleaning up the debris scattered around the table.

“You work made a deep impression on the selection committee. I hope you know that. We’re all expecting great things from you.”

“Thank you. I’m very honored to be here.”

“My job was to wrestle you away from Ulysses Nestor,” Dr. Fernbank added finally. “Uly and I are friends. He thinks he’s lending you to me. Ha! I have no intention of giving you back,” Dr. Fernbank guffawed.

“Excuse me, sir,” said Harry. “I’m supposed to be at a lecture right now. I’m—can you please direct me? I’m so sorry. I’m already late.”

Dr. Fernbank placed his hand on Harry’s arm. “Come on, then, Harry. I’m supposed to be giving the lecture. If you’re late, then I’m late, too.”

They traveled through the trauma area, down a hallway, past a few corridors. Finally Dr. Fernbank opened a door to a small room, just big enough to fit thirty people.

“Here we are, Harry,” Dr. Fernbank said, “Room E-10. Welcome, everyone! I see you all found the place all right?”

A sea of curious faces peeked out at them. Harry could feel all eyes on him. His friend Liam Payne, sitting in the corner, brightened when he saw Harry, and gave him a wave. A few people tittered to each other, but he expected that. Harry was used to the reaction. He scanned the room.

And there he was. Harry spotted Louis right away, and he couldn’t help it. He felt relieved, happy, anxious, all at once. His face must have been a mix of emotions. Louis’s face was blank, his eyes unreadable. Without a smile, he gave a barely perceptible nod to Harry. Harry was tempted, for a second, to go sit with him, but Louis’s frosty greeting made him pause. He forced himself to take a seat on the opposite side, following Dr. Fernbank. The students scraped and scooted their chairs so that Fernbank could pass by.

Still, Harry couldn’t help but glance at Louis every few seconds. The room was uncomfortably warm. Harry’s clothes were damp from the emergency room. Many of the other interns were in their scrubs already. Louis stared diffidently ahead, his lips tight and pursed. It was as if Harry wasn’t even there.

Dr. Fernbank introduced himself, and then asked each of them to say a few words. It turned out that only twelve of the interns would go into the general surgery track. The others were all going into surgical subspecialties: urology, orthopedics, and so on.

When it was Harry’s turn, he stood up and said, “My name is Harry Styles,” and then he heard a giggle, coming from the corner, where a petite brunette and a blond guy were sitting, with Liam. As
soon as he turned to look at them, they went silent and innocent. “I’m—uh—I’m from Johns Hopkins, like my friend Liam, over there. And I’m doing general surgery.” He sat down awkwardly.

Harry lifted his eyes to sneak a look at Louis. Louis was staring at him, his expression just short of hostile, his eyes coldly appraising. Harry eyes stayed wide and neutral, but Louis quickly glanced away, as if he had been caught daydreaming.

After the lecture, the interns were dismissed to join their teams. Harry waited by the door for a minute. He watched as Louis shuffled in the back of the room.

Liam came out the door and took his arm.

“Styles! Great to see you!”

“Liam—great to see you, too. Did you—um—move in alright?”

“Yeah, met a bunch of great people. I’ll introduce you to them. Hey, interns are divided into pairs, and I think you and I are together?”

Harry looked down at his schedule.

“I’m neurosurgery.”

“Yeah, me too. Let’s walk together. We’re late as it is. Come on.”

“Um—Liam, I—”

At that second, Louis and his friends came out of the room. Harry could sense Louis’s awareness of him, even though they had made no eye contact. Harry felt the cold air on the back of his neck, sensed the fine hairs rise.

Harry involuntarily turned toward him. His face was a mixture of hope and anxiety, but he tried to play down his expectations.

Coming closer, Louis lifted his head in a curt nod again, and said, “Harry. How are you?”

Liam’s face showed confusion. “You two—you know each other?”

Harry cleared his throat. “We were students at Tulane together. Before I left to come to Hopkins.”

“Fantastic!” Liam said. “Louis was one of the people helping me move in this weekend! I had no idea.”

Niall extended his hand, “I’m Niall Horan, and this is Alice Miller. We’re all going into general surgery, yeah?”

“Cool,” Harry answered, his voice a dry rasp, taking their hands. “Cool, nice to meet you.”

“Why didn’t you say something, Tommo, about knowing Harry here?” Niall slapped Louis on the arm. “We were talking about him, and you—not a peep from you.”

Harry peered up from his bowed head, watching Louis cautiously. Louis’s face was still unreadable. His eyes were hooded, his lips tightly creased in a thin line, his stance wide and confident, as always, and he had lifted his jaw up as if in challenge to anyone who dared disagree with him. Harry knew this look so well, Louis’s look of brave defiance.
“You were talking about me?” Harry asked. He hoped he didn’t sound narcissistic.

“Yeah,” Alice said. “Liam showed us some photos of your extracurricular activities at Hopkins.” Her mouth involuntarily curled into a flirtatious smile. “Impressive.”

“I almost had to revive Alice here, after seeing your photo shoot,” said Niall.

Harry’s face registered his puzzlement. Liam whispered to him, “For the Annual.”

Alice blushed three shades into raspberry. “Harry, don’t listen to him. I wasn’t the only one. And I firmly believe in freedom of artistic expression—live and let live, I always say.”

“Yeah, for sure,” said Niall. “Like, I’m sure your hyperventilation had everything to do with free speech, Alice. You’re the defender of the First Amendment.” Alice kicked him in the shins. “You adore the Constitution. Right? That’s what we’re talking about?” Apparently Alice and Niall shared an inside joke.

Harry said, “Oh, that. Yeah, it was a favor. For a photographer friend. I didn’t really expect people to—um—Google it. It’s a little embarrassing.”

“Ha! It created quite a stir, back in the day,” Liam said. “Don’t you remember, Harry? Wasn’t there a modeling agency that contacted you?”

“No, I’m sure there wasn’t, Liam.” Harry glared at him.

“Ignore them, Harry,” she said. “It was beautifully done. Artistic, you know, contemplative? You should be proud of it.” She turned to Niall. “Blond Neanderthal! Can you not shut up?”

“She’s right, though,” Niall went on. “Louis fangirled so hard, he had to go for a wee, isn’t that right, Louis?”

They all turned toward Louis, whose eyes had a challenging, almost angry, stormy expression. His head tilted down, he glared up at Harry with the crystalline blue glint of a morning guillotine.

“If they gave prizes for best naked pinup doctor,” Louis said, “I’m sure Harry would take top honors. What a man. You give quite the show.”

Niall burst out laughing, and the other interns turned to see what the commotion was. Liam, however, saw Harry glance at Louis and quickly look down, hurt, and Louis’s eyes crease subtly, pinched and wary.

What was that about? Liam thought to himself.

“We’re late,” said Liam. “Harry, we’re going to Wells 2, the neurosurgery ward. Let’s see if we can catch up with rounds.” He turned to the others. “What are your schedules today? Think we can meet up later?”

“I’m on call tonight,” said Niall. “ER. Gonna be a killer, I bet.”

“And I’m on call for orthopedics,” Alice said. “Shit. It’s really happening, isn’t it? Sink or swim.”

Harry saw Louis shift his hips and start walking away. Despite their exchange, Harry hoped unreasonably. Turn around, he thought. Come back, Louis. Look at me.

Liam glanced at his schedule. “I’m on call as well. It looks like we won’t be able to meet after all—maybe just us three, for dinner in the cafeteria? Oh, glorious hospital food! Hey, Harry, let’s
exchange numbers, and we’ll try to patch something together later this week, Friday? We’ll start a
group chat or something. All right?”

Harry was no longer paying attention to Liam.

Louis walked away, so close and yet so far away. Despite not expecting anything, Harry was
devastated by Louis’s words. He tried not to let it bother him.

*There’s nothing there,* he thought. *No love, no hate. Not even friendship. He doesn't feel anything.*
*You're reading too much into it. He wasn't trying to hurt you. He didn't mean anything. It was just
banter.*

    **Oh, I will carry you over**
    **Fire and water for your love**
    **And I will hold you closer**
    **Hope your heart is strong enough**

He shook out of it with a start.

“Yeah, that sounds great, Li. Can you first tell me where you got the scrubs? I need to change out of
these clothes—bit of a mess in trauma this morning.”

“I saw that!” Liam exclaimed. “Yeah, scrubs are on the fourth floor, laundry services. I’ll take you
there. Haha, I might have gotten here early this morning. Took a little tour.”

Liam watched Harry look down the hallway. Harry’s mind was galaxies away…

“Trauma was just brilliant this morning, Harry,” Liam said, trying to engage Harry’s attention. “Not
five seconds in the door, you’re doing a code already! Tell the truth, was it terrifying?”

“Scarier than anything I’ve ever done,” Harry said, his eyes watching Louis’s silhouette disappear
down the hall.

**Fantastic artwork by Nina.** Thank you so much.
Chapter 2

The next morning, the interns rounded with their teams, wrote their notes, and gathered in Room E-10 at 7 AM sharp. It was time for Dr. Fernbank to give the first lecture.

“So, what d’you all think? Tough first day?”

Half the interns had not gone home from yesterday. Their hairs were slept in, flat on one side and untamed on the other. The women had make-up askew, dark patches where mascara hopelessly smudged under the eyes, making them look hungover. The men weren’t much better. They hadn't showered and smelled distinctly funky. Their cheeks and chins were unshaven, and their hair straggly and unsettled.

Those who did have a chance to go home didn't look much better. They wore freshly pressed scrubs, but it was evident that they hadn't gotten much sleep. It was not unusual for interns to work until 8 or 9 PM. Then they had to read up on surgeries to be done the next day, anatomy, in case they were asked questions in the operating room, and physiology, of the weird and rare diseases that their patients had, nicknamed “zebras.” The saying went, “When you hear hoofbeats, think horses, not zebras,” or, common things were common. When someone had the sniffles, he or she likely didn't have Ebola, only the common cold.

Interns were routinely asked esoteric questions. This process was called pimping. Attending physicians and older residents pimped interns, to keep interns on their toes, to force them to read on their own, to separate the superior interns from the average.

And, thought Louis, because some of them have a fucking superiority kink. Because they get off on stumping interns with the same twenty fucking unanswerable questions every year. Assholes.

The interns who worked overnight in the emergency room, like Niall, were done for the day. They had worked twenty-four hours straight. Niall truly looked like shit warmed over. His skin was a pale mottled color, his light blue eyes were ringed with bags, and he sat with a dazed expression, as if tranquilized.

“Let’s get going,” said Dr. Fernbank. “Get some of you out of here. My name is Joshua Fernbank, as you know. I did my surgery residency here, at MSH, approximately a million years ago, it feels like,” he chuckled, his gray eyes merry, “before I contracted Guillaume-Barré Syndrome. Life is like that—sometimes it knocks you down a couple of steps when you’re least expecting it.

“I sat in your chair once. I was a relatively ignorant, eager beaver just like you. This thing, surgery: it's the greatest job I know. It's an art and a science, and it really is a life’s work. Many people have come before you, experimented, tried procedures on people just to try something better.” He paused and looked around. “And they failed. Miserably. Patients died. A lot of patients. The first twenty patients to have their heart valves repaired all died. The first patients on the cardiac bypass machines all died. Did you know that?”

The interns looked around, some shook their heads, others whistled. Liam nodded.

“Lesson number one. You’re going to fail. But, so what? You never hear about the failures. But I guarantee you, every single surgeon on staff here has been there. Trust me, I know them all.” Dr. Fernbank chuckled aloud, and there were grins all around.

“But eventually, someone lived on a dialysis machine. Then someone lived through bypass surgery,”
Dr. Fernbank continued. “Fewer and fewer people died of infection after surgery, because of penicillin. Fewer people had to suffer through painful surgery, because of anesthesia. These aren’t miracles, although they are,” he paused. “They’re miracles of persistence. These miracles happened because of people like you, in places like this.”

Louis snuck a glance at Harry. Harry was looking down into a notebook, absorbed by Dr. Fernbank’s words. Louis thought, because of people like Harry—smart, bullheaded, persistent people.

“Now, how many of you saw the trauma in the emergency room yesterday?” Dr. Fernbank asked. A handful of students raised their hands.

“Harry, I know you were there.” Harry looked up at Dr. Fernbank, who nodded affectionately at him.

“It probably looked chaotic, didn’t it? So much happening at once? So much noise? Lesson number two, stay cool. Surgery is an animal with one head, and that head has to be the surgeon. Trauma is run by a senior surgeon—no one can distract that person, because he or she controls the chaos. There’s a lot of adrenaline floating around the room, but it can all be harnessed to work for the surgeon. It’s the only way that the patient is going to make it.

“One of my teachers told me this, and now I’ll tell it to you—always walk to an emergency. Never run. No, of course, sometimes you physically run—not that I can run anymore,” he sighed. “But in your head. Always be walking and thinking; sometimes you’re the only one walking and thinking, while everyone else is losing their minds. ‘Wisely and slow; they stumble that run fast.’ Anyone?”

“Romeo and Juliet,” Harry muttered under his breath.

“Romeo and Juliet, by William Shakespeare,” said Dr. Fernbank. “You see, surgery is a romantic profession. The drama! The laughs! The tears! Lines out the door. It’s practically a sell-out show every night.”

Harry was busy writing it all down. Louis felt a pang of tenderness. What a nerd he was. He could just picture Harry drawing the surgical beast and drawing an arrow to the head, labeling it, in block letters, “SURGEON.” Harry probably underlined twice, in hatches, Romeo and Juliet, when he had probably memorized the whole damn play.

“Okay,” Dr. Fernbank exhaled. “Let’s start. Today, we’re talking about building blocks. The ABC’s of trauma—literally. Can anyone help me out? What does A stand for?”

“Airway, professor?” Liam volunteered.

“Very good. Liam Payne, is it?”

“Liam, yes, sir.”

“Liam, tell us about the airway.”

“Well, according to Advanced Trauma Life Support—“

Louis quietly shaped his left hand into an “L” and put it on his forehead, turning around to show Liam.

Liam pretended to ignore him, “According to the ATLS, securing an airway is the first step in trauma.”
“Absolutely,” said Dr. Fernbank. “First, assess whether the patient is conscious. Then whether the patient can talk or breathe. If not, establish an airway.”

The lecture went on for another twenty minutes. By the end, several pairs of eyes were closed and a few heads were nodding, and, with great embarrassment, one of the interns had started snoring and had to be shaken awake.

At the end of the hour, the interns gathered their things and shifted in their seats, ready to go.

“Just one more thing before you take off,” Dr. Fernbank said. “As you know, cardiothoracic surgery is a fellowship offered at MSH, after completion of the surgical residency. It is quite competitive, although our residents do well.” He took a drink of water and paused.

The room was silent. The interns all listened intently. “This year, the committee decided to try something a little different. An experiment, if you will. We’ve decided to offer an accelerated track to one surgical intern.”

A flash of excitement passed around the room. Dr. Fernbank continued, “We feel that a dedicated mentorship with the senior staff early on might encourage more daring and original research. Of course,” he paused, “this person must be of sound mind and health. Don’t worry; despite your suspicions, you all qualify. And he or she must be technically proficient. You’re all surgeons now. Learn to do it well.”

A round of murmurs passed through the interns as they stood up.

“The committee will be judging throughout the internship year. The winner of the fellowship will be announced at the end of the year,” Dr. Fernbank said over their shuffling noises. “Stay safe! Do good work!”

With that, they filed out one by one.

Liam and Harry walked together to the neurosurgery wing, both in green scrubs.

“This CT fellowship, what d’you think, Harry?” Liam said excitedly.

“Sounds like a lark.”

“You know what I think?” Liam’s eyes sparkled with energy, despite being on call the previous night.

“What, Li?”

“I think you’re a shoo-in for it. In fact, they probably changed the program just to give you a space. That’s it, Harry!” Liam smiled hugely at his own deductive brilliance. “It’s all a charade to get you to sign to MSH forever!”

“I doubt that,” Harry smiled. “I think you’re sleep-deprived, Liam. That sounds like a crazy conspiracy theory to me. This is the bureaucratic MSH we’re talking about? Not some spy agency. Layers and layers of boring committees meet to discuss that kind of stuff.”

“You’re wrong,” Liam said. “Dr. Fernbank likes you. A lot. He was practically giving you a French kiss back there.”

Harry barked out a laugh. “Please, Liam. Dr. Fernbank met me in trauma yesterday. He saw what an incompetent fool I was.”
“Well, who’s going to compete with you? Your research is so far ahead of anyone else’s. I mean, it's not like any of the other interns has an N.I.H. grant. Hell, some of the professors here don't even have their own grants.”

“I agree. I’ve been very fortunate,” said Harry. “But that doesn't mean anything. I’m an intern like everyone else. I’m not expecting special treatment.”

They turned down the hallway and continued walking quickly to find the neurosurgery team.

Actually, Harry thought, there was one other person. We started our research at about the same time. One person whose research could potentially be dazzling, if only he could recognize it, whose contribution to medicine could be revolutionary.

***

Harry and Louis had sat next to each other on the first day of Tulane University School of Medicine. Louis was a legacy kid—his mother, Johannah Deakin, head of vascular surgery, had the dubious distinction of making every student who trained under her cry at least once. She was tough, unforgiving, brilliant. The doctors who trained under her became the heads of departments; doctors came from international countries to observe her for two or three weeks at a time. Her influence was world-wide.

Louis, on the other hand, was restless and loud, preferring to be the class clown. Better to be loved than feared—that seemed to be his motto. And he was well-loved by the student body. After a few weeks, Louis had been voted the liaison between students and administration.

He was effective, too. Somehow, during a dining room staff strike at Tulane, he had wheedled the administration into approving an evening cocktail tour of New Orleans for the first year students, in order to “boost spirits” and to recoup the money they had paid for boarding. The students couldn’t believe his audacity, nor could they believe that Tulane actually paid for them to drink Hurricanes and Sazeracs all night.

Louis could talk people into anything. His charm, his seeming candor, and his oratory skills were such that people were nodding “yes” before they knew what they were doing. He also convinced the faculty to set up a café for medical students to study in, with live music and an espresso bar, “to keep us energized.” He claimed that it could be used as a clinical study on all sorts of medical student problems—sleep deprivation, caffeine addiction, even freaking hearing loss. The boy was imaginative and bold. And, if he had to admit it, shameless, in the best sense.

This loud boy completely enraptured Harry. The weird thing was, Harry and Louis had met once before, almost ten years ago, in Barcelona, when they were just adolescents. Harry had been visiting his father Des, a professor of English teaching a year abroad at the Universitat de Barcelona, and Louis was there with his mother during a surgical conference. The single day they had spent together was one of the highlights of Harry’s life. He wasn't sure whether Louis even remembered him, since
they had quickly lost touch afterward, but he never forgot the trip or their adventures.

It was a mad coincidence that they had both ended up medical students at Tulane. Harry hadn't even known that he wanted to study medicine until just two years ago. He was drifting unmoored, from one academic major to another. Nothing had excited him very much.

At his mother’s urging, he took pre-med courses, and scored well on his MCAT’s. He had applied to exactly two schools, and was surprised when Tulane had accepted him.

Harry still wasn't sure that medicine was for him. He was a ship at sea without an anchor.

Harry thought that part of the reason he got on so well with Louis was because they were very similar. Harry matched Louis in so many ways. Both of them came from families filled with women and girls, divorced and remarried mothers. Both had had long periods of time alone, long periods of reading, listening to music, exploring the world, trying to figure out what kind of person they wanted to be.

They both had an irrepressible urge to play pranks on people, to fuck things up.

For Halloween, they had taken a plywood door and nailed it over the dorm room door of one of their friends, and booby-trapped a skeleton to leap out when he tried to get out.

They had mailed a series of postcards of the “classics of 1950’s gay cinema” to send to an especially obnoxious, sanctimonious, homophobic dean. One sample hand-written message read, “Hope to see you at the gay pool orgy next Saturday, darling. Love, Daddy Long Legs.”

They ran through the dorms on Friday nights with free tequila for any students stuck there on the weekends. Both had the ambition to be the best at what they did, a work ethic to put their heads down and grind the work out, but also to dream stratospheric dreams, to launch into unimaginable heights.

No matter how bad a day Harry had, Louis could always make him laugh. Louis was—he was a great person to just, like, sit and kind of like, just admire what he’s like, Harry thought. They hung out all the time, along with a few other friends in their group. Soon, Louis and Harry were studying by themselves, preparing for examinations together, stopping by each other’s rooms before going to class, eating meals together.

When Louis was gone on weekends, spending time with his family, Harry felt bored, abandoned. How could weekends in New Orleans be remotely boring? Such was the effect that Louis had on Harry. Louis was so enmeshed, so vital in Harry’s life that Harry felt incomplete without him—as if he’d forgotten to get dressed completely.

On Wednesdays they had a late start: anatomy at 11 AM and physiology at 1 PM. It wasn't unusual for Harry to lay half-asleep in bed, his face smashed into the pillows, a string of drool pooling, naked but for his necklace, only to have Louis knock on the door with a plate of pancakes and a cup of tea.

“Room service! Did you or did you not order room service, sir? Pancakes and tea, delivered by your sexy waiter! Open up, Haz, you lazy bum. The sun has got his hat on!”

Harry would get up slowly, padding naked in fuzzy pink slippers to the door, while Louis banged like the apocalypse on the door.

“I’m coming, Lou. Hold your horses. You're waking the dead.”

“Summer sun, something’s begun, but uh, oh those summer nights, doobiedoobiedoobiedo…” Louis
sang at the top of his voice, the sound ricocheting around the entire dorm.

“Oh my God, shut up, Lou. No show tunes. It’s too fucking early.”

Then Louis would burst in as soon as the door opened, pushing Harry with exaggerated violence, all the way into his bed, to the edge of the wall, and push himself obnoxiously into bed with him.

This made Harry giggle uncontrollably, but he enjoyed their closeness, intimate and unforced. It made him feel unself-conscious, as if Louis were a natural part of him, an arm, an ear.

They sipped tea from the same cup while Louis turned his phone speakers to the Backstreet Boys:

Yeah-eh-yeah
You are, my fire,
The one, desire,
Believe, when I say
I want it that way

Louis cawed loudly into his air microphone, cupping one hand around Harry’s jaw as if serenading a girl in a music video. He batted his eyelashes exaggeratedly. Harry had to admit, he was adorable. Louis’s body was a familiarity that felt comfortable and sweet, just the right curves to nudge into Harry’s concavities, unconsciously and without tension.

Harry looked down at the mess of pancakes, misshapen, burnt here and there, drowning in maple syrup. He lay there naked, with a thin bed cover thrown over one knee, drinking hot, milky tea, eating terribly, unevenly, atrociously cooked pancakes, pancakes his ten-year-old self would be too ashamed to serve.

He was in heaven.

***

Neither of them tried to hide the fact that they were gay. Harry remembered a time when he had been unsure, when he had been stumbling in the dark about his sexuality, and Louis had clarified everything for him—on that summer day, years ago, in Spain. Harry assumed that Louis probably had no recollection of it, probably didn’t even realize how he had helped. They never discussed it, either. One minute Harry was confused about why he didn't enjoy kissing girls as much as his friends, and the next minute, he was relieved that this was okay. Louis had somehow, without saying anything specific, reassured him.
Harry remembered the moment of epiphany like a drop of crystal clear water amidst the fog of memory. It was that bright.

Harry did not consider their sexual preference a factor in their friendship. Louis was a fascinating person, no matter what his sexual orientation was. He was just a great friend. Louis was charming and handsome, easy on the eyes. He always looked good, even in a T-shirt and jeans. Harry felt comfortable in his presence.

The fact that they shared their sexual orientation meant he would not have to explain—any of it. He would not have to tell Louis about his apathy when taking girls to dances and proms in high school. Nor about casual friends and distant relatives asking him why he wasn't dating anyone now. Nor about the painful anxiety that he had, somehow, let his family down, his fear and courage when he had come out to them, at age 16. He was not a minority in Louis's presence. He knew that Louis knew, and that it didn't matter. Louis treated him as an equal.

Sometimes, Harry would stay so late in Louis’s room that he almost felt like sleeping on the rug, rather than having to go back to his room. One night, in the middle of studying immunology, Harry was so sleepy that he didn't even hear what Louis was saying to him. The illustrations of MHC class I and class II proteins all blended together. His cup of coffee had long gone cold on the floor.

Slowly, his forehead sank down to the textbook, and dipped into it once. Harry jerked up with a start. He looked around quickly. He was still in Louis’s room, and Louis still had his head in his book, lamp casting a golden light from his right, his feet propped up on the desk in front of him. Louis hadn't seemed to notice that Harry had fallen asleep. He was drinking his tea placidly, highlighter in one hand, marking the textbook.

Harry tried to find his place on the page and restart. The technical language of T lymphocytes and compatibility antigens required hardcore memorization, like much of medicine, and he was too tired to make mnemonics.

His eyelids dragged down again, once, twice. He forced himself to blink them open. It was no use. The room was sweet and warm. Louis had started burning a vanilla candle to make it cozy for Harry, and Harry’s room was miles away.

When Harry woke up, he felt disoriented, the way one woke up in a hotel room on vacation. He was comfortable but the sensation was different. It took a few minutes for his head to come back to his body.

_How long had it been? What day was it?_ All around him hung a veil of silence, the world’s business insulated away. The beeps of car horns and roar of ambulances were faint, distant.

He opened his eyes and looked around the room. It was day. Everything was a bit hazy. The ceiling reminded him that he was in Posner Hall, the matte gray paint simultaneously calming and claustrophobic.

He was in bed, under a cover, and the bed smelled nice, like spices and vanilla—but it wasn't his bed. He looked down at the cover of the comforter—plaid, green and blue, in light down. The recognition snapped into his mind. This was Louis’s room. But if he was in Louis’s bed, then…

Harry sat up, startled. Why was he in Louis’s bed? What had happened?

With slight embarrassment, he glanced down at his body. He was wearing only his boxers. On quick inspection, the rest of his clothes were neatly folded and placed on the desk next to him. There was a hastily scribbled Post-It note on top.
Harry looked around the room. It was the same room he always hung out in, a mess of textbooks all over the floor, a bag of opened potato chips on a chair, half-empty cups on the bookshelves and on the floor.

Louis. He was a hurricane himself, never still, leaving havoc everywhere. This morning, however, Harry noticed a Real Madrid soccer-shaped pillow and a thin blanket on the floor, thrown to one side, next to the rug where Harry had been studying the previous night.

The pieces slotted together in Harry’s brain. Last night, after Harry dozed off, Louis must have made Harry get up, half-asleep, undressed him and tucked him in bed, while sleeping on the floor himself.

And now he was running around getting breakfast for them. Which was, admittedly, really nice, thought the sybarite in Harry who loved to be pampered. He couldn't stop his face from breaking into a big smile, his heart swelling like a stupid sponge cake.

"Fucking sap," he thought. "What a fucking sap he is. I am. We are. What are we? Good friends, right? I would do the same for him. Because he’s my best friend. Because he’s a good guy. He would do that for anyone. Stan, Jimmy. It's not because of me, Harry. Is it? Because he takes care of people, that's what he does. That was Louis Tomlinson, every time. He does the shit but he always take care of the people who need it. The people he—"

The door burst open. Louis came in with a maroon beanie on his head, a hoodie half-zipped, tied around the neck. His face was bright red. He had paper bags and a tray with two paper cups in his hands, which were the same bright red color as his face. His face showed a tiny scruff of whiskers. He hadn't yet shaved.

"Mary, mother of Christ, it is cold out! I could see rocks breathing out steam."

Harry cackled loudly. "Lou, you’re back! You didn't have to, you imbecile!"

"Oh, now it’s my fault? I'm the idiot?" Louis’s eyes crinkled with his grin. "Imagine that, you ingrate. I should have left you to suffer on the floor."

Harry looked down and said nothing, overwhelmed.

"I know you have a bad back, Haz. Like, you’re already pathetic enough. My conscience wouldn't allow me to kick a puppy when he’s down. Besides, I’m the student liaison, remember? How would it look if one of the students became a cripple in my room, because he was too lazy to walk three doors down to his own room, eh?"

"Right. I'm not sorry. I see your plan, Lou. Don’t deny it. You’re trying to seduce me with fried dough," Harry teased. "Don’t pretend you’re too good for the world, Saint Louis. Holy water must run through your tiny veins." Harry put his hands together, looking skyward, pretending to pray. "You’re a fucking living martyr."

"Stop talking trash, Styles. Get over here and help me get rid of these beignets. You wouldn't believe what I've been through."

Harry watched Louis as he unpacked the bag, set two cups of coffee on the desk.

He wasn’t yet completely awake. Maybe that’s why his inside felt so odd, so—unsettled. He watched Louis as if seeing him for the first time, his assumptions fallen away.
This rough, trash-talking, loud, shit-raking boy was actually soft and malleable inside. The angel inside had been there all along, but Louis had hidden it so well, had been so careful about his public persona of loud loud loud!! and fuck-it-up class clown, that almost everyone overlooked his compassion and generosity, his purity and honesty, his absolute genius in helping others without seeming to do anything.

Like Louis’s putting Harry to bed, for instance—everything was done behind the scenes, incognito, so that people woke up and forgot about it, went about their business, without really thinking about who, what, how.

*Only Louis knew.* Harry winced at the feeling he was having, the abnormally tender, appreciative feeling. Of receiving special attention. Of being loved.

*Only Louis knew.*

*But now I know, too.*

“And then she starts counting out the change, and I mean it was like $8 in change, in fucking dimes and nickels, pennies—dropping some, picking it up like she’s fucking knitting? Like there’s no line behind her? Then when her order comes, she says, ‘Do you mind? It’s for three different orders. Can you put them in separate bags?’” Louis mimicked the timid, high-pitched voice of the customer, his hands flying animatedly. “Seriously. Did she bring her entire piggy bank in that purse. Meanwhile I was holding, literally holding my bladder, I had to pee so bad.”

“And you helped her pick up her coins, I bet?” Harry grinned from ear to ear.

“I’m not an animal, Haz. Of course I helped her. I had to get to the toilet, like, *this fucking century.* And she was, like, a-hundred-and-three. Just frail as shit. A grasshopper’s fart could have blown her away. Could have died in line if I didn’t help her, couldn’t she? Fuck, why was she even buying for three people? Now I have to wonder what pathetic fucks those other people look like. Do you have to pick them up with a spoon?”

Louis watched Harry laugh so helplessly that no sound came out.

“Why are they even having beignets? You have to wonder whether they’re even human. Maybe… maybe! Ah! Maybe she was buying for her three cat friends. Can you see it? *Mr. Toodles, Miss Farfalle, Miss Spaghetti Carbonara, look what I have, your highnesses, and in your own wee bags.*”

Harry honked out a laugh at the cats named after pasta.

“Anyway, why did she have to get in line in front of me? Why?” Louis tore a chunk out of a beignet and put it in front of Harry’s mouth. Harry opened his mouth, tongue first, and ate it. He had an impulse to reach out and pull Louis’s wrist in.

As Harry listened to Louis, a part of him was staring in wonder, separated from the scene. Louis was so—irresistible. He knocked down all of your walls. He was funny and grand. The weirdest, most ostracized person felt at home with him. Maybe that was how Harry felt sometimes, weird, aloof, different.

Sometimes Harry did not want to be especially social. He didn’t want to mingle or hang out; he needed to have quiet and solitude. Louis understood and never made him feel strange about it. In fact, being with Louis was a kind of solitude itself. Despite his loudness, Louis could provide the authority to make peace feel more peaceful, alone time more joyful.

Louis pulled him in as if he were on traction, like on Star Trek (they were all good, but he preferred
Next Generation, if he was honest). He didn't judge you. When he was in his element, when you were already laughing, he found the extra joke to drive it in even more, to make you absolutely adore him.

Harry felt bad and good at the same time, and he searched in his mind to find why he was so unbalanced. Everything had been humming along marvelously. What he felt was like an unexpected note in a complex wine that he had just started to taste, a jolt to his psyche, a small stray firecracker going off that started a chain reaction. The ground dropped away from him. He was being buoyed by thin strings—the strings of the dispassionate, unstable, ethereal heavens which held him in a sea blanket of stars.

Harry realized that he had been feeling this way for a while. He did not see it because it had come on cat feet, had been circling and feinting for ages. He had been irrevocably, slowly, unswervingly falling for his best friend.

***

In the fall of their second year, a big part of human physiology was cardiology. Class was accompanied by one lab per month. The students practiced clinical procedures, like drawing blood, taking the blood pressure, listening to heart sounds with the stethoscope, giving intramuscular injections of saline to each other.

October’s lab was placing intravenous catheters in each other. These labs were usually on Thursday afternoons. Harry, who never missed class, came down with a fever of 103 degrees Fahrenheit the night before. His head and joints ached, he felt enervated and vaguely nauseous, and his face was pale, tender. Everything on his body was pins and needles. Physically he couldn't go to lab, and legally he was not allowed to be there, in case he was infectious.

Louis decided to skip lab with Harry. The lab instructor had to speak to the class about integrity, or the ethics of showing up when class was in session, rather than “if one felt like it.” One of their classmates, Jimmy Selley, stood up to defend Louis. He stated that as class liaison, Louis would have skipped out for anyone, not only for Harry.

“That is not the point,” their instructor had said. “Louis was not sick, Harry was. As it stands, Louis has an unexcused absence.”

“No,” Jimmy protested. “Louis has done more for this class than anyone else. People come to class out of respect to him. He would have done this for one person or twenty. Can't you see?”

In the end, Louis apologized in his gracious, compelling way to their instructor, who agreed to let them make up the lab with a few other students, on the Saturday before Halloween, in the student café. Louis reasoned that the caffeine in the air would perk them up on a Saturday morning and the music would make the grim lab more tolerable.
That Saturday, Harry walked into the café, still not entirely himself. Louis had made him drink gallons and gallons of Gatorade and homemade chicken soup, to the point where he wanted to tell Louis to take the broth and shove it up his ass.

Louis went to the market and bought whole fresh chickens, celery, carrots, onions, chopped them up with the serrated bread knife, the only one he had, and boiled the shit out of them until the chicken fell off the bones. It was delicious, the first three or four gallons, but even a sick man had his limits. Harry could have sworn that his body was slightly purple from all the Gatorade he had drunk, and half chicken.

His heart felt huge in his chest, pounding away, yet he was also a little faint and short of breath. He was the medical student version of Scarlett O’Hara in *Gone With the Wind*, after Mammy had Torquemada’d Scarlett’s waist into the corset and force-fed sweet potatoes down her face. Harry felt —honestly, less than great.

A substitute instructor, a lady named Susan, sat down with the four students and went over the basics. Louis, who was supposed to be there, was nowhere to be seen. Susan had said it was not a difficult lab. They’d get started and he could catch up. Harry secretly hoped Louis would be his lab partner, but anyhow, Stan was here.

“The first thing you want to do is identify a good vein,” Susan said. “It’s not as straightforward as you think. Yes, you can see veins popping out on some people, but they’re not necessarily the best ones.”

She pulled out a dummy demonstration arm, with plastic tubing for veins, covered in a grayish-peach colored silicone skin. “It’s as important to feel as it is to see. On obese patients, or dark-skinned patients, you’ll have trouble seeing the veins. But you can still try to feel for them, if you know the anatomy.”

Harry’s stomach swam round and round. His intestines were comets in a distorted galaxy, pinging around an asteroid belt. The grayish tinge of the dummy’s skin was not helping his lightheadedness. Louis wasn't there yet. *Where was he?*

“Why don't you pair up? First practice on the dummy, which should be pretty easy. Try an 18 or 20-gauge on the dummy. Then try a 22 or 24 on each other. Put the tourniquet on, use your non-dominant hand to feel around the veins. Don't pick the largest, most superficial veins; they are usually the most roly-poly. They’ll blow almost every time.”

Harry sat opposite his partner, Stan Atkinson. Stan picked up a tourniquet and said, “H., I’ll volunteer to be first, if you want. I don’t mind.”

Harry pulled the tourniquet over Stan’s right bicep and tightened it. He picked up a 24-gauge IV, checked which way the needle’s bevel was pointed, and then gently pressed the skin to feel for the vein. A hint of blue was seen under Stan’s pale skin. Harry rubbed a damp pad of alcohol over Stan’s antecubital area. The IV catheter entered the skin; Stan involuntarily jerked his arm away, just a fraction of a centimeter. It was enough for Harry’s hand to jump.

“I’m sorry, Stan,” Harry rushed. “Are you—are you all right?”

“I’m fine. I’m okay. Keep going, H. Don't worry about me.”

Harry advanced the catheter in slow motion. A flash of blood came into the hub. Harry stopped, hesitant.
Susan came by to check on their progress.

“Go on, Harry,” she said. “Just a millimeter more, then withdraw the needle and push the catheter in.”

Harry pushed the catheter a bit more. He tried to do exactly what Susan had instructed, but there was a resistance to the needle. By the blossom of a bruise under the skin, he could tell that the vein was blown. Damn. He could also see Stan fix his jaw tensely.

“It’s alright, Harry,” Susan said. “I think I blew the first forty IV’s I tried. You’ll get it eventually. I’m sure you will. Why don’t you switch places now, and let Stan have a try?”

Harry sat on his stool, his elbow on the table as Stan fastened the tourniquet. Coldplay’s *Fix You* drifted over the sound system. Ironic, Harry thought. He snorted in nervous laughter.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Louis walk into the café, calling out a greeting, hands up in the air to high-five the barista behind the counter. *Well, it's about time, Danny Zuko.*

As Stan advanced the IV, Harry, watching the plastic catheter go into his own skin, suddenly saw flashes of light in front of his eyes, like Fourth of July sparklers. His lips tingled and he could feel every molecule on his face, like a million moths kissing him. His eyes flowed away from watching his skin and scanned the room without purpose. Random colors drifted across his visual field. He could no longer feel his fingers or toes. *What an odd sensation,* he thought, just before he lost consciousness.

The next thing Harry felt was his head doused in cold water, and someone leaning over him. His face was under a *meat* mask. He was trying to breathe but his mouth was blocked—*what the hell?* He wanted to shout, but he couldn't. His throat and chest felt a pressure expanding inside. He was suffocating.

Then he realized that he was breathing—that someone was breathing into his mouth. He raised one hand and pushed gently against the chin of the person, letting them know he was conscious, he was okay.

It was a scruffy chin. A scruffy chin attached to sharp cheekbones, blue eyes, ticklish, exuberant eyelashes. A caramel-colored fringe lapped against his forehead. Harry’s face relaxed; his lips involuntarily softened. He leaned into Louis’s lips, feeling their panicked motion. It was lovely.


“Lou,” Harry looked up into Louis’s eyes. Harry’s hair was matted to the floor, his shirt drenched. Water dampened his cheeks, seeped through his lashes. Someone apparently had thrown a glass of water on his face. He was coldly sweaty and ashen, smiling weakly.

“My hero.”

Harry could feel Louis gently, softly rubbing his forearm up and down, over and over, as if he was too anxious to stop. Harry didn't think Louis was even conscious of doing it. Harry couldn't help it—he leaned a little into the touch, the hairs on his forearms standing on end. His belly felt funny—warm, alive.

“Shut the fuck up,” Louis said. “Stop scaring me. I come late, and you’re fucking coding over here. Are you sure you're okay?”
“Must not be over the flu completely,” Harry said. “You came in the nick of time. Thanks for saving me. What would I do without you?”

Harry could hear Stan laughing in the background.

He held Louis’s gaze as though he were looking into a mirror, as Louis’s expression seemed to return everything he felt. Harry’s large, water-soaked green eyes pierced deeply into Louis’s blue, into the unspoken feeling that lay between them. They confirmed the elation of trusting what was unsaid, what was implied, what was meant, the simplicity of that meaning, the ease of that translation, the boundless atomic burst of feeling that could be summed up in one word: YES.

“Come on, Harry. I’ll take you home. Lucky for you, I just made a fresh batch of my special homemade chicken soup.”

Harry blinked.

“Boo?”

“Yes, Hazzie?”

“About your homemade chicken soup.”

“Yeah?” Louis looked at him expectantly.

Harry’s dimple deepened, “I love it. Thank you.”

***

Just after Thanksgiving, Harry and Louis walked into physiology class and received a packet for lab. The thickly stapled packets had large capital letters on the front saying CARDIOPULMONARY CANINE LAB. Underneath were the words in a smaller font, Tulane University School of Medicine.

“What’s this?” Harry muttered.

“The infamous dog lab,” said Stan. “We’re going to be pretend heart and vascular surgeons.”

Harry wasn’t sure he liked the sound of it. The dogs were from the New Orleans dog pound. They had been screened for disease, and were all relatively young, healthy dogs.

Their instructor explained that the dogs had reached their maximum stay at the pound. They had been on the list to be euthanized in the next two weeks. The pound was overrun with stray animals and unwanted pets; the city did not have the facilities to house even a tenth of them. The dogs that had been selected would contribute to medical education. At least their lives would not be lost in
vain. These were the only kind of animals that Tulane allowed for the lab.

In order to truly understand cardiopulmonary physiology, the instructor explained, one must observe the animals’ *in vivo* response to medications, so one could understand how the heart and lungs responded to stress. They were studying the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems. Cardiopulmonary resuscitation, cardiac stress, shock, and hypertension would all be simulated. Every precaution would be taken to ensure the dogs’ safety and comfort. They would be anesthetized, for one thing, so that there was no awareness, no memory, no pain.

“Surely there’s a way to understand it without cutting open live animals,” Harry protested under his breath.

“Haz, you know this is part of the standard curriculum,” Louis said. “These animals are here to teach us. They’re going to die regardless. Let’s be thankful for them.”

“Still think there’s a better way,” Harry retorted, softly, defiantly. “Technology’s come so far and we’re opening animals like medieval butchers.”

The instructor heard their murmurs and raised his hand for attention. “For those of you who are ethically against vivisection,” he announced, “I will emphasize that this is an *optional* lab. You may complete an extra reading assignment and essay on adrenergic receptors, if you like. But if I may offer a personal opinion, I would discourage you from doing that. This lab is one of the few times that you will actually have your hands on an animal and see live anatomy, live physiology. It is an invaluable lesson to any future doctor, particularly those who are considering surgery. Technology,” he looked at Harry directly, “does not, unfortunately, change the fact that we are animals, with a mammalian physiology, and sometimes still need surgical treatment. I think any of you who have been treated by a surgeon might appreciate the fact that he or she has gone through this kind of training.”

Harry bowed his head and bit his lips. He knew how bureaucracy worked in big institutions. It was almost always futile to protest. There was no time for that now, anyway. They were already being shuffled toward a mini-operating room upstairs.

In the hallway outside, an eerie quietness held, punctuated by the peaky bellows and clicks of ventilation machines and IV motors.

If Harry disliked the hypothetical idea of the dog lab, it was many times worse in the flesh. As they entered the lab, they saw twelve tables, separated a few feet apart. Technicians walked around briskly, making sure that drips were functioning and the animals were paralyzed. The dogs were of various sizes, all mutts, for the most part, with ventilation tubes in their mouths, IV lines attached to their groins, their heads pointed toward the machines and their bellies shaved and exposed. The smell of dog was potent and concentrated, mixed with the smell of iodine, soap, and other chemicals.

“Welcome,” said the instructor. “If you open your manuals, you’ll see a photo that corresponds to the trays next to the dogs. You’ll find local anesthesia, hypodermic needles, medicines, and instruments. I should also remind you, although this hardly needs to be said, please do not name the animals. Do not *nickname* the animals. They are experimental subjects. Please respect them as you would any other volunteer to your medical education. They are not here for your amusement.”

“They were *not* volunteers,” Harry muttered vehemently. “They didn’t ask to be here.”

Louis put an arm around his shoulder. His thumb massaged Harry’s triceps sympathetically.

They worked in groups of four. One person administered anesthesia. Two people did the surgery.
One person gave intravenous medicines. They were supposed to rotate and trade stations every fifteen minutes, so that each person experienced all four parts of the lab experience.

Harry, Louis, Stan, and Jimmy walked to the furthest station, where a medium-small dog, a spaniel-terrier mix, was anesthetized and immobilized. She was obviously female; a scar showed she had been spayed at some point. The animal’s fur had been shaved away in the belly, leaving a large patch of pink skin, the color of piglets. Her knees were curved and her paws hung lifelessly, like meat at a butcher shop. Her chest expanded like a barrel with each compression of the mechanical ventilator. The rest of her fur was silky, the colors of a palomino horse, chocolate swirling with caramel and vanilla.

“She looks like a Lady,” Harry said.

“What are you talking about?” asked Stan.

“From Lady and the Tramp,” Harry said. “Look at her mouth.”

“You mean muzzle,” Jimmy protested. “Anyway, we’re not supposed to name her, Harry. Did you not just hear?”

“Look at her face,” Harry went on, each word slow and deliberate in his deep voice. “She looks like she’s smiling.”

“That is very true,” nodded Louis. “Good observation, Harry.”

Stan and Jimmy looked at each other knowingly. Life was difficult with these two. Just get a room already, their look said.

The instructor was saying something about the epinephrine, norepinephrine, dopamine, and acetylcholine syringes on their trays. They were to cut the chest open, observe the cardiac contractions, measure cardiac output and blood pressure while intravenously administering the medications.

Louis picked up the lidocaine injection and pointed the hypodermic needle at the dog’s chest. A subcutaneous injection would vasoconstrict the blood vessels in the skin and reduce bleeding. It would also numb the skin.

“Lou,” said Harry, his hand on Louis’s arm.

“Haz?”

“Are we actually doing this?”

“Harry,” said Stan, his eyebrows raised sympathetically. “The time for the elective essay has passed, I think.”

“Lou,” Harry asked, once more, focusing his eyes on Louis.

“I’m sorry, Haz. We don’t have a choice. I think Stan’s right. We’ve got to complete our assignment. It’s too late for anything else.” Harry wrinkled his eyebrows unhappily as Louis pulled his mouth in apology.

Louis proceeded to do the injection, and then they decided that Stan would perform first cut. Harry elected to be anesthesiologist first, to keep the dog asleep.
They ran through each exercise of the lab manual, finally finishing after two hours. Because of the initial delay, they were working slower than the other groups, and looked to be the last group to finish. A few had left already. The dog’s chest was still open, her heart beating fiercely, steadily, its tenacity contrasting with her helpless form on the table. A small pool of blood lay on the towels beneath her. On the last page of the manual, there was only a short paragraph, with one sentence.

“To euthanize the animal, use the potassium chloride syringe (30 cc) and inject all of the contents into the atrium or ventricle of the heart.”

As Stan went to pick up the syringe, Harry’s hand shot out to grab his wrist, stopping it in midair.

“Harry?” Stan said, quizzically.

“Stan, it’s Lady. We’re not putting Lady down.”

“Haz,” said Jimmy, “we weren’t supposed to name—“

“We’re not going to euthanize her!” Harry shouted. Some students turned to look at him.

“No?” Jimmy softly protested.

“Harry,” Louis whispered.

Harry’s raised voice attracted the attention of several nearby tables. Students glanced over to see what was going on. The instructor, piqued by the commotion, sauntered over to their table.

“How was the lab, then?” he asked jovially. “Did you have any questions? Everything okay?”

A round of looks passed between the men, with Harry’s eyebrows knitted belligerently and Stan and Jimmy anxiously glancing from one person to another.

“Just fine, professor,” Louis answered. “We were just getting ready to clean up.”

“Need any help?”

“No, we’ve got it. Thanks for all the work today—it was exceptional. We learned so much.”

The instructor looked at Louis dubiously. He knew disingenuous sweet talk when he heard it. He glared ominously around the table. All four students looked innocent, their faces shining with beatific purity.

The instructor started to say, “It looks like everyone else is almost done. You’re the last group. Are you able—“

“It’s no problem at all,” Stan Atkinson interrupted. “I’m sorry we’re taking so long. It’s just that the opposing effects of acetylcholine and epinephrine were so interesting, we had to do the experiment three times to record our data. Jimmy requested it. It’s his fault.”

“What?” Jimmy protested. “I didn’t—“ Louis glared at him. “I mean, uh, holy cardiac output, Batman, it was just—um—too cool for school, professor. I’m really sorry. I got carried away.”

By this time, all the other students had left the lab, as had all of the lab technicians. Their was the only table still active, the ventilator still on.

The instructor struggled with the decision of whether to allow them to clean up alone.
“As student-faculty liaison,” Louis said, “I give you my word that we will clean up and be out of here in twenty minutes, professor. Pinky swear. I will work for free every weekend in the café for the rest of the semester if you find us in violation.”

“Me too,” said Harry. “I’ll volunteer in the free clinic every day for two weeks.”

“No,” Jimmy—

“He means yes,” Louis said. “Jimmy and Stan too.”

The instructor glanced at his watch. The afternoon was running rather late.

“Twenty minutes, Tomlinson. I’ll be back to check.”

After he left, Harry whooped a cry of victory. Stan shouted at Louis and high-fived him, loudly. Only Jimmy protested, “Twenty minutes?! Are you out of your fucking mind, Tomlinson? We can't sew that fast! Hell, we can't even sew!”

“Can’t we?” Harry and Louis gazed into each other's eyes and smiled.

If looks could cause diabetes, Stan and Jimmy were going to need a warehouse-sized barrel of insulin.

Were they ever going to stop? Everyone else in the room could see it. Jesus.

As well as they could, they sutured up Lady’s incision and doused Beta-dyne all over it, to prevent infection. She could always go to a vet later to be treated properly. Harry cranked the gas to pure oxygen. The pulse oximeter climbed until saturation read 100%. The dog’s tail twitched, then one paw. Soon, her body was shivering as if cold. Seventeen minutes had passed.

“Should we take the endotracheal tube out now?” asked Stan. No one knew the right answer, of course. They weren't doctors. Not even remotely.

“Hold her until she’s trying to get off the table,” Louis said. “That’s what I saw on Grey’s Anatomy.”

“Holy shit,” Stan said. “You don't know.”

Jimmy added, “We’re fucked.”

A minute or two later, Lady was chomping on the endotracheal tube, fighting to get loose. They took her tube out. She twisted and fought until she was out of energy. She nipped at Harry’s hands. Despite wearing surgical gloves, there were scratches and blood stains on Harry’s palms and wrists, cuts through the gloves.

Footsteps came down the hall. A metal door slammed. The boys looked at each other in alarm.

“Get out of here,” said Stan. “Jimmy and I will clean this shit up.”

“Wait,” Jimmy—

“You're the best, Atkinson. And you, Selley,” Louis grabbed Jimmy’s head with both hands and kissed him roughly on the mouth. Louis grabbed a nearby stack of cloth towels, and placed Lady gingerly in them, belly side down. He held her like an infant. Harry glanced back at the other two students, his eyes shining with gratitude.

In his measured, sweet baritone, Harry said, “I just want to say, you're the best friends anyone could
Harry had begged Gemma to take a two-week break so that she could come help take care of Lady. They had immediately taken her to a vet, who traced her papers from the pound and found that she had had all of her shots. Her surgical site healed surprisingly well, for a suture job by second-year medical students. While Lady was tentative in her surroundings at first, Gemma was so gentle with her that Lady soon began following her everywhere, huffing excited little yelps as if conversing. Gemma taught her to sit, heel, and stay. She emptied her bank account buying organic dog food and toys for Lady.

“She’s my dog, not yours,” said Harry.

“Are you sure?” Gemma buried her face in Lady’s fur, covering her with kisses. Lady pulled out her rubber bone and began playing tug-of-war with Gemma. “She loves her mummy best.”

“If you spoil her, what am I going to do?”

“Harry, you’re a grown ass adult,” Gemma said. “Figure it out. It’s one thing to talk like a hero, another to act like one. Spur-of-the-moment rescues are sooooo romantic. Grow a pair and man up.”

Lady’s belly hair grew in, patchy white tufts that made her look a bit distressed. Gemma told her that real ladies always kept their undersides neat and covered.

“She’s not some sissy baby,” said Harry. “She’s my little soldier, my punk rocker.” He scratched her head and tickled her face. “Aren't you, love? Aren't you?”

After two weeks, Gemma got ready to fly home, and Lady was left in the bachelor world to fend for herself.

“Lady, I expect you to keep Harry in line,” said Gemma. “No wild stuff. He’s still very immature.”

Lady gazed at Gemma solemnly, memorizing each word.

“Stay,” commanded Gemma sadly. Even though she dare not look back as she left Harry’s apartment, her tears beat her out the door.

Not that there was any deficit of people who wanted to spoil Lady.
Every other day, Stan “took a wrong turn” on his way home and stopped by to see her. He “just wanted to make sure Harry wasn’t fucking things up.” He held Lady in his lap and gently stroked her back until she almost purred like a cat. He let Lady lick his hand while he held bacon treats for her.

“She’s going to get fat with all your stupid treats,” said Harry. Secretly he was pleased that all his friends loved her. He was more convinced than ever that breaking rules was the right thing to do. They were all rule-breakers together, for him. For Lady.

“Wrong again, Dr. Do-very-little,” said Stan. “Got these from the vet. They happened to be high protein, high calcium treats that also clean teeth.” Stan looked at Lady’s big brown eyes. “Is he abusing you, sweetheart? Is he? Is he neglecting the health of your bones? Is he just a useless sack of shit wrapped around an inflated ego built for masturbating?”

“I’m not, and I don’t,” said Harry. “Don’t talk like that in front of a lady.”

Louis was the worst. He came by at all times of the day and night on the pretext of checking up on Lady, so much so that Harry decided to put a key under a decorative rock outside the apartment for him, so he wouldn’t barge in unannounced at night and expect Harry to come to the door. Louis brought toys, blankets, treats for Lady. On Louis’s insistence, they took Lady to the pet store to be fitted for a leather collar, and had it engraved. Louis was tender with Lady as with no one else. He cooed and petted her, never giving her a harsh word or glance. Gone was the loud, brash, and commanding Louis, replaced by the gentle caretaker, the one who helped save her.

Lady paraded around Harry’s apartment as if she were queen of all she surveyed. When Harry played music on his stereo, she would sit on the red padded bed that he bought for her, her head up, critiquing early 20th century American jazz in its development from blues to bebop. Yes, her eyes seemed to say, while I appreciate the rhythmic and improvisational freedom of bebop, I also regret the passing of the visceral longing and spiritual authenticity of early blues.

After the first two months of the year, as the weather improved and the biting wintry wind from the Gulf calmed down, Harry took Lady out running with him. Her classic leather collar accentuated her warm brown colors, more like a fashion accessory than a name marker. A curly-cue font identified her as “Lady: I belong to Harry Styles.” A jingling tag had his address.

He ran in a black tank top, a thin warm-up shell, and leggings, because his legs were always cold and the streets of New Orleans sometimes kicked up glass splinters and rocks. They ran toward the waterfront, past Poydras Station to the Spanish Plaza, where Lady chased the seagulls swooping down to catch crumbs from the tourists, and Harry watched the undulating waves of the ocean off the harbor. The city noises fell away. They were free from care, their lives sweeter because they spent the time together.

Then Harry would run up Canal Street until he hit North Basin Street, and take a right toward one of his favorite places in NOLA. The spectacular, outsized, dramatic grave markers of Saint Louis Cemetery No. 1 were visible from far away, on the left, across the street from the solemn simplicity of the Church of Saint Jude.

Supposedly the legendary voodoo priestess, Marie Laveau, was buried at the cemetery. Because New Orleans was below the water line, the graves and mausoleums were above ground, bombastic and grand, like overgrown ornaments from the underworld. Harry loved this contrast: the open, small, simple Catholic church on one side, and the melodramatic, celebratory, theatrical cemetery behind a high stuccoed wall on the other.

They ran toward Basin Street Station, turned a right, then took a left on North Rampart to the tree-lined Congo Square, next to Louis Armstrong Park. Apart from weekends, the park was almost
always deserted. It was far from the madding crowds of the French Quarter, unassuming, blandly peaceful. Harry would let Lady loose to roam and explore.

As she inhaled the scents of birds, squirrels, worms, frogs, and other fascinating creatures, Harry would sit down on one of the Hunter green cast iron benches and marvel how history marked this tiny park—how gospel, blues, and rock & roll grew out of the slaves whose owners had given them free time to gather here on Sundays. They came to market, trading stories, songs, prayers, dances, until out of that communal experience grew a longing for a potent music. He could almost hear and see their shadows in the trees. The birth place of rock & roll serendipitously combined the musical genius of slaves, pirates, louche French traders, and the ne’er-do-wells of a diverse port city. It was one of the most moving historical stories he knew.

***

Harry had missed Mardi Gras his first year at Tulane. He had flown to England to visit his father for a week, since school was on break.

Louis hoped that he would be around during Mardi Gras this year, to share New Orleans at its maddest with his friend. Louis remembered every Mardi Gras from the time he could walk, from the first time he had caught a bag of loot from a Krewe of Eve float. The bag had fruit snacks, gold beads, and a fluorescent green water pistol.

He’d never forgotten it—the huge, papier-mâché and plastic heads painted in flamboyant colors, decorated with mythical creatures, the faces scary and funny, the Native-American costumes, called Indians, who wore bright purple and red headdresses walking alongside the parade route, the unbearable collective excitement and happiness in the air. It was better than ice cream and Disney World added together.

“But our anatomy test,” said Harry. “I feel like with my vast knowledge of the human body, I should be getting better scores on the exams.”

“Harold, you are only young once, and you are only in New Orleans once,” said Louis. “Human anatomy will always be there for you. Bienville did not drag his powdered, pantaloons-wearing ass from France to the fucking Louisianan swamps, for you to sit home and study anatomy during the holy times.”

Harry’s face expressed doubt and reluctance.

“Fine,” said Louis. “What are we on now, head and neck anatomy? I promise you I will help you study, all right? Scout’s honor and pinky swear.”

Harry was on the verge of being convinced and Louis knew it.
“Laissez les bons temps rouler, Styles! Friday night, I’m taking you on an oyster tour of the town. Kind of a, you know, appetizer to Mardi Gras. Get ready, Harry, you’ve never known love until you’ve tasted the Gulf oyster.”

On Friday night, Harry changed his outfit five times. Was it a date? Were other people coming? Was it a hangout? The way Louis phrased it was so ambiguous, and Harry didn't want to misinterpret.

On the one hand, wearing a plaid flannel shirt to a fancy place like Antoine’s would never do, but overdressing to have a pint at the Acme Oyster House would signal his embarrassing crush on Louis like announcing it on a fucking friendship-ending loudspeaker. Was he overthinking it? Should he just call Louis and ask him where they were going? Cryptic, mysterious Louis. No, he couldn't call; he might look desperate.

“What do you think, Lady?” he asked his dog.

She looked at him, smelling his freshly showered, herbal scent. That doesn't smell like Harry, she thought. He smelled like a scrumptious cake, but also like sweaty nerves. Like he’s scared and excited but covered in delicious sauce. He paced back and forth, using a lot of energy but going nowhere. His hair was combed in a funny way, away from his face, with crackly gel in it. Harry was a confusion of intentions, ambitions, and desires. What a weird human.

Lady barked once, softly, to ask, where are we going?

“Sorry, love,” said Harry. “I’m afraid you're going to stay home tonight. I’ll have to face this disaster on my own.”

He decided on an untucked dark dress shirt, skinny jeans, and dark brown Chelsea boots. Simple and elegant, suitable for all occasions. He decided to leave the top five buttons unbuttoned. His heart was fluttering out of his chest and he had to let the damn thing breathe. Wouldn’t want to repeat the fainting episode, especially not before any alcohol was in the system.

That’s it, Harry thought. No matter what, he did not want to jeopardize his friendship with Louis. He was pretty sure it was just a one-way infatuation anyway, but he would rather have it unrequited for a thousand years than know that Louis turned him down. It would be unbearable.

***

What have I done?

What have I fucking done?

Louis cracked open another bottle of Stella Artois, his third. It was only four in the afternoon.

Maybe if he were pleasantly inebriated, he could bluff his way through. He could be his usual wise-
cracking, inventive jokester self and turn everything into a laugh.

Too bad I don't have any stronger liquor, Louis thought.

It's oysters, Louis. Oysters to you are like burgers and fries to other people. You know them like the back of your hand. Gulf oysters in NOLA were never more than 24 hours out of the water. They never left you wanting; they never disappointed. If all else goes to shit, at least you will have had amazing oysters.

Lately, he thought he had caught Harry staring at him for long periods of time, but every time he turned around, he found that he'd been wrong; Harry was never remotely looking at him.

Louis knew the value of his own good looks. He knew that people stared at him for good reason: at his angular, fairytale prince's face, at his honey-colored hair, at his chin and cheekbones sharp enough to cut eyes. His shoulder and arm muscles were just right for him, tight and loaded. He was neither tall nor dark, but he knew that he was the center of attention, always, his stance wide and powerful, his self-assurance secure. In spite of his size, he was ruggedly protective. Everyone laughed at his jokes but ran to him when they needed help, when they were hopeless.

He knew that he was spectacular from all angles, but that his most spectacular physical asset was his undeniably superb, toned, shapely, polished ass. The eighth-wonder-of-the-world ass, the ass that broke the mold. It was a drool-inducing-from-fifty-feet-away great ass, a world-class-hurdles-running ass, a Roman Empire-destroying Cleopatra's ass.

He knew that he was popular, that he was envied and coveted. He knew he could easily sleep around. It was tempting at times; didn't everyone like sex?

Sex was natural. It was natural to want it, to like the feelings during sex. Nothing relaxed like a good orgasm. There was no shame in it.

Louis, being an open-minded gay man in the twenty-first century, felt he was more tolerant than most people when it came to sexual games and kinks. As long as there was no physical harm done and sex was between consenting adults, he was all for it. To deprive oneself because of some prudish, preconceived notions about love or commitment was probably (probably) a waste of energy, not to mention a waste of experiences and opportunities.

But lately, he found himself faced with an entirely foreign feeling, a feeling so alien to his essence that it actually came as an revelation during a morning shower.

As he rubbed shampoo perfunctorily through his hair and the warm water and suds ran down his back, he realized, with a start, that he had been feeling restless and emotionally hungry—starved, actually. He was fidgeting more, he woke up often at night wondering why he couldn't go back to sleep, he ate his cereal in the morning with irritation and indifference. It was fucking Cinnamon Toast Crunch?! And he wasn't even loving it?

Fuck. He was fucking sexually frustrated.

What the hell.

He was Louis William Tomlinson. Sexual frustration was for mortals, not him. He could have a fling. He could have a thousand flings. It wasn't a matter of if, but when. Sexual contact was there if he wanted it. He didn't need Grindr or anything else. But the baffling thing was, he didn't want casual sex. It was all right for some, maybe even for the Louis Tomlinson of the past, but not now. He just couldn't do it now. He was restless, frustrated.
And that wasn't all.

It wasn't only that sex was an urge he couldn't scratch. He could, of course, to some degree, like a normal person. He got himself off, in bed, in the shower, on the regular. He wasn't broken, for fuck’s sake.

It was that he wanted more than sex. He wanted to be held, to be adored. He wanted to give love and to receive it. He wanted—oh, God—to cuddle. He wanted all the sickening, nauseating, vomit-inducing sweet talk and endearments and mutual support. He wanted to wake up in bed and have someone next to him, someone who knew and loved him exactly like that, in ripped boxers, unshaved, smelling of faded laundry detergent and morning breath and last night’s dinner.

Okay, be honest, Tomlinson, he thought to himself. That’s not all either.

There was only one man he wanted that with.

Harry Edward Styles.

Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, he walks into mine.

Oh, Louis. What kind of romantic toilet-clogging shit are you dreaming about?

He had no idea how to feel about that. He knew why. If he could look into his deepest soul, he would recognize that this was no lightbulb-over-the-head epiphany. He knew that he had fallen in love with Harry from the first disastrous pancake, from the first time they lay thigh to thigh in his twin bed at Posner Hall, drinking tea together, giggling, passing their time with hands tied like two ships.

Louis was ensnared like a bird in a trap, his heart fluttering like wings, beating against a cage.

He loved Harry’s intelligence and compassion. He loved that Harry always laughed at his jokes, that he lost composure and barked out laughing like a seal when Louis was really on. He loved Harry’s curls, his smell, his giraffe legs and rabbit-y front incisors that made him always, always a kid at heart, kind, innocent, open to the world, learning and dreaming. In Harry’s world, good things were not possibilities but realities. Truth and beauty tumbled together like best friends.

He loved Harry’s dorky-as-hell sense of humor, the faraway, thinking look he got when inspiration struck, the light that turned in his eyes, the slow crinkle in the outer corners when he was telling the joke, his excessive self-satisfaction as he waited for Louis to laugh, the inability to keep from laughing. Harry couldn't keep a straight face—his poker face was the worst. He loved Harry’s big hands and his grotesque, giant, bony, size 12 feet, the golden, curly hairs on his thighs and legs, the veins on the side of his neck, the wrinkles in his fingers and elbows.

He loved that Harry’s heart was bigger than everything, that he loved things without reservation, without boundaries. That he was creative, that the world loved him. He loved the flicker of light in Harry’s eyes when he figured out a problem, his cleverness, his inner snark.

He wanted to suck Harry’s body into his own, feel his chest against his own, to hear his breaths in his ear, to live in his heartbeat. He wanted to put his hand behind Harry’s neck and pull Harry’s face to his, to smell the side of his cheeks and temples and drink in all of him. He wanted to be lost in the ocean of Harry’s luminescent green eyes. He wanted to be a million fireflies in the garden of Harry’s body, to be on fire and alive in the night.

Louis groaned. An oyster tour, really? You suggested that? Only the food most often thought of as an aphrodisiac, paired with cocktails that were sure to make you do something stupid? And here you
are, on your fourth Artois.

He had to take a shower and get ready. Might as well get some of the nervousness out of the way, Louis thought, work the kinks out of the system. Oh, man, did he really think kinks? He didn't mean that. He peeled his T shirt and shorts off, ran the water.

He let the water run over his body. Thinking about Harry, Louis became hard, blood flooding his groins. Stop it, he thought. Fantasizing about your friend, your best friend, is really unhealthy-- isn't that what you learned in psychiatry? It's not emotionally stable for your friendship. He doesn't think about you like that. Don't ruin it.

The water ran smooth and slippery over Louis. He soaped himself, his neck, his back. As Louis washed his buttocks, a warmth built up below, and he keened with the stimulation. He brought his left hand in front to touch the top of his erection, his right hand gripping the base, giving a slow stroke. He felt so much. So much desire, so much confusion, so much yearning. He already had so much, but he wanted more.

The sound of the word “more” triggered a cry in his brain, more, give me more, I need more. He panted harshly as his arms worked steadily, the hot water slippery, compounding his touch. More, he panted. More of you, more of your voice, more kisses, more legs, more hands, more waist and lips and more. Mouth opened to breathe, lips used in prayer, shouting your name. More time. More laughter. More sensation. More. Press into me, surround me, enslave me, bind me, enthrall me. Give it to me. Give me all of you. All of you. I want all of you, I want to taste you, to touch you. I want to swim with you, to drown with you, to take you apart and embrace you. More. Closer. Larger. More, more, more, more, more.

Louis’s voice dragged into a high pitched howl as he came into his hand, each pulse racking his mind with intense desire. Hazza, my Hazza. I want—I want you. I do. I want you—so much.

***

Harry walked to their meeting point tentatively. Louis had picked this place, yet it was just a nondescript house restaurant in a seaside hotel, not an iconic place in the heart of the French Quarter.

Louis was nowhere in the hotel lobby. Harry looked at his phone. Perhaps he’d gotten the meeting time wrong. It was exactly 5:30 PM. Harry was seldom late.

Eventually Harry, impatient and annoyed, walked outside the hotel again. Was today the right day? Surely Louis didn’t forget?

Harry’s phone vibrated in his pocket. Harry took it out and saw that Louis had texted him.

Just had to pick up somthg. Will b there in 5.
Hurry up. The oysters r getting cold :-).}

A few minutes later, Harry saw Louis come toward him, fringe blowing, hands in his pockets.

Louis was wearing a gray cashmere sweater in a V neck. His toned physique and broad chest muscles were defined through the sweater. Underneath, he wore black pants with rolled hems and loafers without socks. Harry’s face was a mess of confusion, his mouth opened slackly. His brain short-circuited while he searched for something to say.

“Harry! Sorry I’m late.”

“I—I wasn’t sure this was the place,” Harry said. “But I trust you, Lou; you’re the New Orleans native. I guess my oyster-tasting life is in your hands.”

Louis smiled so big that his eyes were tiny crinkles in his face.

Harry looked fucking unbelievable today—a February day in New Orleans, and he was practically giving the entire city a free show of his torso, his male physique splayed out like a fucking lion roaring for his pride. Look at him! Shameless! His jeans were so tight that you could build an accurate model of male anatomy just by pouring plaster on them. His ass was shrink-wrapped into the jeans so they could be pried away only by a crow bar, excruciatingly, methodically, slowly.


Louis took Harry’s elbow, turned him toward the restaurant entrance. “You are in for a once-in-a-lifetime, you-won-the-lottery kind of experience, Harry. I don't say this lightly, but I am one of the world’s experts on Gulf oysters.”

“Is that so?” Harry grinned. “I don't think I've ever had one.”

Louis stopped in his tracks.

“What kind of abusive home did you grow up in, Harry? Who hurt you?”

Harry tipped his head down and sideways in embarrassment. “They’re just, sort of, I don’t know, slimy, I guess? They remind me of snails?”

“Say it with me, Harold,” Louis said. “The mild brine of the Gulf waters brings out a sweetness in oysters that has no parallel in the oyster world. Now, we could be assholes, go to Pêche and ask for individual oysters by artisanal farm and time of harvest. We might also specify that they be harvested by a girl named Betty. We’re not gonna do that. Why? Because we’re not assholes, and because foodies are boring. Maybe they eat good food; whatever, doesn't really matter. Do you see what I mean?”

“Because they’re snobs.”

“They’re the worst kind of snobs. They’re insecure snobs. They want to keep their snobbery to what they know.” Louis’s voice always rose higher and higher when he was passionate about a topic. At times he sounded like a little kid, or a songbird, because he got so heated in conversation. Harry, who was almost Louis’s exact opposite when it came to speaking, found this endearing and stupid. His excited voice was one thing that Louis, who controlled everything, could not control. Therefore Harry loved to goad him on.

Louis put his hand on the small of Harry’s back and nudged him forward. Harry enjoyed the frisson
of that touch, a little electric heat that aroused him, the spark of flint before the start of a fire.

“First stop, Drago’s,” said Louis. “Everything else here is shit, but we’re only here to eat one thing.”

“Really?”

“Well, technically two things. Come on.”

The maître d’ seated them at the bar. Louis ordered two glasses of Sauvignon Blanc. Harry watched him with great amusement, charmed by Louis’s self-confidence. A waiter set down a basketful of bread.

“Normally, with oysters, I don’t love the bread,” said Louis. “But this bread is special, and this oyster is special.”

“Oh?”

“This is a New Orleans baguette, Haz,” Louis explained, taking a piece out and breaking off a little bit. He shoved it toward Harry’s mouth, who opened like a baby bird, tongue sticking out. “Feel how soft it is in your mouth? Go on, just close your eyes and savor it a bit.”

Harry chewed and tasted the complex flavor of wheat, the heat of the oven, the round dark comfort of butter.

“It’s super soft, but tough. You can use this bread to pack po’ boys to bursting, you can slather mayo and hot sauce and all sorts of things. And it never falls apart.”

_Like you, thought Harry, soft and tough. Never falling apart._

The waiter came over with a large platter, twelve large oysters opened on it. Harry breathed in the smell of oregano, sage, olive oil, cheese.

“Wow,” Harry said, “I thought we were having raw oysters on the half shell?”

“Patience, young Styles, patience. All in good time. This is how I like to start the night of the oyster orgy.” Immediately Louis regretted his words. He hoped that Harry didn’t notice his cheeks redden with color. He ducked his head down, hoping to regain the casual, bantering tone they had previously. They always, always, always bantered with innuendos, but Louis couldn’t do it anymore.

Louis watched Harry take an oyster and put it on his plate. “This is the famous chargrilled oyster, invented by the legendary Tommy Cvitanovich, head chef. Everyone copies it, but no one does it like they do here. Look at the charring outside, on the shell. But the butter protects the oysters from being overcooked or dried out. See how the oysters plumped up a little on the grill?” Louis shifted on his chair. “And you should dip the bread in the sauce, just once, then take a sip of wine. It’s the closest your mouth will come to tasting heaven.”

“You would know,” Harry smiled.

Louis could just kick himself. He definitely shouldn’t have had that fourth Artois. Double entendres and inappropriate sexual innuendos were tumbling out of his mouth like a massive pile-up accident. _Get a grip, _he thought. _The night is young. You have two more stops._

Proudly and happily, Louis watched Harry follow his suggestions. Harry’s face was one of resigned satisfaction. He had given in to the oysters; they had won him over.
“So good, Lou. I thought it would be disgusting but, actually, I love them.” Louis knew that his face was probably sickeningly happy, but, hell, none of their friends were here to see them, and so what if the other patrons saw them? They could go suck an egg.

Louis raised his hand for the check. “Take it easy, Haz. Finish your wine if you want to, but leave the bread. We’re going.”

“But I thought you said—“

“A true connoisseur knows when to say when, Harry,” Louis said. Harry grinned broadly, as if to remind Louis how full of shit he actually was. They finished their oysters and felt three quarters full, sagging down from the bar stools.

“I’m glad we have a walk, actually,” said Louis. “It’ll give us a chance to walk off the butter. Oh, God. I know I’m going to regret it. I’m adding a mile to the run tomorrow morning.”

“What happened to laissez les bons temps rouler?” Harry asked.

“Shut up, Harry. Don’t use my own words against me.”

“You can run with me and Lady tomorrow, if you like,” offered Harry, shyly. Louis glanced at him. What the actual hell, Styles? Was he flirting?

Louis’s mind reeled. The Sauvignon Blanc was doing funny things with the beers he’d already had. There was an illusion of Harry’s body feeling warmer and warmer next to his. If Louis didn’t stop this hallucination, he was going to have a stroke.

“I’m not sure I’ll be in any shape to run anywhere, Haz, after tonight. But thanks for the offer.”

They arrived in the French Quarter. Louis couldn’t help noticing the beauty of the evening. The French Quarter was always amazing with its louche, overripe, gothic Southern beauty, its balustrades and bougainvilleas wrestling for attention, its street musicians dressed in costume and singing troubadour songs. The sidewalks were unevenly paved in brick, as if to underscore, with each step, how beauty was treacherous and difficult, how getting into something beautiful required pain, penance.

The Catholic city separated sin and holiness so starkly that sin was magnified in all its complex glory. And how the New Orleans citizens sinned! They reveled in sin, they excelled in forgiveness, they embraced the occult, the strange, the damaged, the disappeared; they invented the crazy and the cool and the astoundingly new and fresh, out of the fecund manure of sin.

Louis made them turn under the eaves of Bourbon House. A few tourist groups stood in the lobby, waiting for a table. A large oyster bar, in a half-moon shape, faced the front door, with a chalkboard behind listing the oyster beds harvested that day. Two large men stood shucking oysters behind the bar.

“Is this the place we’re going to have raw oysters? Because I—ooo, I can’t wait.” Harry said sarcastically, wrinkling his nose and lips in an expression of distaste. Despite the good experience with chargrilled oysters, Harry was not at all certain about putting raw bivalves into his mouth. He was afraid he would gag and vomit them back up.

“Just wait,” Louis said. “Larry is the best shucker in the city.” He pointed to the African-American man behind the bar, wearing a blue flannel shirt, with bushy eyebrows. He was probably in his mid-40’s. He shucked a dozen oysters so quickly. It couldn’t have been more than a minute or two. “No sand, no shell. He shucks the whole oyster—foot, tendon, everything, onto the shell.” Louis could see that Harry did not appreciate the finesse of shucking. “Come on, let’s get a seat.”
They sat on the leftmost side of the raw bar. Louis ordered two rum milk punches. The sweetness of milk and vanilla, the bakery savoriness of the cinnamon, the heat and smoke of the rum flooded their mouths, while they waited for oysters to arrive. The bar had Tabasco sauce and lemons on the side, and was filled with adults drinking and slurping, their conversations happy and easy.

“Thank you for taking me on tour,” Harry said, looking into Louis’s hooded eyes. “My tiny Abercrombie and Kent tour guide. What would I even eat without you?”

*Me,* Louis thought. *Eat me.* He was definitely drunk. He was shocked by his uninhibited brain and mentally slapped himself. “I’m not horny,” he grumbled.

Harry’s eyes popped open, “Sorry, Lou?”

“I said,” Louis loudly proclaimed, “I’m not tiny. I’m big.”

“Oh. I thought you said something else.” Harry was popping one oyster cracker after another into his mouth, his hands tapping busily.

“Don’t stuff yourself, Harry! You won’t be able to eat anything when the oysters come.”

“That would be—sad,” smiled Harry. “I usually like to have something nice and dry in my belly if I’m preparing to throw up, so that, you know, it doesn't linger.”

Louis started to punch him, but only managed to tap Harry weakly in the chest. Harry caught his hand and gave it an affectionate squeeze.

“You’re in a temple of oyster goodness, Harry,” Louis said. “Try to keep your voice down. I don’t care if a heathen like you never comes here again, but don’t ruin it for me. Larry is irreplaceable.”

“Got it,” Harry smiled conspiratorially. “I’ll behave.”

Larry, the oyster shucker, set a plate of freshly shucked oysters in front of them. The opalescent shells held tender morsels of oysters in a thimbleful of juice. Harry did not look impressed.

“Here you are, Louis,” Larry winked at him. “Your usual. Enjoy.”

“Thanks a lot, man. This is my friend Harry’s first time.”

Larry narrowed his eyes to assess Harry, as if to gauge whether he was worthy of Larry’s labors. Harry returned his gaze, and raised his eyebrows, intimidated.


“There’s no one like you. Thanks.”

After Larry turned away, Harry turned to Louis and said, “Wow. You do know each other. All this talk of virginity is kind of—stimulating.” Louis kicked him under the table.

Louis and Harry both took an oyster. “Listen up. The way to eat oysters on the half shell is to decide how you want them,” Louis said. “Some like it raw, undressed.” *Shit, not again.* He glanced sideways at Harry, to see if he had noticed. Harry looked straight ahead at his oyster, his lips curled up in amusement. *Oh, he definitely heard it, the little shit.*

“Oh, but myself,” Louis shifted again, “I like it with some horseradish and lemon, maybe a dash of
hot sauce,” he demonstrated. “Then you just put it up to your mouth, and gently welcome it in.”

“Gently welcome it in…” Harry did the same. Louis watched him. Harry swallowed thickly, then took a sip of milk punch.

“When you drink something sweet right afterward,” said Harry, “when you cover up the disgusting aftertaste, the phlegm-y feeling, when you close your eyes and don't think about a loogie burger going down the throat, it's actually—“


“No,” laughed Harry, tears forming in his eyes from watching Louis’s worried expression, “it's actually pretty good.” He put an arm around Louis. “I like it very much. Maybe it's not my favorite thing in the world, unlike, I don't know, raw liver ice cream, but it's not bad, Lou.”

“Fine,” grumbled Louis. “Give me your share. I can't believe you. These poor fellas shouldn't die for nothing. At least not for someone who is a pagan and cannot appreciate—“

Harry placed his hand on Louis’s thigh to stop him from talking. Louis thought he might fall off the stool from the touch. His face stopped moving; his whole leg felt numb, rooted to the spot. An electric wire snaked up the leg to his pelvis, to the pit of his belly button, where his insides stirred like a bubbling cauldron.

This is Harry, Louis shouted to himself. You’ve lain side by side in bed hundreds of times. Don't act like an idiot. Just grin and bear it, you love-besotted village idiot. Just a few more hours. Then you can go home, wank to your heart’s content, read the New Testament, and go the fuck to bed.

Harry’s eyes sparkled. “You alright, Lou? You look a little pale. Are you getting seasick? Food poisoning maybe?” Harry opened his hand and used his thumb to gently drag up and down Louis’s thigh, a slow graze of pressure. He looked innocently into Louis’s face, his eyes just wide enough to be coy. Harry felt Louis’s muscles fall absolutely still, his quadriceps twitching whenever Harry dragged his thumb over them. It was like an involuntary reflex Harry could turn off or on. He kind of liked it.

“I.. I.. muh.. muh.. th..th..” Louis stuttered incoherently. “Mu.. may.. maybe we..we.. should go, you’ll li..li..”

“I'll like the next place better?” Harry winked at him, looking at Louis' useless, dead leg. “If you say so, Lou. Lead the way.”

Louis glared at Harry with a hot fury. What was he doing, playing with me? I'm your best friend. Your goddamn best friend. At least treat me with a little dignity. Don't tease me mercilessly, don't make me crumble and beg in public. You know the effect you have on people—you know you are obscenely beautiful. You're so beautiful, Harry. Why haven't I ever told you so?

They walked down Bourbon Street and turned down St. Peter’s, past the diminutive, faded, boarded façade of the great Preservation Hall, toward Jackson Square. The days were still short, and the sun had set long ago. Louis’s half-drunken state didn't help him. He shivered involuntarily despite his sweater.

Harry, his shoulders hunched and feet picking out crevices on the bricks, scooted closer to Louis to make sure he was alright. When he felt Louis shudder, Harry swung his arm over Louis’s shoulder, pulling him close. They said nothing, but Harry felt Louis tense, his chest become straighter, stiffer. Harry tried to keep his hand steady. He pulled Louis closer to himself, feeling his heat and a thin
“This is where we want,” said Louis, his voice a whisper, teeth chattering.

They were at the elegant Tableau. A waiter showed them to a table on the second floor, by the French windows. The lights of the square were just visible through the window. They could hear the faint voices and laughter of people walking below. A low male voice sang *Embraceable You* in the background. The restaurant was modern Louisiana fusion, and the decoration was in crisp black and white tones, with accents in dark mahogany. The boys fanned out the starched, linen napkins on their laps. A single candle flickered between them. The waiter came back and set down two Booker’s Bluegrass bourbons, neat.

“Louis,” Harry said, “I’m okay if you’re tired. Really. I’m so full anyway. If you’re not up for it—“

“Haz,” Louis interrupted. “There’s a reason this one’s last.”

Harry raised an eyebrow.

The waiter came back with a small plate of what looked like breaded, fried oysters, and a separate plate of dark olives. “Fried Oysters Maison,” he announced, “and Spanish Manzanilla olives.”

Harry waited for any instruction or commentary from Louis, but Louis gazed at him directly and said nothing. His open palm gestured for Harry to start.

Harry’s mouth closed around the warmth of a perfectly fried oyster, the breading providing substance and integrity, the small morsel inside soft, succulent, warm as a kiss. The flavors of garlic, rosemary, and bacon blended in a smokey, bewitching haze in his mouth. His eyes opened in surprise. Louis watched Harry, his vicarious pleasure evident.

Harry pointed questioningly to the dish of olives. “I don't get it. Olives, Louis? What does that have to do with oysters?”

Louis said nothing. From the front pocket of his pants, he took out a small package wrapped in newspaper and handed it to Harry.

Harry gingerly opened the package, feeling something flat and hard inside, about the size of his palm. A small, porcelain dish slipped out. A single dark olive was painted in the middle of the dish. Around the fluted sides was decorated with the words “You” painted in small, flowing red script.

Harry stared at the dish, trying to understand the meaning of the pun. You’re an olive. Olive and you’s. You on olives. You’re all around an olive. And then, something faraway, something barely remembered, clicked into place, like a key into a lock, like a bird cage sprung open, birds released. A veil lifted.

“Where did you get this?” Harry whispered.

Louis smiled gently. “Turn it over.”

On the bottom of the dish were the words, *Made in Barcelona.*

For a long moment, Harry Styles looked at the marking, emotions rushing through his face at light speed, belief and disbelief tumbling over each other. Harry stared at Louis, his eyes ablaze. Louis looked back at him with expectancy, tenderness.

Harry took cash out of his wallet and slapped it on the table. Restaurant patrons stared at him in
curiosity, but he didn't care. He pulled Louis from his seat and dragged him briskly through the
dining room, down the stairs, and toward Jackson Square, holding on to Louis’s hand all the time,
the other hand clutching the olive dish. In the Square, he hailed a taxi and pushed Louis inside, then
roughly climbed over Louis. He gave the driver instructions to his apartment.

Louis watched Harry in the backseat of the taxi through heavy eyes. Harry knew. He had figured it
out, the clever boy.

Louis was so sleepy. He leaned his head on Harry’s shoulder. Was it so very late? He yawned. The
taxi was warm, the staticky radio playing calypso music. The zooming traffic outside was a soothing
whoosh, whoosh, whoosh. Street lights flitted overhead as they headed west from the French
Quarter, each block shadowier than the next.

Harry took Louis’s right hand in both of his, lifted it to kiss each finger, tenderly and slowly. Louis
turned to face him.

“Louis, can I—“

“Haz,” Louis answered, “You can. You can.”

Harry closed his eyes and breathed in the scent of Louis. Louis was all around him, and yet Harry
wanted more of him. Harry wanted to breathe all of him in. “I can't believe you—you remembered.”

Louis looked up to face Harry. His cheekbones caught the light brilliantly, the shadows sharply
angular in the night air, his profile almost in black and white. His eyes were beautifully sleepy.

“Of course,” Louis said. “Always.”

Harry leaned down and brought his lips to rest on Louis’s, barely touching them, a feather’s breath
passing between them. He felt Louis’s heart pass through his lips into his own, the steady, strong
beat whispering *yes, yes, yes.* The beat that had been there, had always been there. The heart that had
given itself so, so long ago, that had separated itself into two and was now whole.

The taxi arrived. Harry paid the bill and got out, giving Louis his hand to help him out. They held
hands as they walked toward the door. Their touch was different now, electrified. At the entrance,
Louis paused, and pulled on Harry’s arm to stop.

“Harry,” Louis said, tentatively, “I’m going to say it once, and as it’s very hard for me to say this,
please let me say it all.”

“Yes, Lou?”

Louis looked at Harry. He was everything Louis imagined and more. He was all Louis wanted—so
much, so much it hurt. All of his reservation disintegrated at that moment, pooled like water from a
 glacier. If he wanted to tell Harry anything, the moment washed it away.

Louis craned his head toward Harry’s and opened his mouth on Harry’s neck, over his carotid pulse,
rested it there. He could feel the blood pounding through, feel the pulsation under his lips as he
sucked the skin in. The pulses washed over his lips, his teeth. He was no longer chilly but burned
with a cold heat. He felt Harry throw his head back, open his neck to be sucked and bitten. Louis
pulled Harry’s shirt closer, held him, lightly traced Harry’s torso, his ribs, the dip in his waist. Harry
was motionless for ten, fifteen seconds, as Louis nursed the wound on his neck, sucking, licking it,
tasting Harry’s skin, lapping with the tip of his tongue like a cat, with an insistent pressure to Harry’s
body.
Harry placed his arm around Louis, pulling him in by the small of his back, whispered into his ear, “Inside.”

They walked wordlessly through the hallways, being silent as not to wake the neighbors. Harry’s apartment was on the third floor, the top floor of the building. By the time they made it to the door, their eyes were wild, their breaths fast.

After Harry closed the door, he leaned against it, long legs stretched out. Louis put his arms around Harry’s neck and angled his face, leaned in for a kiss. Harry gathered Louis’s lips into his own, a bee to nectar, a fawn to the spring rain, every sensation new and fresh. Louis was so good, he tasted so good, his mouth responsive and alive, matching Harry’s poetry stanza for stanza, a green thought in a green shade. Harry opened his mouth and guided Louis in, licking him, tasting him, gently thrusting and darting with his tongue, teasing him. Louis responded by his own gorgeous reaction, his lips eager and rough, his tongue quick and adventurous. Harry’s breaths panted shallowly into Louis’s mouth, his stomach muscles knotted in anticipation, a warm weight pressing down at the base. He was so aroused from kissing Louis.

Harry’s hand rested on Louis’s lower back. Now one hand moved lower to rest on the crest of Louis’s ass, which flickered with an acknowledgement of desire. Harry palmed Louis’s right cheek through his pants and kneaded it slowly, steadily, infuriatingly, his fingers supple and apart, his thumb circling the cleavage of the buttocks.

Louis moaned with a high-pitched whine. “Please—“

Harry kneaded, kneaded, one large hand cupping Louis’s ass and spreading his cheeks through his pants, the other hand holding Louis tightly to him, his tongue exploring Louis. Louis’s hands climbed under Harry’s shirt to find his abdominal muscles hard and defined, sweat glistening at the surface. Louis unbuttoned the last two buttons of Harry’s shirt, watched the shirt gape apart and saw Harry standing unguarded, his face an open book, ravishing, glowing.

Harry stepped forward and lifted Louis sideways, carrying him to the bedroom, setting him down in bed. He gazed at Louis, eyes dilated, lips swollen from kissing, face ready to inhale Harry, to possess him and tame him.

Lady followed them to the door and watched with curiosity.

“Lady, I’m afraid this will not be a group activity,” Harry said, his voice low and raspy.

He turned back to Louis and pressed his face into Louis’s. This reminded Harry of the time Louis gave him CPR, and he couldn’t help but smile fondly. His hero, his fucking, life-saving hero. He couldn’t have imagined that they would be here, doing this.

Harry took off Louis’s sweater and unbuttoned his pants. They were both getting so painfully hard. Harry put his mouth to Louis’s groin and kissed his hardness, mouthed it through his pants, his breath hot and shallow, while Louis writhed uncontrollably, cursing. “Please, Harry. Take the pants off. I need—"

“I’ll take care of you, Louis. I promise.”

Louis took off Harry’s shirt, his jeans, his own pants. They were undressing in stages, as if learning to undress, one layer at a time, a strip tease. Harry held Louis’s wrists, lifted them above his head, and pushed a kiss into his nipple, biting it lightly, pulling it with his teeth, swirling his tongue around it, feeling the erratic rise and fall of Louis’s chest as he struggled with the heated contact, arching his back. Harry dragged a kiss up Louis’s chest, to his neck, all the while holding both his wrists down
Louis thrust his hip up, grinding against Harry’s hip. His cock sought the firmness of Harry’s hip for friction, a sunflower chasing the sun, pursuing it by instinct, turning in synchrony. Harry sucked the side of Louis’s jaw, licked him under the ear, listening to Louis’s high pitched breaths and moans, to Louis enjoying the moment, coming undone. He traced his nose from Louis’s right wrist, up his arm and into his armpit, breathing his scent of sweat and cologne, of musk and need.

“Harry, can you—“

“Anything, Boo.”

“Touch me. Please?”

Harry wrenched Louis’s boxers off, as well as his own. They were in their element, without secrets. Their nakedness tore a layer of self-consciousness away. Harry traced a finger down Louis’s shaft, gently, marveling its perfection and beauty, its anatomical miraculousness. Louis’s tip was wet; with Harry’s gentle touch, his shaft became slippery.

Harry let go of Louis’s wrists and moved down. He licked Louis’s tip, watching it shimmer and jump. Louis tasted like oysters, like the brine of the sea, like rain, like tears. Louis tasted like bourbon and beer and loudness, like rugged handsomeness and protection, like bravery and fun. Louis tasted like a thousand adventures and a dozen consolations, like a treasure and a sex god, like a rescuer and a savior and a guardian. Louis tasted like a lover.

Harry swallowed him down completely and heard Louis keen in agony. He scraped the shaft gently with his teeth, then began moving up and down, in and out, swirling mercilessly, giving a gentle suction to pull every time he came out, a slight push when he went in, adding his hand to the push and pull.

“Harry!” Louis looked down at Harry, at his beautiful, expressive mouth wrapped around Louis’s cock, his heart exploding in tenderness,

“Lou, you’re amazing. I’ve waited—and waited.” Harry’s lips kissed Louis’s slit, his tongue licking delicately around it, before sucking him in again.

Louis responded to Harry like a hand in a glove, as if Harry’s mouth were his home, and he was back after a long journey. The stimulation was comforting and arousing at the same time, relentless, unbearable. He pushed into Harry’s mouth, loving the enveloping pressure, but then held his breath and held back; he did not want to come like this. He gave a gentle nudge to Harry, and whispered, “Harry—“

“Yes, Lou?”

Louis put his hand on Harry’s face, on his sweaty temple, in his wavy hair reflected gold from the bedside lamp, silky and damp. How was this boy possible? He was a mass of long limbs, a spider, his extremities flexible as a flower stem, strong and gentle. He was all heart and soul. He loved all-consumingly. Louis touched his skin, his warm, pliant, sweet-smelling skin. The light cast his cheekbones in shadows. His brows were knitted and his green eyes blazing. His lips were cherry red, swollen.

“I want—I need you, in me. Give me all of you.”

“Do you? Are you sure?”
Louis said fiercely, “Never been more sure of anything.”

Harry reached over to his bedside table and retrieved a bottle of lube and a condom. His eyes met Louis’s, a face full of trust. It was impossible. Wasn't it? That they had found each other. That neither had moved to do this before. It was impossible, but it was possible.

Harry put two pillows behind Louis, making sure he was comfortable. He placed one lubed finger around Louis’s rim and teased him, ghosting over it and circling, playing, before inserting the finger and pulling it out, barely to the first knuckle.

“Lou, are you okay?”

“I’m good, Harry.”

Harry inserted his finger and began to move it, feeling Louis under him, at first tight and uncomfortable, then looser, more open, his groans growing in volume and intensity, his body undulating. As Harry added a second finger, and a third, Louis cried louder, his breaths huffed in synchrony to their movement. His prick was dark pink and stretched to bursting, stiffly rocking on his abdomen. Seeing Louis like this sent firecrackers to Harry’s brain. He was so close without penetrating Louis, even, his orgasm on the edge of his pelvis, ready to explode. A single touch from Louis might have done it. His fingers teased Louis until Louis cried that he was ready. Harry unrolled the condom and poured an excessive amount of lube on it, his fingers trembling. He raised Louis’s leg and pushed in, savoring the warm tightness of Louis, the small contractions around him, small kisses and caresses inside. Louis was so tight. He was so beautifully fucked, so fantastically transformed into a magical creature, a forest sprite, a mythical spirit. Harry was balls deep in Louis’s glorious, world-class ass. He moved slightly faster, with more force, bringing a different response from Louis, who cried in short ecstatic bursts.

“Lou, how are you? Are you comfortable?”

“Harry,” Louis huffed, “I'm more than comfortable. Don’t, don't stop.”

“I won't stop, will never stop looking at you. You’re beautiful.”

Harry pinned Louis’s waist, pushing his hips down, fixing him in place. The feeling of being held captive was doing amazing things to Louis’s body. He was struggling to get loose, yet shuddering with the thrill of his restriction. He was a prisoner of his own physical ecstasy. He felt Harry’s hands tighten and relax, holding him, rocking him, each thrust a sharp burst of pleasure. Harry’s push had changed their angle slightly, and Louis was being intensely, unbearably stimulated.

“Oh my fucking—Oh God—Yes, yes, Haz. It’s so good—“

“Let me hear you—“

“Fuck. Yes. You’re amazing. You make me—you make—feels good—feels—“ Louis was talking incoherently through gasps and moans, obscene, broken.

“Louis, I want you so much, so badly, you have no idea, always, always wanted you.” Harry pulled himself down, kissing Louis’s face, his neck, his shoulders, enjoying the raw, salty, sweaty taste of him. Louis writhed in his climb, responded to Harry’s touch as a live wire, snapping and coiling.

“But Haz, it was always—you, it was, only—“

“Come on, darling. Let me see you, hear you.” Harry wrapped his hand around Louis’s cock and half caressed, half pumped it in time to their thrusts. “You can let go.” The warmth in Louis’s belly
built up to intensity, winding with every pump of Harry’s hand. Louis felt every rasp of touch like a string that went from his heart to his cock, through Harry’s hand, up his arm and into Harry’s heart, and then back through their faces, their eyes and lips, connecting them, in love and friendship, a Moëbius strip of lightning and soothing rain, infinite, stimulating, teasing, obscene and intimate. He wanted to prolong this moment forever.

“Lou, come for me. You're the most beautiful, Louis, the most.” The slaps of their bodies moving, the friction of skin and wetness, the moans and smell of sex, were intoxicating, maddening to them both, caught in an ecstatic pinnacle, unstoppable.

“Harry, I’m—“ Louis rocked his ass as his muscles began to uncoil, the nerves pushed to their firing point.

Harry was concentrating on not coming until he had satisfied Louis, but Louis looked so, so good, his face frantic, eyes wild, his hair tossed sweaty and haphazard to one side, his arms on their elbows and shaking.

“Fuck! Fucking fuck!”

Louis felt dark and light, the rushing of an unstoppable energy traveling down his spine and through his groin. The familiar roll of the release was magnified a thousand times. Louis shot into the air, onto his own belly, spilling on Harry’s hand. His face was a distortion of ecstasy and agony.

Harry moved faster, his own pressure gathering into a storm at the base of his groin, breathing raggedly, feeling the pressure rise and rise, a wave gathering to a tsunami and bursting over every last strand of need, want, love, need, want, love. Seeing Louis come was too much—Harry felt so much for him. Harry cried with each thrust, harder and louder, without inhibition. Louis breathed with him. Louis’s last spasms met with Harry pulsing uncontrolled into the condom. Harry’s hips thrust in short, hard jags.

Harry rode out the wave of his orgasm and leaned forward. Louis gazed at him adoringly, eyes unfocused, his mind three miles in the sky, a half smile on his lips. Harry leaned forward and licked Louis’s belly, tasting its sweetness, its bitter undertones piquant and sharp. Harry licked his lips lasciviously and watched Louis. Louis laughed long and slowly, happy and satisfied, so proud.

He pulled Harry’s neck down and kissed him, licking inside his mouth, tasting himself mixed in with Harry. Harry gave him slow, loving teases inside the mouth, mixing their wetness, their bodies joined above and below, slowly coming down. Harry pulled out and tied off the condom, dropping it to the ground. He cleaned Louis’s face and belly with tissues next to the nightstand.

“I'll get a towel to clean us up,” he laughed.


Louis lay with his head against Harry’s chest, his arm across Harry’s butterfly tattoo, holding his waist. Their chests rose and sank together. To think they had often lain like this, eating pancakes. Louis had so much to say, but he was warm and comfortable, a burn in his ass to remind him of the deliciousness that had just happened, with his Harry, his lovely boy. He closed his eyes for a second. The next thing he knew, Louis was sound asleep.
and his heart was
going like
mad
and yes I said yes I will Yes

The mornings are turning lighter earlier now—some days are warm enough to go out for a run without freezing my assets off. It's great to have someone to run with, even if his short legs can't keep up and he's always trying to cheat. I'm not talking about Lady. I feel like I have an idiot smile pasted on my face all the time, and people look at me funny. I don't blame them. I can't pass a mirror without wanting to throw up. It's all his fault. I hate him for that. No, I don't. Of course I don't.

Something's happening
Happening to me
My friends say I'm acting peculiarly

C'mon baby
We better make a start
You better make it soon
Before you break my heart

Oh I,
I want to be with you everywhere
Oh I,
I want to be with you everywhere

Louis decided that they should see at least two parades during Mardi Gras. The first one, Krewe of Bacchus, was on the Sunday before Fat Tuesday, through the Garden District and going uptown. Louis and Harry invited Jimmy and Stan to come with them. They decided they would split all of their loot and then go for dinner afterward.
They arrived at their meeting spot and set down chairs. The day was beautiful, balmy, sunny. Louis and Harry were in a great mood; they were touching each other more than usual and couldn't stop smiling. Stan figured something had happened between them, but Jimmy was perplexed. Were they sharing some sort of private joke? Why were they looking at each other and, without exchanging a word, bursting out laughing? It was pretty fucking annoying, to be honest. Jimmy wanted to formally protest being left out.

A little past 5:30 PM, they could see the floats coming around the corner. Families had waited by the side of the road. The children were excitedly pointing the largest floats coming down the street. People dressed in costume, some with faces painted, lined the streets. Out-of-town visitors carried cardboard signs with funny sayings: “I Want! Live While We’re Young,” and “Dallas, TX wants beads,” and “A Doubloon for a Buffoon Please.” The atmosphere was joyous and anticipatory. A few yards down the sidewalk, Louis saw a male couple holding hands, their faces painted purple and green, respectively. They waved to the floats passing by, which tossed strings of beads. Louis loved seeing them, loved the inclusiveness.

The decorations were loud and outlandish, the faces bigger than life, theatrical. A second float passed by and a lady in a feather bikini on the float shouted to them, “Boys! Catch!” A mass of variegated beads flew toward them, and they all raised their arms. They shouted and waved their thanks; the lady blew a kiss at them, and wiggled her body suggestively, playfully. They laughed and whistled back.

More floats came by and tossed beads. By the end, they had collected enough beads to take up every inch of their neck space. Louis gave away most of his beads to the families around him. A little girl gave Louis a hug and a kiss. Harry could not help noticing that when Louis hugged children, his face would squeeze shut and his arms wrapped around them completely, his eyes peaceful and joyful.

Later, they had fried eggplant and gumbo at the Royal House. The French Quarter was a mess during Mardi Gras, rowdy, dirty. It wasn't anyone’s favorite place. Street performers were also on edge, watching for drunks and thieves who ruined their shows, stole their money.

The second parade was the Krewe of Orpheus, on Monday night. Louis and Harry went by themselves this time. The Krewe was huge, the parade extravagant and loud. Marching bands preceded some of the largest and most spectacular floats. Jazz musicians played on the floats, their music piped out from loudspeakers. People dressed in bright red, yellow, purple Native-American costumes (the famous Mardi Gras Indians), with full body headdresses, marched along, picking parade watchers out to dance. They signaled Louis to join in, who pulled Harry’s hand with him. He twirled Harry, spinning him happily. Harry who didn't dance, Harry whose limbs weren't made for dancing, twirled for Louis. Afterward, someone from a float shouted at them and tossed down a stuffed animal. Harry caught it and saw that it was a little stuffed Teddy bear—a rainbow bear with a soft bondage collar. He burst out in his loud cackle of a laugh and pulled on Louis’s arm to show him.

“Rainbow Bondage Bear,” said Louis, “RBB, we’ll call you. He’s perfect.”

“He’s into S&M, Louis!” said Harry.

“So he is,” said Louis. “The bear has a kink, no shame in that. He’s not hurting anyone, is he?”

“No,” Harry said. “He’s too cute to hurt anyone.” A few seconds passed. Harry felt the softness of the bear—his tiny black eyes, his carefree smile, his daring, flamboyant rainbow colors. The idea that Louis was his boyfriend sank in, wrapping him in warmth.

“Always,” replied Louis. Their eyes met, and Louis saw that Harry’s eyes glistened. He gave Harry’s hand a squeeze. “Be happy, Harry. Love is love. No one can take that away from us.”

***

A week after Mardi Gras, after the last doubloon had been swept away, after the last cocktail glass had been thrown into the trash, Louis walked to Jackson Square on a Sunday morning to buy beignets for him and Harry.

Harry was still asleep when he left, at 8 AM. Louis decided to take Lady for a walk. Normally he couldn't be bothered to get out of bed before noon on a Sunday, but today he had woken up early on his own, feeling great. He left Harry purring in the softness of his bed, his hair a halo, his forehead damp.

Lady trotted proudly on her leash, surveying her realm with the elegance of royalty, nodding hello to her subjects. Louis watched the warm Gulf wind lift a plastic bag off the ground and carry it aloft, sailing on an invisible magic carpet. The streets were empty. Party goers were sleeping off their hangovers. Tourists were getting on airplanes. Birds tittered above the rooftops. All around, chartreuse buds were opening on trees and tendrils pushed through the ground. Spring was awakening.

At the Café du Monde, Louis got into a long line under the awning, which snaked under two corners. A jazz quartet—sax, percussion, bass, and guitar—were just setting up, too early for the Sunday brunch crowd. Louis finally got his order. The hot beignets puffed out the paper bag, suffusing the air with pops of confectioner’s sugar. Louis walked back toward the Gulf.

He heard an acoustic guitar playing a little ways down the street. A male voice was singing, a folksy, lovely tune. No one seemed to be paying attention to him.

“Lady, heel,” Louis pulled Lady short of the guitar player. An open guitar case lay in front of him, the purple felt worn down in spots, coins and bills strewn forlornly within.

I've seen love go by my door
It's never been this close before
Never been so easy or so slow
I've been shooting in the dark too long
When something not right it's wrong
You're gonna make me lonesome when you go
Louis listened to the whole song, then put $5 in the guitar case and turned to go. It was a romantic tune with pretty words, but Louis was perturbed by the sentiment of the poem. The singer seemed to be in the middle of a love affair that he was ready to give up—yet he continued to engage in it. It was wrong. It was worse than deluding a lover—it was deluding yourself. Louis could not imagine doing that; it seemed morally dishonest to him. If something was over, it was more honest just to let go.

“You're not going to believe the moronic song I heard today,” he said to Harry. They were eating beignets in bed. Harry had a ring of sugar around his mouth—he looked like a bedridden clown.

Louis sang what he could remember. “What kind of idiot writes this shit?”

Harry laughed. “The genius kind,” he said. Harry reached across the nightstand for his phone. After a few clicks, acoustic guitar streamed out from the tiny speakers. “This sound like it?”

“That's it! Exactly!” Louis exclaimed. “What a horrible singing voice. He sounds like a goose being strangled in English. No wonder he’s not around anymore. One-hit wonder?”


“Well, the song can fuck off,” Louis said. “What kind of fake-ass sentiment is this? It's disingenuous. I love you even though we're going separate ways. I love you even though I know you're going to be dead soon.”

“Hmm,” said Harry. “Is that what it really means?” He pulled Louis’s back to his chest, swung his hands across Louis’s belly and wrapped Louis’s smaller hands in his.

“Well? What do you think it means? I'll be lonesome when you're gone. How else can you interpret it?”

“I think,” Harry said in his slow, contemplative way, “it means that the singer knows relationships will go through bad times—rough patches. Like every relationship does. Love doesn't necessarily diminish because of them.”

“Every relationship.”

“Well,” Harry answered slowly, watching Louis. “In the song, it seems like a very romantic relationship—as magical as dragon clouds, as intricate as Queen Anne’s lace, as big as cities, as real as the tall grass. But love isn't just about romance.”

“Why isn't it?” Louis turned around, indignant. “What's wrong with romance?”

Harry kissed Louis’s temple soothingly. “Calm down, firecracker.”
“Don't tell me what to feel,” Louis pouted.

Harry gazed at Lou steadily, aware that they were no longer talking about a song.

“Louis! Louis. Don't be mad. Look, the singer cares. It's not that he doesn't care—I think it's just the opposite. He wrote a song, you know? His lover is the song. The song was meant to last longer than any mortal love affair. He's talking about an everlasting kind of love. No matter what happened, what had yet to happen, he was going to tell the whole world about it. Nothing bad could come between them in the end. He was shouting it for everyone to hear.”

Louis was reluctant to admit he was wrong, but he could perhaps grudgingly accept that Harry might be right. Just grudgingly.

Harry turned on his phone, did a quick search.

“Here,” he said, handing the phone to Louis. “Read the last two lines.”

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

“What does that have to do with anything?” Louis growled.

“I think——“ Harry paused. “I'm not sure, but the meaning of the poem is like the song. It means that some things last longer than mortality. Love. Beauty. Truth. This poem—Ode on a Grecian Urn—was written by John Keats, who died of tuberculosis when he was 26.”

“Fucking hell! That's not much older than us.”

“Well, yeah. TB was kind of a cliché in the day, the poet’s disease. They were dying left and right. So, anyway, Keats goes to a museum. He sees this Grecian urn, the people on it, the cows, the little town, a river. Of course, everything on that urn had died thousands of years ago, had turned to dust by the time he saw the urn.”

Louis listened patiently, although still indignant.

“But because of the urn-maker, they lived on. The artist gave them eternal life. Like Bob Dylan singing about love, you know? 'I'll see you in the sky above, in the tall grass, in the ones I love.’ Love makes him realize he sees his lover everywhere, all the time. She’s immortalized in the song.”

“So what?” Louis countered. “A fat lot of good that did for the actual cow. He's still fucking dead.”

Harry looked at Louis’s handsome face, the hairs that curled at the nape of his neck, his sky-blue eyes, his lively expression. It was hard to imagine him at any other age; he was dazzlingly, amazingly alive, gorgeously there.

In any case, the argument was moot. Harry turned Louis around and kissed his cheeks with sugary lips, getting powdered sugar everywhere.

“Boo,” Harry said. “You've got sweet cheeks.” He grinned at his own pun.

“You're ridiculous.”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “Ridiculous for you.”
Ever since the dog lab, Harry had been thinking about a way to study cardiac physiology without dissection, on live subjects. He had talked to the physiology professor, who didn't seem at all interested in what he had to say. Harry knew that no other medical student really shared his obsession—he was obsessed, he admitted—with this topic. They didn't want to tell him that he was being boring, that they'd lost interest. The semester over, everyone was just relieved to move on to the next subject, physiology labs behind them.

After an online search, Harry found a professor at John Hopkins, Dr. Ulysses Nestor, who was doing extraordinary, original work. His work combined micro-robotics with cardiac surgery. He was working on a way of delivering medications to the coronary arteries, by directing micro-robots to the arteries. In addition, micro-robotics would be used to perform microvascular surgery based on computer tomography imaging results. Harry had some laboratory experience with bacterial research, but this technological research was completely foreign to him, and sounded exciting. He wrote to Dr. Nestor, hoping for a way to work with him long-distance. Instead, he was surprised when Dr. Nestor emailed him back, asking to speak with him by phone.

“I have a promising project, Harry, that needs a medical student as a research assistant,” said Dr. Nestor. “The previous student decided not to continue with the project, and although I have advertised, we have not found the right candidate. There is some urgency, as the research relies on results before the end of the grant cycle, and we have nearly enough data to publish. I know there are some logistical problems we need to solve, but looking at your resumé, I would be happy to help you in any way with a transfer to Johns Hopkins.”

“Professor, I am astounded at the offer. It’s an honor, definitely,” Harry said, his head swimming with the words promising, urgency, transfer. “But I’ll have to think about it.”

“Is three weeks too soon, Harry? I'm afraid I'll need to know by then. Otherwise I will have to extend the offer elsewhere, I’m afraid. You are the ideal candidate, but the research is too important —and too promising—to be put on hold. I will draft a letter to you and have it out tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you, professor. I’ll look forward to it.”

Harry knew, in his heart, that Hopkins was the right place for his career. No such research was being done at Tulane; no one was even interested in it. It was impossible, for a medical student, to start something like that from scratch.

He felt guilty for not talking to Louis about the project. Louis had his own research project with a professor at Tulane. It focused on using the tools of animation to improve radiographic imaging of the body. It seemed that all the hours on video games did translate to something useful, as Louis was doing very well, having presented his research in front of the student body already.
The days passed, and Harry received Dr. Nestor’s letter in the mail. It said that a spot in the medical school class was available to Harry; the professor had discussed him with the admissions committee and a decision had been made. Harry would leave at the end of his second year at Tulane to finish his third and fourth year at Hopkins. No matter how the research worked out, he would graduate with a doctor of medicine degree. The terms of his financial aid would be matched to Tulane’s.

Harry had to talk to Louis, he decided. He had not made up his mind, but it was only fair to discuss it with Louis. He dreaded and postponed it until the very last night, vacillating in his decision.

He came back to his apartment just before dinner. Lady ran to greet him, and he stooped down to rub her back. He looked toward the bedroom. The door was ajar. A light was on. Because of this decision hanging over his head, he had been unconsciously avoiding Louis, and had not been with him outside of classes for the entire week. There was always some excuse: he didn’t feel well, he had to catch up on homework, he’d stayed late to study. Finals were two weeks away. Then they would leave to go home for summer break.

He walked toward the bedroom. All was quiet. Only the hum of machines—refrigerator, air-conditioning—percolated through the apartment. He gently pushed the door open. Louis was asleep in his bed, bedcover over his chest. RBB sat on a chair next to the bed. Harry touched Louis’s hair, kissed him on the top of his nose, then on his right cheek.

Louis’s eyes fluttered and he reached out his arm. “Harry,” he breathed, lazily.

“Hello, sweetheart.”

“Was having a dream. I’ve missed you. Come here.”

Harry sat down on the bed, wrapped his arm around Louis and held him.

Louis turned to face Harry, searching for his lips. The kiss began as a soft reassurance, then evolved into something more complex, more dangerous. Louis kissed Harry with a hunger, a question. Harry kissed him back with tenderness, resignation, reluctance. Louis’s eyes opened.

“What is it, Harry?”

Harry looked down, miserable. He was terrible at lying. “I need to tell you something, Louis. I’ve been meaning to.”

“Of course, darling. Tell me.” Louis’s blue eyes were wide open, questioning.

“I’m sorry. I meant to say something earlier. I have—I’ve been talking to a professor at Johns Hopkins, Dr. Ulysses Nestor—well, it doesn’t matter who he is. We’ve been discussing a possible research project.”

“What? What are you talking about, Harry?” Dread poured into Louis. “Why Hopkins?” He watched as Harry’s face struggled with composure. Louis was afraid of what he saw there—uncertainty, fear, guilt.

“He’s the lead researcher on a micro-robotics project. It is cutting edge, Lou, the forefront of micro-robotics research.” Harry paused again. He chewed his bottom lip, agonizing. “He’s—he’s offered me a position.”

Louis’s mind raced with possibilities. Surely Harry wouldn’t do something so drastic. Surely he wouldn’t. Not without discussing it.
Louis asked, “Do you mean for the summer?”

“It’s a long term project.” Harry said, chewing his lip. “He’s asked me to transfer to Hopkins.”

Louis sat in shock. Harry must have been having conversations with the professor for a while, for everything to have transpired. Yet he had mentioned nothing to Louis. Not only were they lovers, they were best friends. They knew everything about each other. That’s what Louis loved—they had no need to keep secrets. Louis felt a million things at once: confusion, disbelief, betrayal, anger.

Louis asked, feeling a taut wire across his heart, “What did you decide?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

Harry looked at Louis, and then looked away. Louis searched Harry’s face for reassurance. He was met with an uncomfortable silence.

It was true. Louis acted out of resentment, in part. He felt diminished, neglected. He was worth so little, so little to Harry, that this major decision had not even once been broached with him. There hadn’t even been a hint of, Do you think this is a good idea? Harry had pursued the research single-mindedly, with a laser-beam focus on his career. It was enviable, really, that the boy could think so clearly for himself. The lamb had grown up, and now he was a tiger.

On the other hand, Louis, with his brilliant deductive mind that always saw five steps ahead, that always anticipated every argument, always knew every punchline, realized that this wasn’t completely honest. If the prospect was less than spectacular, Harry would have refused to go. That he was hesitating at all was because the project was really great, that it would be an enormous boost to his career, but he was holding back for a reason. He was afraid of hurting Louis.

_Coward_, thought Louis. _I would have understood. I could have helped. But maybe our expectations were crossed. Maybe we never wanted the same thing._

_Wait a fool I was._

All that talk about an everlasting love. It was prettier in a song, after all.

Part of Louis understood that Harry was trying to protect him. But maybe Harry was protecting himself, too.

In that split second, Louis decided what had to be done.

“If you’re so unsure, Harry,” Louis said, “maybe you should just go. Maybe there’s nothing here to stay for.”

“What?”

Harry’s head jerked up to look at Louis. It registered his shock and hurt, as if Louis had punched him. Louis’s face was impassive.

“What we had was fun, Harry. But it was just for fun. Wasn’t it?”

Harry’s lips opened slightly. His eyes stared straight into Louis’s, his wounded expression breaking Louis’s heart. Pain, regret, sadness passed over his face.

“Lou, do you really mean—?” Harry stopped, his voice cracked, unable to say more.
“I mean, look, Harry. We’ve got our whole lives ahead of us.” Louis tried to keep his voice steady, his tone low. “We’re obviously not right for each other. We gave it a go. We should move on.”

Harry opened his mouth to protest, but Louis put a hand up to stop him.

“You’re a hot guy. I’m sure you’ll rebound in no time. I’m planning to. Life’s too short for regrets. Let’s not make the good-bye terrible.” Louis’s face registered none of the heartache he was feeling. It was defiant and stoic.

Harry stared at Louis for another minute. He was choked with emotion, out of words. He took Louis’s hand and moved to kiss Louis, and Louis could not deny him.

Louis met Harry’s open lips with a kiss of violence, of hopeless, sadness, and bleakness, a kiss to destroy intimacy, a kiss to communicate only lust, need, and selfishness.

Louis crowded into Harry’s space and held him roughly, spinning him into the bed. He stripped off Harry’s clothes with a feral wildness, with the burning anger of valediction. He could see Harry’s nervousness and confusion. Louis was hurting, and he was glad Harry was hurting, too. He wished he could tell Harry just how much.

From the bedside table, he picked up two strands of Mardi Gras beads, from the day of the Bacchus parade.

He took Harry’s wrists and bound them tightly with the beads, painfully constricting them, the beads biting into Harry’s soft flesh. Harry’s mouth opened in surprise, but was silenced by Louis’s lips and tongue, probing selfishly, licking, biting, drawing out the pain and hurt. He took Harry’s left nipple into his mouth and sucked, with a steady frenzy, painfully enough for Harry to twist in bed, then lazily, insouciantly licked around the nipple and down his body, to the trail of hairs leading down to the pubis.

“Harry.” Louis looked up Harry’s magnificent torso, whose every inch he knew, whose hardness and softness he had memorized.

Harry looked at him, eyes searching. “Lou?”

“Stop me if you don’t want this. It's sex, and it will be good.” Louis added, “One for the road.” A pause. “Okay?”

Harry shook his head. “I—Lou.” Harry was on the verge of tears. “I do. I want you. You know I want you, but not like this.” Harry paused and swallowed, gathering his voice. “Can we talk?”

“What's there to talk about?” Louis asked. His tone was sarcastic. Haven't you already decided, for both of us? it said.

He saw Harry turn his head away. He might have seen Harry’s eyes glisten.

“We can just walk away. No harm, no foul,” Louis said. “Do you want me to stop?”

“Please, Lou—“

“Do you want to stop?” Louis asked coldly.

Harry looked down, his hands twisting the beads. Silently, he blinked a tear away.

“No,” Harry whispered. “Don't stop.” Always, with you. He wanted any part of Louis, any part he
could have.

“Just say no,” Louis said, “if you want to stop.”

Harry fell into silence as Louis licked up the side of his erection, causing Harry to twist, his wrists trapped by the beads. Louis watched Harry for any signs not to go on, for a word or a gesture. But he knew Harry wouldn’t; he knew Harry.

Louis knew how Harry’s tip was most sensitive, how he loved when Louis gagged on his length, spit around his lips, tongue on the tip. Louis was giving him everything in a cold and calculated way, knowing that Harry would respond, couldn’t help but respond, his touch so familiar, but without talk, without tenderness. Harry moaned involuntarily. Louis increased the pull and suck on Harry’s cock, until he knew Harry was close. Then Louis abruptly stopped, and pulled out. Harry thrust his hips into emptiness, twitching.

“Are you sure, Haz? Go on?”

Silently, Harry looked at Louis, his heart breaking, and nodded, Yes.

Louis opened the night table drawer and drew out a condom, rolling it onto Harry. Then he took out the lube, slathering his hand with it. Methodically and quickly, he prepped himself, in full view of Harry, scissoring himself open. He could see that Harry was fully aroused, cock hard, leaking into the condom, but his face showed something else now—anger. It registered lust, arousal, fury. He was perplexed by Louis’s refusal to have a conversation. He was wounded by Louis’s cruel and casual words.

Louis slowly, cautiously lowered himself onto Harry’s length, their bodies once again connected, the feeling of unity, the rightness of it, flooding his senses. Harry nudged inside, surrounded by Louis’s warmth. Always, always, always so good with you, Louis thought. The feeling of sex had always been connected, for them, with love and intimacy, and their brains couldn't turn it off. Nevertheless, Louis tried to drown it with anger.

Once Harry was completely inside him, Louis rode him swiftly and hard, swirling his hips to hit his spot immediately, again and again. He had one hand across Harry’s mouth, silencing him. Harry thrust forward, pushing into Louis, their rhythm fast, smooth.

Louis’s hand stroked himself, his steady pulls rough. The last time, he thought. The last time, the last time, the last time. Harry’s wrists worked back and forth in increasing frustration until, with a sudden, muscular burst, he broke the Mardi Gras beads, scattering them to the ground.

Both of them stopped, a moment of wordless wonder passing through their faces. Louis’s mouth opened in astonishment. Harry’s wrists were blood red. The muscles in his shoulders tensed and rippled. The beads bounced noisily along the wooden floor.

Harry took hold of Louis’s hips, touched him tenderly through the waist and buttock out of habit, and then, gripping Louis’s skin, hard enough to cause pain and bruising, thrust harder and harder, until his ass was no longer on the bed, was lifted into the air, taking Louis with him. Harry seemed to push and pull Louis exactly how he wanted to. His legs were so strong. Louis felt like he was on a ride he couldn't get off, didn't want to get off. He wanted it—the bruising, the pain, the stimulation, the deep grind. Against his inclination, he matched Harry’s rhythm and felt himself climbing closer. The sensations were stronger, rougher and harder than any time they had had sex before. It hurt him physically. Louis felt pushed to the border, and then ruthlessly shoved over. Harry was relentless, his face unreadable. He overpowered Louis. Louis tried to resist him, but Harry pushed him so hard. He was so fucking controlling; Louis fell and fell. With a loud cry, Louis shot onto Harry’s abdomen,
his muscles contracting helplessly, strand after strand of come leaping out.

Defiantly, Louis dipped his fingers and licked them, one by one, tasting himself, slowly staring at Harry with his chin raised. Harry glared at him, furious, stilling for a second.

Louis then ground down on Harry, circling his hips and squeezing him, making this unforgettable, the sexual pleasure paired in equal part with sadness, with accusation. Harry closed his eyes, chasing only the friction, palming Louis’s ass with his hands, spreading him and cleaving him, massaging him, bruising him. The violence of his feelings guiding him, Harry surged forward and came into him with an elongated moan. He spurted into Louis in strong beats, seemingly endlessly.

Their bodies slowed in a decrescendo, the chase over, the harmonies dissolving into dissonance.

Louis bent down to kiss Harry then, a genuine, loving, slow kiss, a kiss that caressed him in sympathy, that tasted Harry wholly, seeking desperately to remember every shadow of every kiss, every time they held hands, every hug and joke, every ring of laughter. The moment was suspended for a long time, as Harry held Louis’s hips and their faces were close, inches away. Then Louis got up from Harry, took off the condom, and wiped him clean. Louis walked with a burning pain. Harry’s slender wrists were slashed with bright red marks, the surface blood vessels broken, bruises spreading like an ink blot.

With Harry still in bed, Louis got dressed and came to stand next to the head of the bed. He was bruised and walked painfully, a pain to remember. He wanted so much to reach out and hold Harry, to reassure him, to tell him everything would be fine. He was unmoored, lost. He wished none of this had happened. His face registered none of these emotions. His eyes stared coldly, clinically ahead.

“Please go, Louis,” said Harry, his face hard, wet with tears.

Louis turned around and left.
Chapter 3

At Massachusetts State Hospital, every Tuesday morning was Grand Rounds.

The interns doing their general surgery rotation gave the “patient of the day” synopsis. The residents’ teams selected a patient in the hospital whose disease or presentation was especially interesting. On rare occasions, an interesting patient may end up being written up in a case study, published in the weekly New England Journal of Medicine.

On this day, the responsibility fell on Louis. He was presenting a case of a 16-year-old girl with mononucleosis who came to the hospital emergency room with symptoms of cholecystitis, inflammation of the gallbladder. Although this disease was not common in the pediatric population, the patient had unusual elevation of her liver enzymes, signally inflammation. In addition to removing her gallbladder, she had needed extensive treatment of her liver, with anti-viral and immunosuppressive medicines.

The presentation required rote memorization of a two-minute history. Chief complaint, history of the present illness, past medical history, exam, laboratory and radiographic data, then surgical and pathological reports—the presentation was always in this order. Normally, the presentation was the only time that interns would engage in public speaking in front of the entire surgical staff: interns, residents, attending physicians, visiting surgeons. It was a demonstration of team work, of public speaking skills, of intellect, of professional bearing.

The interns were expected to work on the talk themselves, but the senior residents on the team, who had all been through the same training, patiently coached and supported the interns. Louis had written the report two nights before the presentation, had transcribed the speech and carried the script with him on his phone. He pulled it out during any spare time he had to memorize and go over the speech in his head. Jess Rabenweiler was his senior resident. She had corrected any awkward wording on the report and given him a thumbs up for the presentation. All he had to do now was to deliver it.

Grand Rounds was given in the Warner Auditorium, a narrow and long lecture hall with rows of plush seats set on elevated steps, like a movie theater. The attending surgeons often sat in the front row. They rarely interrupted the “patient of the day” presentation, since it was a basic presentation of facts and rarely contained any controversy. They were, however, the imperious surgeons who pimped the residents relentlessly, grilled them with their own illogical reasoning, demanded citations in academic literature or academic studies to support the treatment choices. Not unusually, even hardened senior residents became distraught, sweaty, and confused in front of such a panel. The attending physicians represented the cold reality of the academic world, the world of competitive technologies, professional scrutiny, inter-departmental jealousies and politics.

It was the week before Thanksgiving. Since there were no holiday breaks in internship (only the official two weeks of vacation), the interns would be staying in Boston over the holidays. Many had Thanksgiving Day off, as it was an official federal and hospital holiday. Only those on call were working.

Since the beginning of internship, Harry and Louis had managed mostly to avoid each other. They made sure that they did not go to the same parties, even if they shared the same friends. They did not make eye contact in the hallways, nor during internship lectures with Dr. Fernbank. Their friends assumed that they did not know each other well, or that they had a professional or personal dislike of each other, for whatever private reason.
Harry sometimes hung out with his surgical partner, Liam, on the evenings they had free together, occasionally eating dinner out or seeing a movie. Louis came down to Niall’s apartment, or Niall came up, to play X-box games and order take-out. Mostly internship was a grind, a job where they spent 90 to 100 hours in the hospital every week. Their valuable free time was to be spent alone, to decompress, to sleep, maybe to catch up on research. It was an impossible schedule, which made it very easy to avoid one person.

One place that they often had to sit together was during Grand Rounds, where the interns sat in one section. Harry often sat in the top row, alone, just to be able to survey everyone, and also to do his internship work without interruption. Sometimes he worked on formulations for the micro-robotics research and sent the data back to Dr. Nestor, who was a long-distance advisor, or he worked on patient notes so as not to get behind. Sometimes he sat with Liam for companionship.

As the doctors filed into the room, Harry saw Louis stand up and walk up the stairs on the right side of the stage. It was a shallow stage, only three steps up. A podium stood to one side, but interns were expected to stand center-stage, shoulders squared, hands behind the back, when they delivered the speech. There was much in surgery that was similar to the military—the hierarchy of command, the strict discipline, the low tolerance for incompetence, the vast bureaucratic agency, the reliance on accurate data. Also the hazing, thought Harry. Of course no one would admit it, just as they might not admit there was an excess of stress to training at the lower levels. One felt the judgment and the potential for hazing even if there was no actual hazing; the interns had watched enough senior residents, grown men and women in their late 20’s and early 30’s, tear up because they did not have enough knowledge, they could not prove their worth, in front of other doctors.

They read all the time, not only textbooks but journals published every month, keeping ahead of technological breakthroughs. They had to practice all the technical skills of surgery—the sewing, the knot tying, the handling of instruments—on chicken breast, on pork. The rest—the recognition of anatomy, the application of their knowledge of muscles, vessels, nerves, bones—structures they had never before seen in a real live person—were expected to fall into place, to be perfect after two or three tries. There was no room for error.

Harry noticed that Louis, although he appeared calm, was flexing his fingers behind his back, closing and opening his fists, a gesture, he knew, of Louis’s nervousness. Occasionally he would open his phone and glance down at the text, silently mouthing the words.

When everyone was seated, Jess introduced Louis. Then it was his time to go.

“S.C. was a 16-year-old girl who presented to the emergency room with right upper quadrant pain of eight hours,” Louis started, his voice calm and steady, though higher in pitch than normally. “She had been in her usual state of good health until two days prior to admission, when she developed a fever of 103 degrees. Her mother reported that she had developed a sore throat, muscle soreness, fevers, chills, and fatigue.”

Louis had been staring straight ahead, but now his eyes scanned the room in order to make eye contact with the audience. His eyes came to rest on Harry, who was watching him intently.

“…her liver was palpable—pal—palpable,” Louis stammered. “Liver was palpable, and was tender to touch. Her—“ he paused, a look of mild panic on his face. “Um, her—“

You can do it, thought Harry. Come on, Boo, loud loud loud Louis. Where are you?

“She—she denied constipation or diarrhea. On exam, her temperature was 101, blood pressure 110 over 70, pulse 76. Her—her—“
Again Louis looked at Harry and stopped talking, losing his train of thought. His look was a plead for help. *What's the next word? What happens next?* Harry saw Louis’s hands wring behind his back. Louis looked down at the floor, concentrating. Two long minutes passed. The audience fidgeted, someone coughed, but otherwise there was no noise, the entire auditorium waiting for Louis to remember his two-minute case.

Louis raised his head and looked at the audience, a look of pure terror and insecurity on his face. No words came out. Finally, Jess met him on stage and whispered something to him, and he walked off. Jess then continued with the synopsis.

Harry saw Louis walk from the stage and toward the door on the side of the auditorium, pushing the metal bar to exit. The door clanged loudly behind him. The interns looked stricken, some exchanging glances, others gazing at the floor in extreme empathy. Louis had demonstrated what they all feared, the worst case scenario—an intern with paralyzing stage fright.

Harry shoved all of his things in his pockets and stood up quickly, making soft apologetic remarks to get out of his row. He walked toward one of the side doors and went out, scanning the hallways. He didn't see Louis at all. On a hunch, he walked toward the main corridor of the hospital. He caught a view of Louis’s head just as he turned a corner.

Time seemed to dilate as Harry picked up his pace, chasing Louis. This seemed so familiar, a *déjà vu*, like Harry had seen it all before: the script was written and he could not change it. Then he realized, he was remembering his dream, the lake house dream. Louis was in front, just out of sight.

He turned the corner and ran. He saw what looked like the back of Louis’s head and aimed in that direction. Finally, Harry reached him just as Louis was ready to walk out the front door.

“Louis!” Harry called.

Louis stopped, glanced back at him, and then turned his back, resumed walking.

“Stop! Louis!”

Harry touched Louis’s elbow. Louis wrenched it away, saying, “Harry, don't. Whatever you’re going to say, don't say it.” He started walking again.

“Why?” Harry raised his voice. “Why do you have to be like this?”

“Why do *I* have to be like this?” Louis shouted. “I’m not in a mood to explain, Harry, if you don’t know. Why? Why does the earth spin? Why does the moon rise? Why are people born and why do they die? Why do some people have all the luck and others, none of it? Why is it so hard to understand that when something hurts, it fucking hurts no matter how much time has passed by, and it fucking hurts no matter if you're alone, or if you’re in a room with five hundred other people?”

Harry was breathless, silent, the diatribe hitting him like a slap.

“Or that sometimes there's not enough space in the brain, not one *iota* of space, for anything useful to coexist with shitty memories, memories that come up during the most inconvenient—ughh!”

Louis twisted his head and ran his hands through his hair in frustration. He glanced sideways at Harry, who stood rooted to his spot, his tongue frozen.

“So if you will excuse me, Harry Styles, kindly fuck off. I don't want to talk. I don't want anything from you. You don't owe me anything, and vice versa. I’m going to walk around the block, then I’m going back to work.”
Louis turned his back and started leaving. Harry watched him go silently, his desire to comfort Louis balanced by his desire not to hurt him. Then, changing his mind, Harry ran to catch up with Louis. He walked next to Louis without speaking. Louis glanced at him with an annoyed look, and continued walking, faster, eyes straight ahead. Harry walked faster to keep pace. It wasn’t difficult with his longer legs. The silence was only punctuated by the muffled slaps of their steps.

They continued walking down the street, silently, until they were halfway around the block. Out of the corner of his eye, Louis glanced at Harry again, his furious eyes now with a glint, a spark of amusement and frustration. Why was Harry so endearingly dumb? Why couldn’t he follow instructions? Why, despite the changes to his outer appearance, was he the same Harry inside?

“Lou,” said Harry to the air straight ahead of him, to no one. “I’m sorry. I don’t accept. I’m not going to go away.”

Despite his best self-control, Louis had to turn away from Harry. He wanted to slap Harry. He had been through possibly the most humiliating event in his entire professional career. His chances for recognition had diminished; he was a head case, a departmental punchline. Why was Harry talking about himself? It’s not about you. Fucking fuck off, Louis thought.

“I’m not going away. I’m here. I’ll be here when you want to talk to me. Because I—“

Louis slowed down, but continued staring straight ahead, not engaging.

“Because as far as I’m concerned, I’m still your friend. I want you to do well. I believe in you.”

Harry took a deep breath and blew it out, his lips vibrating a little as he did so. He brushed a strand of hair out of his eyes. “So, um, that’s it.”

Louis’s anger had been relentless, in part because of his mortification and shame. But Harry’s words were a needle that snuck in and punctured a hole through, allowing the anger to release. Louis couldn’t talk to him now. He couldn’t. He was still completely, totally furious. Right?

Louis looked down, avoiding Harry’s gaze. The air around him suddenly seemed cleaner and fresher, the sun brighter, the autumnal colors more intense, the foliage shouting their beauty into a human void, beauty that was free, was there for the taking, that had always been there if one only cared to look. The sounds of traffic suddenly seemed louder, more obnoxious, more selfishly persistent—but also more present, more perceived. Life seemed to turn technicolor.

“Was it really bad?” Louis asked.

“Oh,” Harry said, brightening, “it wasn't the worst.” Harry’s smile nearly split his face in half. Louis chuckled mordantly; he knew that wasn't true. “Could have been worse. You just forgot, that's all. Just the one time.”

“The only time.”

“The only time so far,” Harry replied. “We’re only interns. You’ll have another chance. It’s never too late.” Harry’s pulse increased. They were actually talking. Sentences, even.

They had returned to the hospital. Louis’s feeling of failure returned; now he had to go face his colleagues, the residents, Dr. Fernbank, Jess—with the label of the one who crashed and burned at Grand Rounds. He didn’t feel awful though. In fact, he felt a bit—fine.

Louis turned to Harry and said, “Thanks, Harry, for what you said. I’ll see you around.”

Harry watched Louis’s back as he walked away. It appeared that his step was incrementally lighter.
On Thanksgiving, by a feat of scheduling miracle, Niall, Alice, Louis, and Harry all had the day off. Harry and Liam were on the urology rotation, and Liam was on call.

Niall, Alice, and Louis made plans to meet for a late lunch, at 2 PM, at the Trestle Tavern. None of them were in the mood for the overload that was the traditional Thanksgiving dinner. The tryptophan coma would kill them when they went back to work the next day. The Trestle was having a Thanksgiving special anyway: an Irish-American fusion, hot open turkey and gravy on a shepherd pie base, with sides of cranberry relish and green beans, sweet potato pie, and pints of Guinness.

Harry got up early in the morning and took Lady out for a run in the Boston Public Garden. The Garden was overrun with tourists during the summer, but on a Thanksgiving Day, it was almost deserted, only a few single people or couples strolling through the formal landscaping, all the ostentatious summer flowers gone, replaced by decorative cabbages and holiday fare. The large swan boats were locked for the season. Families strolled by Mrs. Mallard and her brass ducklings at the corner of Beacon Street and Charles Street, the youngest kids petting the tiny brass duckling statues and posing for pictures. Lady loved this corner—always a few squirrels to chase, a few birds to scare, some old, knotty tree trunks to sniff around and explore.

Occasionally Harry would see someone with a musical instrument case—a violin or guitar or trombone—sitting on a park bench and enjoying the outdoor scenery. He loved living in a city full of musicians, even if he had no chance to see them. The Boston Philharmonic was in season, and there were loads of other performance groups in the city: jazz, theater, student orchestras. Not that he had time to attend any of those performances. He was lucky to hear music in his own apartment at all, when he had the energy to put on a record, when he didn't fall into bed as soon as he came home, dead tired, throwing a bowl of food haphazardly into a dish for Lady, being careful not to pour it accidentally into his own plate and eat it for dinner.

He had found a couple of great vintage record stores in the city. In Your Ear, on Commonwealth, was his favorite. Digging through the records on a Saturday, he'd spent over $200 in just an hour, easily the best money he'd spent in Boston so far. He found a vintage Pink Floyd concert T-shirt—faded, dingy, slightly too small—that he bought anyway.

They ran through the Public Garden and paused at the Memorial to Robert Gould Shaw and the 54th Regiment. Of all the monumental statues and commemorations in the Garden, it was this simple and moving tribute to the African-American regimen, led by their white commander, that moved Harry most. More than a century ago, they had marched off from right here, on Beacon Street, to die fighting against the idea of slavery. Harry thought back to the lambent beauty of Congo Square, its fecund flora, the green cast iron benches where he had sat gazing at clouds.
They made their way to Arlington Street. Harry crossed Boylston, where the Burberry and Hermès stores already had Christmas decorations up. He made a mental note to check out Yogaworks, just down the street, when he had more time. Turning on Berkeley, he took another left at Newberry Street to observe the calm before the storm. The retail stores would be swamped in a few hours with Black Friday shoppers. The street was great for people watching on most days. Now red holiday ribbons and lights threaded through all the lamp posts; wreaths decorated store windows. The sidewalks were bare of the café tables and chairs that were set out for outdoor dining in the summer. They looked empty, like a bald head without a hat.

Harry checked to see whether the Thinking Cup was open. He was dressed in his running gear—leggings, T-shirt, hoodie, beanie, ear buds in his ears and mobile phone in his pocket. He was sweaty from running and sleep-weary, with bags under his eyes, but his mood was good—the whole day free, a whole 24 hours on his own. He went up to the counter and ordered a double espresso with a shot of crème caramel for himself, and a small cup of whipped cream for Lady. They walked over and sat down at a small table while waiting for their order. Lady curled herself at Harry’s feet.

The door opened with a breeze. Harry was checking his phone when he looked up. He would have recognized that silhouette anywhere, the way he stood, left hand on the hip, cocked to one side, the head tilted at an angle. Lady stood up at attention, her ears perked, and she let out an excited whine. Her tail wagged like a sparkler.

It was too late for Harry to go anywhere. If he was spotted, it would look as if he left on purpose, to avoid an encounter.

Louis turned around to scan the room and saw Harry right away. A look passed through his face—uncertainty, hesitancy, an effort to look casual and not surprised.

He walked over and stood by the table.

“Haz. Out running?”

Harry couldn’t help the constriction inside his chest when he heard the term of endearment. It's nothing, he thought. He's a polite person. Just trying to be friendly. It doesn't mean anything. Be good. Behave. Take it easy.

“Taking Lady out for a run,” he said.

At her name, Lady let out a short, sharp bark. Her tongue lolled excitedly. She charged toward Louis.

Louis seemed to notice Lady for the first time. Looking down, his demeanor changed. All the apprehension fell from his face. His expression was sunlight shining through the darkness, a blossoming dawn. He bent down and scooped Lady’s face into his hands, ruffling her fur.

“Hello, sweetheart,” he said softly. “Haven't seen you for a long time.”

Harry watched Louis interact with Lady with a pang. Lady licked Louis’s face and tapped her paws on his hands. Louis rubbed her belly where her scars were, her back, her face. Lady closed her eyes and then shook her head, barked again once, twice. She circled Louis and jumped up and down, nuzzling him.

“Lovely, lovely girl. What a lovely girl you are,” said Louis. “Are you enjoying the sunshine? Are you having fun?”

Harry said nothing. The barista called his name and he went to the counter to get his drink. When he
came back, Louis was still there, playing with Lady.

“Louis, would you like to—uh—if you're not doing anything else—“ Harry’s hand motioned for Louis to join him.

Louis massaged his chin, not sure what to do. He looked at his watch: it was still early. The barista called his name, and he raised one finger, made a sign for Harry to wait.

When he came back, he set his cup down on the table and sat down.

Louis said, “I’m meeting Niall and Alice later, so…”

“Yeah, no problem,” Harry said. “I should probably—also—uh, work on my research today.”

Right. The research.

“It's going well, I take it?” Louis asked casually.

“Yeah, seems to be. Pretty well. We have an article out this month, in Science. Lead article, actually. We’re pretty excited.”

“Fantastic,” said Louis, feeling just the opposite. “And you’re the lead author, I presume?” he asked, jokingly.

“Oh, yeah,” Harry looked sheepish. “Actually, I am.”

Louis looked up, astounded. Fucking hell? The lead article was usually reserved for the research that represented a major breakthrough, or has significant value to academics or industry. The discovery of the double helical structure of DNA, for example, would be lead article material. It was almost unheard of for a medical student to be lead author, and for a lead article! It meant that all reprint requests would go to him, that his name would be the first cited for that article from any other publication. It meant that he would be spoken of as the representative for this particular discovery. It was a major item in his resumé. It was huge.

No wonder you have a grant, Louis thought. You're the wunderkind of the medical robotics world. In the race for achievement, you were already out of the stratosphere while everyone else was still trying to build their rocket boosters.

“Congratulations, Harry. That's huge.”

“Thanks, thanks a lot,” Harry said. He played with his cup, his fingers nervously tracing the stem. “How are you, Louis? How’s your research?”

“Research is fine. I've found someone to work with here, Dr. Enright, who does computer graphic design in medicine. I mean, we’re not publishing lead articles in Science or anything, but yeah, it's going okay.”

“And everything else?”

“Good, good. I mean, you know, looking forward to the emergency room rotation. Heard that one’s really cool, a lot of hands-on interactions with patients.”

They sat a while, knowing that all the small talk was shielding them from anything more difficult. Perhaps, thought Louis, we can end it like this. No fireworks. Just a fizzle. After all, most people can't choose how they actually die. It comes. People just go.
“Do you always run around here?” Louis asked.

“I like the Public Garden,” Harry said. “Lady does, too. Always interesting things to see. I have—kind of—a routine now, two or three miles, and sometimes I add to it a bit, if there’s time.”

“Oh? Do you live—I mean, is this far from where you live?”

“No, no, I’m just off Charles Street, so it’s close, actually.” Harry leaned down to scratch Lady’s head. Lady was contentedly licking the remnants of the whipped cream, her mouth ringed in white. “Sometimes we go on the Esplanade—when the weather’s good. I run down to Boston University, cross over Harvard, run back to M.I.T. Good run. That’s about six, seven miles?”

“The Esplanade—hmm. I haven’t been there.”

“You really should, Louis. It’s gorgeous. The boats on the Charles River—there are people learning to sail in the summer. Wind-surfers. Scullers. Regatta races sometimes? And concerts at the Half Shell? We should—I mean, you can, you know, check it out. In the summer especially.”

Louis sipped his tea. “I thought the Esplanade was not safe? We see patients sometimes, motor vehicle accidents, muggings.”

Harry laughed. “Well, then you really couldn't go anywhere, can you?” He took a drink of coffee, the last drops getting cold. “Boston is treacherous for pedestrians; it’s well-known. Highest rate of accidents, or something like that, amongst all the large cities. But lowest rate of fatalities—no one can drive very fast in traffic jams, so no one gets hit very hard. Lucky for us, eh?”

Louis agreed. Drinks finished, they gathered their things to head out the door. Harry clipped Lady’s leash to her collar. Louis saw that she still had the same collar that he’d picked out with Harry, with the same inscription, “Lady: I belong to Harry Styles.”

Harry hesitated outside, turned toward Louis.

“Lou—Louis, there's—um—I’m going to pop in next door, at the church,” Harry raised a hand and pointed his thumb toward a large, imposing, solemn church set back from the street. “There are some stained glass windows I want to see. Do you want to—only if you want—do you want to join me?”

“Are you asking me for a date?” Louis said, and immediately regretted it, because it was a joke that wasn’t quite a joke, with too much history behind it, with a whiff, Louis thought, of desperation. “Because I'm on a strict, self-imposed period of celibacy,” he added quickly. “Internship, you know. Gotta preserve all this masculine strength.” He flexed his bicep jokingly.


Next door was the Church of the Covenant, not a famous church by Boston standards, but old enough, quiet, and for the most part, quietly unvisited.

Harry tied Lady to a fence by the church and went up the steps, Louis following behind.

Louis said quietly, “What’s so special about this place?”

Harry whispered, “You’ll see.”

Something in the air triggered a memory in Louis, distant but acute, an orangey, sweet, custardy feeling. With dark chocolate overtones. What was it? A wave of nostalgia came back to Louis
suddenly, a déjà vu moment. The ghosts of the babies he and Harry used to be hovered over them, just above grown-up Harry and Louis. Spanish sunlight, toasting the skin. Sevillian bitter orange blossoms. An open square paved in stone. Hawkers selling scarfs for women to cover their shoulders. Large postcards depicting a medieval church, a Roman wall, a city by the sea. Large, soaring vaulted domes, intricate carvings, a baroque fence. Barcelona.

They had escaped their tour group and wandered through the streets of old Barcelona, a city structure so old, it was flanked by Roman walls, when they came upon a plaza facing a great cathedral. The Catedral de la Santa Creu i Santa Eulàlia, also known as the Barcelona Cathedral, had been constructed in the thirteenth century and was in the gothic style: many spires, gargoyles, vaulted ceilings.

Harry had not been impressed. He was more interested in the hellados, the ice cream shops of Barcelona.

“Harry, don't you believe in God?” young Louis had asked him, scandalized.

“What does that have to do with churches?” Harry had said. “If God exists, God loves me for what I am, not for visiting a church.”

Very true, thought Louis. Who wouldn't like Harry, he mused. “But don't you feel better being in church? That’s where God—lives?”

“Boo,” said Harry, “I don't want to go all theological on you,” Harry made air quotes. “But God lives, well, everywhere. God is in that ice cream shop in the corner over there. God’s in that kid throwing rocks at the pigeons. God’s even in the Roman walls over there, even if the Romans never read the Bible.”

Louis had been bowled over by Harry’s impeccable, adolescent theory of divine omnipresence. He was impressed that Harry was so certain, so nonchalant about it.

“How do you know, though?”

“How do I know?” Harry had said. “I don't know. It’s a feeling I have. Certain places, and things, feel holy.”

Louis paused. He hadn't felt anything like that before, and he wondered whether Harry was imagining it or, worse, making it up. “So it's something you feel?” Louis asked. “Like, outside of yourself, soaking in?”

“It’s not poison gas, Lou,” Harry had chided. “I don't want to sound pretentious or anything, Louis, but when something’s holy, it’s inside and outside. It’s everywhere. You just feel it.”

“In your heart?”

“Yes, Lou. Always in your heart. And in the mountains. Even in things we can't see—the air, your breath, the breath inside a whale or a baby.”

Harry put his hand up to Louis’s face. Louis didn't know why, but he closed his eyes and pushed his face into Harry’s hand and rested there, breathing in and out, thinking, yes, he did. He did feel it.

This memory came back vividly, the feeling of Harry’s hand over his face, his breath fogging up, the cathedral ancient, towering, and imposing, but powerless next to them. The intangible feeling of something divine created in the moment of breathing, of two people sharing that breath.
Louis wondered whether Harry had changed his mind about churches. Louis wondered what they were doing here at all.

They ascended the steps to the front door of the church and went through, walking down the center aisle. Harry took a turn and came to a stop in front of a large stained glass window. A figure dressed in white was at the center. He seemed to be pointing his hand down to one corner of the window, but Louis couldn't tell what he was pointing to.

“So—this is what we came for?”

“Partly,” said Harry. “The first time I wandered in here was by accident. I think I was just hot, honestly, and just wanted somewhere cool to sit. I wandered in from the street, and noticed all these windows. A church volunteer told me these were Tiffany stained glass windows.”

“Tiffany? As in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*? The Audrey Hepburn movie? I like that one.”

“Tiffany, as in the American stained glass designer and interior design company. But yeah, I think it’s related to the jewelry store. These windows all came from the Tiffany company. Early twenty-first century.”

Louis looked around the dark church, illuminated by the artistry of the stained glass panels. The light traveled through the colors of the glass in milky layers, making the colors shimmer and move, as if the colors were alive. The parts of the windows most alive, most three-dimensionally vivid, seemed to be the nonhuman things: the grape leaves, the folds of fabric in the clothing, the clouds in the skies, the brilliant reflections in the water.

Louis nodded toward the window in front of them, “So what’s this, then, Harry? What are we looking at?”

“A missing sparrow,” said Harry. “This one’s called The Sparrow Window.”

Louis was completely lost. There were no sparrows in the picture, none at all. Harry, seeing his reaction, glanced sideways at him and smiled.

“Just because you don’t see the sparrow,” he said, “doesn’t mean he’s not there. This is supposed to be Jesus Christ, the carpenter, having a chat with his little sparrow.”

Louis’s puzzled expression did not lift.

“My grandmother Beryl always said that the little things are the most important. The creatures you love most are often the smallest, so small—sometimes they’re out of the picture entirely.” Louis watched Harry’s face, Harry, who towered over him. “Obviously Jesus loved his sparrow; there’s a whole window for him! But the lovely thing is, he’s just out of view. No one sees him. The reason you know he’s important at all is because someone loved him.”

Louis pictured the swallows that were tattooed onto Harry’s chest in his Hopkins photograph, the two swallows flying toward each other, complementary but not identical, one on each side. It was a tattoo that he had inked after he’d left Tulane. Today they were hidden.

“Sometimes, when I’m in the neighborhood, I stop in,” Harry said. “The window makes me feel—like there’s hope. Like there’s hope for the invisible things. And, no matter how small you feel, it’s enough to be loved. Love gives you presence.”

Louis knew that this was a pointed explanation from Harry, maybe even an indirect metaphor pertaining to them, but he did not want to give Harry the satisfaction of thinking he understood it. He
blocked it out of his mind, redirected the question. Louis cleared his throat.

“All right, Harry. Are we done?”

Harry paused and was quiet. If he was disappointed by Louis’s reaction, he didn't show it. Instead, he smiled at Louis. “One more, Lou. Follow me.”

Harry walked around the church. More windows passed by: four panels of women figures, a Madonna and child, more grape vines, a Roman soldier and an angel. The light was warmly, sublimely alive. It seemed to radiate from the era of the panels themselves, a slower, more complex, richer time.

Harry paused in front of a window showing a man—a monk or scholar—bent over a book.

Louis read the inscription. The panel depicted Saint Augustine writing his book. It translated his Latin words from his book, *Vita Beata*, or *The Blessed Life*. “O my mother, I do believe that through thy prayers, God gave me a mind to think of, to love, above all things, the discovery of truth, and by thee to this I do attain.”

The iridescent ivory of the monk’s robe was contrasted with the cobalt blue of the skies, veering in the outer edges toward amethyst and violet. On the right side of the panel, opposite the monk, was a vivid, emerald green plant, with ivory colored flowers.

“I just like the colors,” said Harry. “Don’t you? I think I’ve always loved these colors, green and blue.”

Louis looked at Harry, who seemed lost in the art, in another world.

“Harry?” Louis asked.

After a moment, Harry said in a small voice, “My grandmother passed away last month, Louis,” He paused. “She had been ill for a long time. I guess it shouldn't have been a surprise. I had requested two days off for the funeral—it was in England.”

“Oh. I’m so sorry, Harry,” Louis said, bowing his head, stepping toward Harry. “I didn’t know. Were you close to her?”

“Yeah,” Harry sighed. “She was my favorite part of England. Really my closest memory of England, the times I visited. She was a sweet, gentle lady.” Harry stopped, inhaled. “It was nice to see her, one last time. She always gave me my lemon drops—she had a stash at her and granddad’s house. She liked them too. We both did.” Harry took another breath, and paused, looking down, for a minute. “She had a really nice garden at her house. It was small, but nice. The thing was, she had roses from when they were first married. They must have been fifty-year-old roses. Nothing special, just her own white roses. It reminded her of being a young bride, a young mum. Granddad had planted them.”

Harry paused again, looking down. After some minutes, Louis realized that Harry’s face was damp, darkly reflective in the warm light, but he hadn’t made a sound. Louis put his hand on Harry’s shoulder. Harry leaned into him, and Louis stretched his arm across Harry’s back, giving him a gentle pat. They stood for another minute or so, in front of Saint Augustine’s window of truth, the bright green and blue light casting its jeweled hues on them.

Harry moved first, across the church, Louis following. They stepped out into the cold and bright sunshine of the day. Harry untied Lady.
“Thanks for coming, Louis,” Harry said. “You’d better get going. I should go home too.”

“Harry,” interjected Louis, “do you want to come to lunch? I’m meeting up with Niall and Alice later. You know, if you have no plans? I’m sure they wouldn’t mind.

Harry shifted his legs. “Thanks, Louis. I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“It’s at the Trestle Tavern, at two. In the Back Bay. Only if you want to, Harry.”

Harry looked tentative. He was reading Louis’s face, Louis realized. Louis watched Harry go through seconds of deliberation, emotions passing quickly one after the other: a flicker of joy, hesitancy, then skepticism.

“You don’t want to be stuck at home, eating some frozen leftover food for Thanksgiving, do you?”

“Louis, I—“

“Harry, I want you to,” interrupted Louis, “as a friend. No strings attached. Please. Think about it? Hope to see you soon?” Louis gave an encouraging smile.

Harry nodded, squinting his eyes, trying to avoid the glare of the sun. As he ran with Lady down the street, the image of the two of them was both familiar and distant for Louis. He couldn't get it out of his head, although he had tried to, for more than two years. He felt a small flicker of love rekindle, just a shadow of caring, but the memory was so painful, and his fears of reliving the pain so sharp, that he pushed it all away.

***

Happy Thanksgiving.

Came back from a run with Lady. Bumped into L.

Maybe it’s enough to be friends. We had our chance. It’s enough to have loved him. I can’t—shouldn’t, dwell on anything more. Who knew it could be so complicated? So bittersweet?

Love is a smoke rais’d with the fume of sighs; being purg’d, a fire sparkling in lovers’ eyes; being vex’d, a sea nourish’d with lovers’ tears; what is it else? A madness most discreet, a choking gall, and a preserving sweet

It was a nice run, though. Not too cold, sunny. Need to work on incorporating more yoga before the runs. The stretches feel really good, when I actually do them.

I may not always love you
But long as there are stars above you
You never need to doubt it
I'll make you so sure about it
God only knows what I'd be without you

If you should ever leave me
Though life would still go on, believe me
The world could show nothing to me
So what good would living do me
God only knows what I'd be without you

Dr. Nestor is flying in today. He’s going to meet with some medical companies. We’re meeting afterward. Might be something exciting.

***

Louis walked into the Trestle Tavern and saw Niall and Alice right away, in the booth at the back, their usual table. The radio was blaring The Cars, Just What I Needed.

“Lou, buddy!” Niall shouted. “Nice to see you! Come, sit. The waitress just took our order. Got you a Samuel Adams White Christmas—seasonal beer. Hope that was okay?”

“Guys, I feel almost human,” said Alice. “Hair washed. No scrubs, no blood-soaked socks, no one yelling at me. In fact, no blood anywhere on my body.”

“People listening to you might think you’re a serial killer,” Louis laughed as he sat down. The waitress came by to lay down coasters and glasses, and shortly later returned with their drinks. Louis nursed his longneck as Niall and Alice traded small talk.

No Harry. Well, it was to be expected. What was Louis thinking, that some stained glass windows would perform a miracle of restoring friendship?

“…so then Finn, Finn Wellington, you know?” Niall was saying.

“He’s a fourth year?” Alice asked.

“Fifth year. Anyway, at rounds he tells the med student to pull the drain.” Niall’s face beamed in anticipation.

“Oh, no.”

By Niall’s animated tone and facial expression, Louis could see where this story was going.

“And the patient had, like, five drains coming out of his belly. So Finn says, pull the Jackson-Pratt
drain, 'cause he’s ready to go home.”

“And the other drains?” Alice asked.

“They were hepatic drains, to keep his hepatic ducts open. So Finn was thinking, have him go home with the other drains, come back to clinic in a week and we could deal with them one by one.”

Louis said, “It was a field of drains.” Niall groaned at this terrible pun.

“Yeah, well. He'd just had surgery a few days ago to clear blocked hepatic ducts. Apparently it took forever and was very complicated. Three hours or something like that. I mean, just imagine. Five drains? Have you ever seen that from a belly case? It was bonkers. The attending on the case is one of the best belly guys, but even for him, three hours.”

“Who was it?” Alice asked.

“Trenton,” Niall said. Louis nodded in recognition. Trenton was ace.

Alice’s face dropped. “Don’t tell me. The intern pulled the wrong drain. Am I right?”

Niall slapped the table. “He pulled the wrong fucking drain! The medical student couldn't see the difference between the drains. He didn't want to bother anyone about it, so he picked one and pulled it. He pulled one of the fucking hepatic drains.”

“But couldn't he see that all of them looked the same except for the JP?” Alice asked, incredulous.

Niall replied, “That was kind of the problem, you see. It was a set up for medical error. They kind of all looked different, so it was confusing for the med student. It probably would have confused me. So anyway, I go check on the patient thirty minutes later, to get him ready for discharge.”

Louis, leaping ahead, asked, “And? What color was he?”

Niall said, “Wow. Why are you so damn smart, Tommo? Bright yellow. He was yellow as a dandelion. Head to toe. Even his eyeballs were yellow, even his eyelashes. The guy looked like a human squash; it was thirty minutes!”

“Holy elevated bilirubin, Batman!” said Alice.

“I lose my shit, I mean, not in front of the patient, of course. The guy had just gotten out of surgery three days ago, all these blockages just got cleared, he was finally doing better.”

“What did the med student say?”

“I page him, and he comes to the room, and I swear, he nearly peed in his pants when he saw the patient.”

“Yellow,” marveled Alice. “They were both yellow.”

Louis shook his head, “Poor bastard.”

“He felt pretty bad, needless to say. But we couldn't do anything about it, and I told him it wasn't his fault, not entirely, because we, interns and residents, should have been there to help him.”

“How did Finn take it?”

Niall expressed a quiet surprise. “That’s just it. He was, like, totally calm about it. I thought he would
bust a nut. I mean, it was all of our faults—the med student, for pulling the wrong fucking drain, me, for not being around to supervise him, Finn, for giving the job to a med student. We all had some part in it. I thought he would lose it because he had to tell Trenton. But he was totally cool, and Trenton too. No one ripped us a new one.”

“So what happened?” Alice asked.

“So,” Niall said, “after I dictated his thirty-page discharge summary, guess what? Discharge cancelled. Finn took him back to the operating room, put the drain back.”

Louis asked, “And the patient’s family?”

Niall sighed in relief. “They were actually okay, too. Said, things happen, thanked us for taking care of him. I mean, considering how sick he was when he got admitted, I guess they have a point. He’s tons better.”

Alice and Louis marveled at this story, at the close calls of internship, how easily one mistake could be a catastrophe, how they were all living, at some point or another, near the cliff’s edge.

The restaurant was actually fairly crowded for a holiday afternoon. The wait staff bustled, and the kitchen noises drifted into the restaurant. Young professionals like Louis, Niall, and Alice, who didn’t have family to go home to, seemed relaxed and happy to be around each other, not having to be alone on a holiday.

Louis began to feel bad that he hadn’t insisted on Harry coming. He was probably listening to records at home, eating kale or some stupid healthy shit, drinking a disgusting yogurt-raw egg mixture and doing tantric yoga. How can someone be such a hippie dork and still look like him, smell like him? Louis wasn’t going to think about that. He didn’t even want to remember how Harry smelled, how his curls had looked this morning, damp and peeking out from under his beanie, how his legs were toned under his leggings, or whatever.

The restaurant was full enough, with people at the bar walking around and others getting up to play the jukebox, that they didn’t notice Harry until he was almost at their booth. Niall, who was talking, stopped abruptly and looked up, causing Alice, next to him, to look up too. Louis, who had his back to the booth, wasn’t really paying close attention to Niall. Louis had finished his beer and was now nursing a bourbon. Eventually, Louis registered that Niall was no longer talking, and then slowly turned around to see what he and Alice were staring at, their mouths agape.

Harry had showered and changed, and had his hair down, wisps curled around his face, chestnut hair flowing and shiny. The hair formed a frame around his face, his eyelashes bright, green eyes blazing, lips lush, bright pink, and full. He wore a blood red, diaphanous shirt with a lacy design, buttons opened to the belly, so that his butterfly and swallow tattoos were visible, tinted dark red by light reflecting from the shirt. There was a hint of another pair of tattoos lower down, curled leaves of some kind, just a hint through the shirt, just above his hip bones. The cuffs on the sleeves were folded up, showing a large anchor tattoo on his left wrist, multiple rings on both hands. A slender black leather cuff with brass tacks wrapped around his right wrist. A chain hung from his neck with a grey pearl, hitting Harry just below the sternal notch, slotted between the cleavage of his chest. He wore black boots and torn black skinny jeans tight enough to strangle a python. His attire screamed tease, a collusion between revealed intimacy, overstimulation, fluidity and rhythm, ambivalence and ambiguity.

_Nice Nutcracker outfit_, thought Louis.

“Harry!” Niall said. “What brings you here?”
Harry’s face registered confusion, shooting a glance at Louis.

Alice quickly recovered, “Come on, sit down. Join us.”

Louis scooted over so that Harry could sit, their bodies awkwardly close, a heat rising between them. Louis was regretting ever inviting Harry at all; Louis was just starting to get comfortably, numbly drunk. He knew he was contradicting himself, but damn it, Harry made him contradictory. Harry drove all fucking sense out of his head.


“Sure,” said Niall. “Love it. Glad you could make it, Harry.”

A few minutes later, the waitress brought their food, and they all chatted over each other, loudly and fondly. Louis could not help noticing how wonderfully Harry smelled—partly a spicy, flowery scented cologne, and partly his own warm, raw smell. He could not stop glancing at Harry’s rings, his leather cuff, his pearl necklace, each of them drawing attention to a different part of himself, parts that invited looking, touching, being touched—that invited speculation of meaning, adornment, function. Harry wore these accessories because he knew exactly how he looked in them, a seductive creature, open to experiment. Harry was indeed a grown-up, completely different from the person Louis knew. His outfit signaled kink and risk.

_How very dare he?

Their hands bumped each other eating, passing salt and pepper shakers. The first time, Louis had pulled away as if burned, and had noticed Harry looking down, avoiding his gaze, uncomfortably awkward. The next time, he forced himself to remain steady and not to flinch, to pretend it was fine. He noticed that Harry also relaxed as time passed. He was enjoying himself, laughing at Niall’s jokes and asking polite questions of Alice.

“So, Harry,” Alice asked. “Did you know Louis at all when you were at Tulane?”

Harry stopped chewing mid-bite and coughed. Louis also looked down. Alice and Niall were surgeons, not psychiatrists, but even they could see these were not normal responses.

“How’s it going?” Niall interjected. “You all right?”

“If you’d rather not, you don’t have to—I, I’m sorry if I—” Alice stammered.

“No, it's okay,” said Harry, clearing his throat. “Yeah, actually, Louis and I were friends.”

“O—kay,” said Alice. “You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to.”

Louis thought back to a time when he and Harry had spent every waking second together, and even the non-waking ones, when they didn't have to say anything to each other and could just enjoy being in the same room together, happy and secure in their friendship, when they weren’t afraid of anything, anyone, because they were together, when they trusted each other completely.

He also thought back to that terrible day when everything had ruptured, the hurt he felt, Harry’s look of anger and pain, his own feelings of betrayal and neglect. It had taken so many weeks for him just to drag himself out of the house at all, to continue life, to walk the halls that were bereft of Harry, bereft of every lingering trace. He had nothing to hold on to but a few memories, beautiful Harry as a first year student, wearing corduroy pants and cotton sweaters, Harry in class with an faded plaid shirt, Harry at Mardi Gras dancing with him, Harry in bed lying with limbs entwined around him, his wavy hair in Louis’s face, his lips upturned and eyes closed. It had taken so, so long for Louis to
Louis wondered whether Harry remembered those images at all, whether he was thinking the same thing. As much as he wanted Harry, Louis could not find it in himself to forgive him. What he did was abandon Louis. Louis could not allow himself fall into that trap again.

“Harry was a superstar at Tulane, too,” Louis said. “Too big for us. He should have been at Hopkins to begin with—no surprise he ended up there.”

Harry listened to Louis, his cheeks coloring. “I didn't have the opportunity to do the research I wanted to, at Tulane,” he said. “I was lucky to find something elsewhere. I would have never left otherwise. I loved Tulane and New Orleans.”

The words hung unchallenged in the air, working out their knotty implications. Clearly Niall sensed this.

Niall asked, “Harry, what do you reckon about this cardiothoracic fellowship that Fernbank talked about? Have you heard more about it? Do you think it's all a gimmick?”

Harry pondered the question. “I think it's the real deal, Niall,” he finally said. “MSH doesn't offer gimmick fellowships. Every cardiothoracic surgeon it trains is a good one. They’re all over the country, doing research, heading up departments. I think anyone would be lucky to get the fellowship.”

“With your micro-robotic heart research,” Alice said, “you would be perfect for it.”

“Me? I don't think so,” said Harry. “There are other interns with interest who might be more talented, working harder toward the fellowship.”

“Like whom?” Niall said.

Harry looked around the table. “Don't any of you want to compete for the fellowship? It's not limited to guys doing heart-related research, you know. And personally, I don't think I’m the best candidate.”

Alice crooked her head, “Then who? In your opinion, who would be the best fellowship candidate?”

Harry said, unhesitatingly, “Louis.”

“What?” Louis exclaimed. “Styles, you're blowing smoke up the wrong ass. What are you even talking about?”

“Louis has leadership ability,” said Harry. “He’s a creative thinker. He’s talented in surgery.” Harry glanced at Louis with fondness. “He also works pretty goddamn hard. At Tulane, he worked harder than anyone I’d ever seen.”

“Our Tommo?” Niall wondered aloud. “The guy who leaves the call room looking like ten people partied in it? Who has three tubes of toothpaste open because he can't find them under all the junk in the bathroom? The guy who eats ramen for dinner four days out of five because he can't bother to go shopping? Who does his grocery shopping in my fridge?” Louis glared at Niall, trying to murder him with his eyes.

“If you knew him at all, you’d know he has the best combination of talent and work ethic,” Harry said. “He's good when it matters. It's a pretty rare combination.” Louis’s heart swelled, hearing Harry’s words, but he promised himself that they were only words. Anyone could say the words.
Words were cheap and easy.

He also knew that thinking this way was not entirely honest. The Louis who could understand someone’s motivation from ten meters away knew that Harry was not one for empty, meaningless words, that he spoke slowly, deliberately when it was serious. That he would not lie—that he was terrible at lying. Deluded, maybe, but not dishonest.

“If only he didn't sabotage himself speaking in front of the public,” Louis sighed.

“Public speaking can be learned,” Harry answered. “But you can't teach grit. You can't teach heart. Right? That's my opinion, anyway.” He stopped talking and took a pull on his longneck, glancing at Louis from above.

Harry’s words sank in around the table, everyone feeling slightly different feelings in response.

The waitress set down their tab. Each person took out their wallet to pay. Louis got ready to go. He was pleasantly tipsy, the tips of his fingers and toes numb, the muscles of his face and neck loose and supple.

“Nialler, you got your car? Do you mind giving me a ride home? I didn't drive.”

“Sorry, Tommo,” Niall looked very sheepish. “I’m—uh, supposed to go to the movies.”

Louis stared at Niall until the implication of his words hit him. Niall shifted uncomfortably, as if he wanted to melt into the ground. He was going on a date. Louis reached across the table and clapped his hand on Niall’s back. “Son of a gun, you old hound dog! You finally convinced some pathetic soul to go out with you. So who’s the sad, desperate girl? Anyone we know?”

For a few seconds there was no answer, as Niall rubbed the back of his neck.

Then Niall turned his head and looked at Alice.

“Al, you ready to go?” Niall asked.

Louis looked from Niall to Alice, realizing that he’d just shoved his entire leg into his mouth.

“Dear God,” Louis said, “I’m a fucking—“

“Moron,” said Alice. “Self-awareness is a beautiful thing. Gentlemen, and Louis Tomlinson, have a good night. I shall try to live up to my desperate hoe reputation.” Louis could only stare at her, while Harry cackled a loud laugh.

Niall looked meaningfully at Louis as he stood up from the table and held his hand out for Alice, and Alice, smiling in daggers, flipped her hair as she left the booth.

After Niall and Alice left, Harry stood up from the table, too. He straightened his shirt and patted to clear it. Louis couldn't help thinking how beautiful he looked, light behind him glowing like a halo, his body long and lean. How Louis wished….

“Me next,” Harry said.

“What?” Louis shook out of his daydream.

“I should go,” said Harry.

“Oh, yeah, right. Can you believe the two of them,” Louis said, gesturing after Niall and Alice,
“sneaking around under our noses.”

“They look good together—cute,” said Harry.

“One only hopes they know about the birds and bees, take the proper precautions.”

Harry paused at the table, facing Louis. He bowed his head slightly and said, slowly, in his low voice, “Lou, thanks for letting me—inventing me, today. It means a lot to me. I’m taking off, but, do you have a way home?”

“Yes, I’ll just walk. It’s not that far. Or, I guess, I could take the T. I’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure?” Harry asked.

“Yes, yeah. Don’t worry about me,” Louis said, feeling the warmth of the dinner dissipate with the vapors of alcohol. “Hey, Haz, thanks for coming out.”

Harry hesitated. “Come on, I’ll walk with you.”

Louis’s inside jumped with this invitation. Would Harry really go home with him? What was he thinking? First, he’s late to lunch, and now— “Didn’t you drive here?”

“Nah, I walked. Boston traffic, no place to park, and so on. It's why I was a bit late—underestimated the distance. I’m meeting someone, but I can walk you to the T,” Harry said.

Oh. Of fucking course. Did Louis think Harry was dressed like that for him? What a twit, what a fucking idiot he truly was. Well, this Thanksgiving was one for the books, just a fucking joy all around—two of his friends dating each other and deserting him, Harry running off to some guy, probably someone bigger than him, a monster who makes him look like a soft petal, and they would have a nice, flirty, fun time with great sex, probably, before he had to go back to work tomorrow. Louis’s mind raced so fast, it could have melted cheese. He hated himself for thinking this way, jealously, because it was a sign that he lacked discipline, that irrationality and feelings were taking over. What did it matter? Harry didn't belong to him. Fucking get over it.

“Oh? All right, come on, then. Let’s make sure no one mugs me,” Louis shrugged on his jacket.

They walked outside, the light beginning to dim in the late afternoon, a slight cold breeze kicking up. Holiday lights were turning on one by one. Parents and their children were bundled in jackets, hats and scarfs, some young ones riding in strollers, looking like baked potatoes wrapped in fluffy blankets. Dogs of all sizes were frolicking about, not yet cold enough to be morose about winter, enjoying the dry air of the late autumn. Couples strolled holding hands, or with their arms around each other, oblivious to everything around them. Ladies in small groups walked by laughing and chatting, drinking from paper cups. Adolescent boys zoomed by, torturing their sisters, yelling and bumping into strangers.

_Sometimes life can be so easy, Harry thought. Sometimes a walk is just a walk._

“So Haz, any chance of going home for the holidays?”

Harry snapped out of his thoughts. “Me? I think, probably not. I’ll be on emergency room duty. Have to keep Liam from going ’round the bend.”

Louis chuckled. “Is he a madman?”

“He’s just a bit—“ Harry paused, “intense, maybe. Obsessive. You know on our neurosurgery
rotation, he got up at 3:30 to round every morning? Even when he wasn't on call?"

“Liam gets like that. No wonder he looked like shit the whole time.”

“We all look like shit, to be honest.” *Not true,* thought Louis. *Do you even own a mirror?* “And Liam’s a good guy. He tries hard to do the right thing, and he’s smart, you know. He’s conscientious, responsible. He deserves to succeed—and he drives me to work harder, which isn’t a bad thing. He’s going to make a good professor someday.”

“Actually,” Louis said, “I think I’ll be on emergency as well. And probably will be working on my fucking birthday. Heard that one’s a doozie. Everyone seems to like it, but they all finish it looking like Presidents after eight years in the White House—old, and completely destroyed.”

Harry laughed. “Yeah, it’ll be interesting, for sure, working twenty-four hours straight at a time. Were human bodies designed to do that? I'm pretty sure we weren’t.”

“We weren't designed to cut people open and put them back together, either,” said Louis. “Surgery is kind of a freak of nature.”

They walked along, enjoying the afternoon, enjoying the noise around them, distracting them. Louis looked forward to work tomorrow, when today would pass. Every day, his murky horizon brightened a tiny bit as light seeped from the other side, lifting the darkness.

At the Copley T station, Harry pulled Louis’s arm to stop him. “Louis, I meant what I said.”

Louis’s heart rate increased as he processed these words. “What are you—what do you mean, H?”

“The fellowship,” Harry said. Louis’s chest fell a little. “I think you should try for it. You would be an amazing cardiothoracic surgeon, an amazing professor. They’d be lucky to have you.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Louis said. “After my performance at Grand Rounds, I don’t feel like I could even operate on chicken breast right now.”

“Remember how you saved Lady?” Harry asked him. “I'll never forget how you led us. You were calm and efficient under pressure. This public speaking stuff—it’s all trivial. You come through when it matters, Louis. You must know how admirable that is.”

Louis felt uncomfortable when Harry referred to the past like this, as if someone were picking at a scab that should not be picked at. Lady was almost the only unspoiled thing from the past. *Don’t talk about her,* he thought. *Leave her out of it.*

“I appreciate your words, Harry,” Louis answered. “I’m glad we bumped into each other today. Anyway, I'm a bit tired and really should get going. Have fun tonight.”

“All right. Good-night then.”

Louis walked down the stairs to the subway and slid his card through. The station was full of people coming out for Black Friday shopping, some already with large bags in their hands. The noisy mixture of the loud speakers, the trains entering and leaving the station, people talking, a guitar player playing an amped acoustic guitar and singing, mixed together with the thoughts in Louis’s own head. Louis always had the ability to allow other sounds to distract himself, for other narratives to wind through his own thoughts, to take the edge away.

The guitar player was singing a song by Augustana. It was a song Louis did not know well, and therefore had the effect of forcing him to listen more closely to the lyrics.
Breaking up with your breakdowns
Standing tall in your white gown
You're going nowhere, you're going fast
Slower down, but it never lasts
Take your time, honey
Take your time

It's the wrong dream, with the wrong man
With a cold gun, in your wrong hand
Get it right this time, get it off your mind
Let the summer rain bring rest and shame and love

***

Louis entered his dark apartment and turned on his lights. He had a pile of laundry on the floor, dishes in the sink. He turned on his computer and logged on to check his email. There was a message from Professor Enright, asking Louis to rewrite the code for the coronary artery imaging project, so that the imaging could be interfaced with live feed from micro-robotics.

*That's beautiful*, Louis thought. *Harry does all the advancement in actually treating disease, and as usual, I'm just the guy watching from the sidelines on a computer.* He clicked reply and said he would work on it between now and New Year’s (in between sleeping four hours a day and feeling incompetent). Louis opened a coding textbook, but just couldn't bring himself to read anymore.

His thoughts ran to being with Harry in the church earlier today, a glimpse of the friendship they used to share, the feeling of protectiveness he still had over Harry, which would probably never, never dissipate, no matter how hard he tried.

Louis opened the bottom drawer of his dresser and took out the only thing there. He kept the dresser empty to keep it pristine, to separate it from everything else. He so seldom took it out anymore.

It was a hand-drawn, pastel portrait of two boys, aged thirteen. One had green eyes; the other, blue. The boy with green eyes had curls, and tiny smudges of chocolate and sugar on his face. Louis remembered that moment well.

“Don't let her draw the chocolate, Boo. It makes me look dirty,” Harry had said, wiping his face with his sleeve and smudging it all the more, making Louis laugh endlessly.

“Of course we have to draw the chocolate, Harry. How else are we going to remember today?”
They sat in the bright Barcelona sunshine, on La Rambla street, toward the end with the Christopher Columbus monument, the Mirador de Colom. A lady was drawing their portrait with oil pastels, her hands fluid and practiced. They were blocks away from the ocean, yet the crystalline glow of the ocean seemed reflected from their faces, the flush of their adolescence its own incandescence. In the portrait, Louis had his arm around Harry’s shoulder and Harry’s head was angled slightly toward Louis. Harry smiled so gently that his dimple was just visible, a slight dip in his cheek, his eyes joyous. Louis’s lips were curled in a mysterious smile, hiding mischief and adventure.

“Lou?”

“Yeah, Harry?”

“What’s been the best day of your life?”

Now, Louis wanted to say. Here.

“I don't know. Probably haven't lived it yet, I hope.”

“Yeah,” Harry shielded his eyes with a raised hand, looking away. “Do you think we’ll ever meet again?”

“Who knows, Harry? If God is everywhere, like you said,” Louis bopped Harry on the nose with his right index finger, “then technically we’re together all the time.”

“But, I mean,” Harry looked down, embarrassed. “Do you think we’ll actually meet again, face to face? I wish you were my friend back home.”

Harry wanted to ask the universe for permission—to have more, of Louis. To feel this carefree and intimate. But of course that was silly. Louis would think that was silly, wouldn't he? This was just—fun. For a day.

“Hmmm,” Louis paused, contemplating. “I guess it's kind of like olives.”

Harry was lost. What did that have to do with his question? What was Louis talking about? He liked olives, or what?

“Olives are Spain’s biggest export.” Louis looked steadily at Harry.

What? Harry’s face was a study of confusion. Louis could be an enigma, sure, but sometimes he spoke in such nonsensical non sequiturs, Harry just couldn't follow.

“I’ve eaten dozens of olives since I came to Spain,” Louis continued, “and I’ll never forget Barcelona’s olives, Harry, as long as I live. Once experienced, never forgotten.”

Harry hummed. “Oh. Okay.”

Louis fixed Harry’s fringe so it was out of his face, his arm resting on Harry’s shoulder. The painter’s umbrella shielded them from the glaring Spanish sun. They looked into each other’s eyes, trying to memorize this happiness, to store it as a charm against everything unanticipated in their future lives.

“Olives and you. Harry, I won't forget you. Olive you.”

Harry’s eyes opened even wider than before. He put his hand on Louis’s hand, lying in Louis’s lap. An invisible thread bound them together. Louis gave his hand a squeeze.

Vacationers bought Barcelona keychains around them. Birds swooped down to grab crumbs fallen from breads and croissants. Pickpockets stole wallets and jewelry around them. Beggars begged. People dressed in costumes like the Mad Hatter and a mermaid and Marilyn Monroe posed for photos. All around, people were experiencing their lives, thousands of memories flowing in the stream of shared human consciousness.

Yet two boys sat in the sunshine, savoring the sweetness of a pun that conveyed more than one was able to say, a pun that the other understood to be a declaration and a promise. A gossamer thread had been flung into space, and had been retrieved and wound, inextricably, inseparably, secured and tied, like two ships. Words had been left unspoken, pages written without end.

Louis sat in his bedroom, staring at this impromptu portrait. Over the years, the paper had curled at the edges and was turning slightly yellow. The two boys had grown up long ago, their dreams spinning out in an uncharted journey. They had sailed toward each other, again and again. Their invisible love had given each other presence, and over the years, through the silence, it had only grown stronger. One was a compass, the other a boat. One was an anchor, the other, a rope.

*I'm not scared*, thought Louis. *I'm not scared.*
Chapter 4

Louis got up at 4:30 AM and showered. INXS was on the radio:

How do you feel?
I'm lonely
What do you think?
Can't take it all
What ya gonna do?
Gonna live my life

First day on the emergency room rotation, two days before his birthday. Louis tried to remember everything about emergencies and trauma that he had learned so far. The ABC’s: airway, breathing, circulation. Surely if everyone else did okay, he could, too. He was actually looking forward to the rotation. Interns rarely did anything substantive in the operating room, other than cut suture and hold retractors. Here was a chance to sew up lacerations, to drain abscesses, to diagnose appendicitis, kidney stones, fractures, concussions—everything virgin, nothing previously worked up. It was a time to be someone’s real, and only, doctor, not someone’s shadow, an apprentice.

He put on clean scrubs and combed his damp hair. His stomach was unsettled. Teeth brushed, deodorant rolled on, aftershave splashed, he gave himself a once over in the bathroom mirror. Not bad, Tomlinson. Thinner than before. Collar bones more prominent. Beard straggly but trimmed. Bags under the eyes. Hair gelled back. Eyes a faded denim blue. You look decent. He put on his jacket and got his work bag, ready to spend the next twenty-four hours in minor surgery. Scraps and cuts. Bruises and sprains. Broken noses and stomach aches. You can do this.

Louis walked down to Niall’s apartment and knocked on the door. Niall opened the door in his scrubs and glasses, looking just as good/bad.


“It’s 5:15. Hurry up, Ni, we’re running late.” Louis barged into the apartment and headed to the kitchen. The two apartments had identical layouts, but Niall’s appeared to have twice the space because of his freakish neatness.

“Ugghhhhh…” Niall groaned and stretched. “Fine, let’s—hey! What are you doing?”

Louis rifled through Niall’s refrigerator and took out two apples, a leftover slice of pizza from a box. “Didn’t have breakfast. Do you mind?”

Niall sighed. “Fine, don’t leave crumbs… I just Swiffered last night.”

They made their way to the parking garage in the basement. Since the emergency room rotation was 24-hours long, Niall would give Louis a ride every other day, and Louis would take the T home the next morning. Boston traffic was not bad at this time of day, but the few people on the roads still drove like madmen, like fleeing criminals on amphetamines, like they were playing a lethal video game. Louis hated driving in Boston traffic and did everything he could to avoid it. He chomped on the apple while holding the pizza and the other apple in his other hand, balancing his work bag on his shoulders. Niall looked at him with disgruntled disgust.
They arrived at the darkened hospital parking garage, negotiated the short, shadowed walk to the hospital and arrived at the familiar small gray door of Room E-10 for their usual Fernbank lecture. Most of the interns were already there, some with cups of coffee steaming. They had the look of experience now: scrubs worn in, shoes scuffed and dotted with dirt and dried blood. Some wore white coats with pens and stainless steel rulers in the pockets, stethoscope in the pockets.

Niall and Louis found their way to their usual corner with Liam, Alice, and now, Harry. Niall exchanged a smile with Alice.

“All right,” said Dr. Fernbank. “Everyone here? Today we’re going to talk about the acute pediatric abdomen, or, *do we really need our appendix*?”

He delivered the lecture in his Socratic fashion, without notes, asking interns, all of them familiar now, how to distinguish a stomach virus from a surgical abdomen, what signs to look for, what tests to order, what the results would show. An acute abdomen could be anything from a gallbladder attack, to appendicitis, to kidney stones, twisted bowels, swallowed magnets, or ruptured intestines from, for instance, cancer. Recognizing the symptoms was crucial in the emergency room and for the general surgeon. At the conclusion of the lecture, Dr. Fernbank once again made an announcement.

“I'm sure you all still remember the cardiothoracic fellowship we talked about earlier in the year,” he said. “I want you to know of another opportunity. Listen up, because this is a way to get free vacation—I know all of you could use some.” The room shifted and chuckled in recognition. “In March, the department will send a few interns to the International Surgical Conference, the ISC, this year. We know that a few of you have very promising research, and some might have interesting case studies, to present. You can apply for a departmental grant to attend. You may also be contacted by the department. The meeting is in Barcelona this year.”

The room erupted in a hush of excitement. Louis and Harry automatically started to turn their bodies toward each other, but, as if controlled by the same switch, both abruptly stopped. “Up to four interns may go. Ask Marlene in the office for the details. Do any of you have questions now?” He glanced around the room. “No? All right. Be safe. Do good work.” He waved them good-bye.

Louis turned to Harry, finally. “First day in the ER. You nervous?”

“No, pretty excited, actually,” Harry said. “Minor surgery, I am your slave. Bring it on.”

They entered the emergency room and found the senior residents, who took them to their respective stations. Interns were in charge of minor surgery. Patients were triaged by nurses when they checked in to the emergency room. Minor surgery patients waited in one section of the emergency room, awaiting their turn to see the intern working. Sometimes the wait could be as long as six hours, during busy times. However, many of these patients did not have any alternatives, and were willing to wait.

Louis and Harry were assigned to different areas. Louis had a small room by himself, where patients came in and he attended to them. The room was a small clinic with all the supplies he needed—sutures, syringes, needles, minor surgery sets with knife blades, scissors, forceps, all pre-sterilized. There was a minor surgery table for patients to lie down on, and two chairs, one for the doctor.

Harry was in the main part of the emergency room, where patients were brought in on stretchers, with minor cuts and bruises, sprains, possible fractures, abdominal pain—patients who were too ill to wait in the waiting room and needed to be seen more quickly.

There were senior residents around, in case they had questions, but the initial contact with patients, assessment, and most of the treatment was done completely on their own. It was the first time they...
would be independently treating patients.

Louis saw the first few patients with nervous excitement. They had easy to diagnose, common problems. An elderly lady had fallen and twisted her ankle, which needed x-rays to see whether there were any fractures. A young woman came in with symptoms of urinary tract infection, and was given an antibiotic prescription. A man had cut his hand working in the garage, and needed a few stitches. It was indeed exhilarating to be a real doctor, actually to inject someone’s cuts and put in stitches that, thus far, had only been put into chicken breast, to tie the sutures that one had practiced so much, to use the iodine, sutures, and bandages in a meaningful way.

His next patient was a woman named Ruthann in her late 30’s who came with her husband, Jerome. They were an interesting couple. The woman was over three hundred pounds, the man less than half her size. They were very much in love, holding hands in the waiting room and even in the examination room. The man held a walking stick, and Louis realized from a brief study that he was blind.

“How can I help you?” Louis asked.

Ruthann said, “I have this boil on my leg. It's been hurting me and getting bigger for about a week.”

Her husband said, “My honey is in a lot of pain, doctor. Do you think you can help her?”

Louis thought his consideration and devotion was rather sweet. They were comfortable with each other yet still passionate, showing their affection with glances and touches.

“Let’s take a look, then.” He had Ruthann sit on the examination table and lift her skirt. Inside the right thigh was a raised and hard area of redness, about the size of an apricot, tense to touch.

“Have you ever had this before?” Louis asked.

“Never,” said Jerome. “We noticed it was like a little pimple at first, and it just got bigger and bigger.”

“Did you do anything to treat it?”

“Well, we washed it, and put hot packs on it. Then we used some antibiotic ointment,” Ruthann said. “Polysporin? Or something like that? But it didn't help. Do you think you can do something, doctor? It hurts real bad.”

“Please help,” said Jerome. “We got to get back to our kids.”

“Oh?” said Louis. “How many children do you have?”

“Four good kids,” said Ruthann. “Oldest is eleven and the youngest is two.”

Louis shook his head in wonder. They were a pair who looked as if they needed to take care of each other, yet had four children who depended on them.

“And I have to get back to work,” Jerome said. “I repair shoes. And I play saxophone for a living. Got a band that plays gigs.”

“And I work in a hotel,” Ruthann said, “in housekeeping. At the end of the day, it throbs so much.”

Louis felt the boil with his hands and realized it was a skin abscess, probably from an infected hair follicle or pimple, that needed to be drained and packed. He informed them and then got his materials
“This will sting and burn,” he said, injecting the anesthetic. Ruthann grimaced and Jerome held her hand. Louis quickly got the cut open and pus drained out, which he cultured for bacteria. He opened the wound and rinsed it with sterile saline, then ran strings of iodoform packing in. Ruthann winced in pain but took everything bravely, not flinching. Because of her size, it was challenging for Louis to have access to the boil without pushing her leg to the side. Jerome observed it all impassively, encouraging her with words.

Louis instructed her to return to the minor surgery clinic the next day to have the packing changed. He then started writing a prescription for antibiotics and one for pain medication.

Jerome asked, tentatively, with an embarrassed chuckle, “Doctor, can I ask a question?”

“Yeah, sure,” Louis said, putting the last bit of tape on the gauze.

“Do you think we could—em—that is, when do you think—em—that Ruthann and I, that we could start having sex?”

Louis was taken aback by the question. Sure, he was open-minded, but thoughts about sex when one has just had a large abscess drained on the leg required a mind blasted open by a grenade.

“Uh—um,” he hesitated. “I’d say, not until the abscess has healed. About two weeks, maybe, with antibiotics.”

“It’s just that we love each other so much,” Ruthann said. They smiled at each other. “Don’t we, honey?” Louis felt uncomfortable at their open intimacy, their lack of inhibition. But, he thought, I am their doctor. They have a right to ask these questions. Who else are they going to ask? Stop being a prude.

He shook his head at their enthusiasm, and asked, “How did you meet?”

“My girl brought in a pair of heels to be repaired,” Jerome said. “That was about twelve years ago, wasn’t it?”

Ruthann giggled. “It was, honey, twelve years, because Jessie’s eleven years old. That’s our oldest daughter, doc. I brought in my heels because my girlfriends and I were going to a party. I was trying on this fancy outfit—remember, Jerome? The pouffy dress? It was silk. Expensive. And he asked me out. He was a handsome devil back then. Not that he isn’t now.

“Yeah, he is quite handsome,” Louis said.

“And I wasn’t this size back then, doc. I was a svelte and athletic girl. I loved to dance. I took this guy dancing.”

“It was romantic,” said Jerome. “We danced outside, at night. And I serenaded her with my saxophone.”

“He’s so good, doc. Hey, if you get a chance, you should come see his band play. Get out of the hospital, you know? Come dancing. Live a little,” she joked. “Anyway, after six months, we were married.”

“There comes a time when a blind man takes your hand and says, ‘Don’t you see?’” Jerome said. “Haha. Love the Dead. It was fate, doc. We were just meant to be.”
“We’re soul mates,” said Ruthann. “We would have found each other no matter what. I knew the minute he asked me out that we were meant for each other.”

Louis considered them, a seemingly mismatched pair, devoted to each other after four children and many years. Their certainty was charming and inspiring.


Louis’s brain reacted with a sense of amused pride, to be referred to casually as a doc, like a character from a Western movie. “Uh, no, no. I’m not.”

“A handsome devil like you?” Ruthann said. “I can’t believe it. Not even a girlfriend?”

“Definitely not a girlfriend,” Louis said, laughing.

“Too bad. If I were twenty years younger,” Ruthann said, looking at her husband and giggling.

“All right,” Louis said. “Here are your prescriptions, Ruthann. Good luck.”

“Good-bye, doctor. Thank you.”

Louis watched them go with a strange envy. They believed in each other. They loved each other. Love was so easy for them, as smooth as a water slide in summer, as sweet as pound cake. Was it so easy to be certain? Could one know, immediately, without pain, without trials and tribulations, without blame, that this person was the one?

***

Harry took the clipboard for the next room. The name was Gabriella O’Donnell, age 43, and the chief complaint was “testicular pain.” The patient was in a room by herself, with glass sliding doors pulled closed. All around Harry was a flurry of noises—beeps, rings, hums, air whooshing, wheels squeaking, people talking on telephones.

He opened the sliding door and entered, closing the door behind him. A person lay in the bed in front of him, with long, thick, dark blond hair, and a rough day’s whiskers in matching color, in obvious discomfort.

“Gabriella?” Harry said. “I’m Dr. Styles.”

“Hello, doctor.” The person spoke in a low baritone, yet with a softness and lilt.

“How can I help you?”

Gabriella raised one hand to play with her hair. “I’m—it’s so embarrassing,” she said.
“It’s all right,” Harry gave a small, reassuring smile. “Don’t be embarrassed. Please tell me why you’re here.”

“I’ve been in pain this entire day,” Gabriella said. “My testicle. I should tell you, biologically I have male genitalia. Right now, that is. I’m saving money for the transition surgery, and now I’m receiving injections.”

“Okay. Go on. Tell me about the pain,” Harry said.

“Well, it started to hurt a little last night. When I woke up this morning, one testicle was really swollen, and it was very tender. I’m afraid there’s some sort of injury or, well, I just don’t know. I had to go to work today—I’m a secretary. It was very painful sitting all day, even more so to walk. I waited all day to come here. I just hope you can help me.”

Harry bit his lip. Testicular pain was something he hadn’t yet treated or read very much about, and he hadn’t done his urology rotation yet. In this age group, he knew, there were possibilities of infection and torsion, or a twisting of the testicular blood vessels, causing a strangulation of the scrotal contents. Swelling and pain were symptoms of both. Torsion was mostly found in children and adolescents, he knew. With male genitalia, the most likely cause was a sexually transmitted infection.

“Have you had recent sexual contact?” Harry asked.

“I have,” said Gabriella.

“Would you be at risk for sexually transmitted diseases, Gabriella?” Harry asked.

“I use protection, doctor,” Gabriella said. “I was tested four weeks ago, and everything, including the HIV test, came back negative.”

“Okay,” said Harry, writing into the clipboard. Gabriella was conscientious and seemed knowledgeable about her own health. It made his job easier. “How about discharge from the penis, difficulty urinating, anything like that?”

“No,” Gabriella answered. “Just pain when I urinate. That’s all.”

Harry asked her to lift her gown so that he could examine her. The right testicle was red, swollen, and tender to touch. Gabriella winced as she tried to shift her legs for Harry to examine her testicle. The legs were shaved to the knees. The thighs were lean, with wiry muscles.


“Please, call me Gabriella,” the patient said.

“All right. Gabriella, I’m afraid this looks like infection to me. I would like to do some blood tests and an ultrasound of the testicle. Then I’ll see you again. You might need some antibiotics. We’ll be sure to give an intravenous dose before you leave today.”

“Thank you so much, Dr. Styles.”

“You’re very welcome,” Harry said, turning to leave.

Gabriella called out, “Doctor?”

“Yes?” Harry turned.

Gabriella played with her hair again, hesitated, and then said, “Dr. Styles, can I ask a favor?”
Harry didn't know what she could possibly ask. Sometimes patients came to the emergency room seeking narcotic medication or prescriptions. He hoped Gabriella wasn't one of them.

“No one at work knows that I have male genitalia,” Gabriella said. She had a five o’clock shadow and broad shoulders, no breasts, bony hands, thick, rough hair. Harry had never considered difficulties such as Gabriella experienced. “I’d like to ask that—that my male biological parts not be revealed,” she pleaded. “It would be a catastrophe for me at work if anyone found out.”

“Gabriella,” Harry said, “your health information is always private in the hospital. It is against the law to disclose it to anyone except people you tell us to. For the purpose of medical work, we do need to chart your entire examination, but this information won't be shared outside of the hospital.”

“I know,” Gabriella said, “but I’m asking you, personally, to reassure me. Please let no one else know. If someone calls from work or something—is that possible? That my problem will be private?”

Harry nodded with seriousness. “You can be sure of that,” Harry said. “I give my promise. No one will know.”

“Thank you,” she sighed. “It’s my career on the line. I knew you’d understand. I trust you, Dr. Styles.” She glanced at Harry, her eyes still in pain, but grateful.

Harry left her and went to talk to his senior resident. Gabriella was a one-of-a-kind patient, someone who identified as female but had a male biological medical problem. Her identity was complex and tangled at the moment. As a gay man, Harry understood what it was to live contrary to other people’s assumptions about sexuality, to have a life outside of heteronormative assumptions. In a way, being able to assert his sexuality made him sadder and more sympathetic for Gabriella. She chose to follow her heart, even though the path she was on would be expensive, painful, and difficult. Her world was narrow and circumscribed on all sides. She was courageous. She respected herself, her own intelligence, her feelings. Her confidence in her identity was admirable.

He never expected to face this kind of social and psychological dilemma in a surgical internship. It continually surprised him, the opportunities he had for learning. Sometimes the patients were his best teachers of all, their minds and bodies educating him endlessly. He discussed Gabriella with his resident and then placed orders for her tests. He was thankful for her, even as he realized that he was her doctor, that he was the one supposedly caring for her.

***

In the afternoon, a young boy, about three-years-old, came with his father to Louis’s minor surgery area. They were visitors from Brazil, and the boy spoke no English. They had been visiting Boston during Christmas vacation. The boy was walking on a slippery patch of sidewalk and had fallen, suffering a gash in his scalp. By the time Louis saw him, the bleeding had stopped.
“Hello, there!” Louis greeted him. The boy’s face was worried, but he was brave and did not cry. His father held him in his lap and said soothing things to him. Louis smiled, and crouched down so that their eyes were on the same level.

“Can you tell me your name?” Louis asked. The boy looked at him with enormous eyes, his brows knitted. His lips were set in a line and he did not speak, did not even move a muscle. Louis waited.

"Fala para o médico o seu nome, meu docinho,” the father whispered.

“Adriano,” the boy said. His saucer eyes were overwhelming Louis’s cute reception center.

“Adriano, my big man,” said Louis softly. “It's nice to meet you.”

Louis explained to Adriano’s father that he needed to examine his scalp. Adriano sat still as his father wrapped his arms around him, lightly holding him, still whispering reassurances to him.

How calm he was, thought Louis. How beautifully trusting he was of his father, how his father’s words protected him like a shield.

Separating Adriano’s thick brown hair, Louis saw that the two-inch gash was indeed deep, that the child would need stitches.

He also knew that the operating room was tremendously busy, was always tremendously busy. He would have to suture Adriano here. If he waited for the operating room, where Adriano might be put under general anesthesia, it might be hours or even half a day before he would be treated by the surgical team, and he would have to fast the entire time. It would be torture for this cooperative, calm little child. He looked at Adriano’s father, trying to decide whether he was good enough to instill the child’s cooperation, or whether he would need a nurse. The child was too big to hold down. Louis really did not like doing that to kids, especially at this age, when he was big enough to remember, and when restraining him would make him even more scared. Once trust was lost, he would be fighting an uphill battle all the way.

Harry, he thought. If Harry could help him for fifteen minutes, to assist him with instruments, to speak with the child. He would be more helpful than a nurse, who were all busy taking care of patients. He knew Harry was probably also terribly busy. They all had patients waiting, and the wait time was now two-and-a-half hours for Louis’s room. He did not want to impose, but felt more comfortable asking Harry than anyone else.

Louis excused himself and went to find Harry. He quickly located Harry checking on labs in the computer, sitting at a desk.

“I need your help,” said Louis. “If you’re not busy?”

Harry glanced up. “Sure, Lou. Let me print out these labs and I’ll be right there.”

“Okay, thanks,” said Louis. He went back to his patient’s room, started setting out a suture set, iodine, anesthetic injection. He had done this so many times today, he was practiced and comfortable. Each patient was another chance at perfecting his technique, each turn of the wrist to knot the sutures more at ease.

Soon Harry was at the door.

“Little fella!” Harry cried, as he saw the tiny patient. “What do we have here?”

“Adriano is from Brazil, Harry,” Louis explained. “He has a pretty good laceration on his head, and
we’re going to fix it.”

“Eu vou ao cinema com meus amigos e família,” said Harry. “I go to the cinema with my family and friends. That’s really the only phrase I know in Portuguese. But, you know, after I’ve been in the country a little while, it all comes back to me.”

Louis looked at Harry in surprise. “You’ve been to Brazil?”

“Well, no,” said Harry. “Portugal. With my dad. It was a long time ago. I thought I would learn a phrase or two so I could banter with people there, you know, impress them with my wit.”

“Really,” mused Louis. “Can you actually speak Portuguese?”

“I think that was a pretty convincing demonstration, wasn’t it? Dad?” Harry asked Adriano’s father, who nodded with a smile. These American doctors were wacky. Or maybe it was just these two. Harry’s accent was pretty atrocious, actually, and Brazilian Portuguese was completely different from Portuguese in Portugal. Just play along, the dad thought. Humor them.

“Did you get anyone to go to the cinema with you, then?” Louis asked.

Harry smiled. “No, but everyone thought I had a great accent. Like a native, they said. Magnífico.”

Adriano seemed confused by the bits of Portuguese escaping from Harry. It was pretty weird in the context of the hospital. The strange, handsome man with the long hair and the green shirt, showing almost his entire naked chest, liked to go to the cinema with his friends and family. Why did he say that? What did that have to do with his injury? And why were they still talking? It was as if—as if they just liked talking to each other. As if they were looking for a reason to prolong the conversation. Adriano looked back and forth between the two doctors as if watching a tennis tournament. Had they forgotten about him? Hello, doctors! I’m still here!

”Eles vão te ajudar agora, está bem?” Adriano’s father said. “Você tem de ficar bem quietinho. Okay?”

Adriano nodded his head. His father laid him on the exam table and held his hand.

“Adriano, this is going to sting a little. I’m sorry,” Louis said, injecting the anesthetic. Adriano closed his eyes like a monk meditating, his lips pursed in concentration. He started to whimper as the anesthetic went in.

“It’s all right, child,” Harry said, stroking Adriano’s face while holding it lightly, his other hand on Adriano’s arm. “Sweetness, it’s okay.” Adriano’s body stilled, listening to Harry’s voice.

Louis used scissors to trim Adriano’s hair a bit, and then opened the sterile suture to begin the repair. Harry cut sutures for him. Louis was very gentle with Adriano, working as quickly and quietly as possible. Harry was right. Louis had a special talent in surgery. His hands were fast and fluid, better than the average intern, even as good as some of the older residents. He was born to do this. Despite his protests to the contrary, Louis practiced. He practiced relentlessly in his apartment, in the call room, tying knots, practicing suturing, reading. He was a perfectionist. Every suture was symmetrical to the adjacent ones, the skin borders perfectly aligned, beautifully smooth. His work was art.

They worked together as a team, quickly getting the job done. Seven stitches later, the laceration was closed. Louis washed the incision and put antibiotic ointment on it.

“There you go, little man,” Louis said to Adriano. “Good as new.”
“Obrigado, doutor,” Adriano’s father said. “Thank you, Dr. Louis,” he promoted Adriano to say thank you.

The little boy looked at him with suspicion, “Obrigado.”

“You're so very welcome. These stitches need to be taken out in a week. You can come back to see me here, or be seen in Brazil, okay?” Adriano’s father nodded.

Louis turned to Harry. “Thank you, Harry, for your help. Adriano seemed to enjoy your presence.”

“He's a big guy, aren't you, Adriano?” Harry said, patting his arm.

Harry smiled at him. Adriano did not return his smile, but he did look relieved.

Adriano’s father clasped Harry and Louis’s hands, thanking them again. The little boy hopped up to his feet and was ready to be discharged. Louis gave him a bunch of stickers.

After they left, Harry turned to Louis, “You were great with him, Louis.”

“You think it’s hypnotic, eh? More like sleep-inducing. Maybe I bored him into being catatonic.”

“You couldn't be boring if you tried,” said Louis, quickly regretting it. He wanted to be polite, to compliment Harry, but he had no intention of coming across as being flirtatious. He could feel Harry’s eyes on him, feel a beam burning a spot in his neck. He just wanted them to work smoothly together, not to be awkward.

“Well, must run,” said Harry. You know where to find me if you need me.” Harry turned to go.

“Okay. Thanks again, Harry.”

Louis cleaned up the instruments, the sutures, put everything sharp in the special sharps container. He had a satisfied feeling of tackling another difficult task—suturing a young child without general anesthesia. Challenges in minor surgery sometimes didn't have to do with the technical aspects of surgery, but with human nature. They required a patience and finesse that couldn't be taught, a certain way of interacting with patients that showed authority and knowledge without being confrontational, that allowed patients to place their trust in his care, that made them feel secure, almost loved.

Trust, finesse, honesty, knowledge, love. In the emergency room, every encounter was brief and temporary. Louis could handle that. He could handle belligerent patients and uncooperative patients and patients in pain or on drugs or depressed. He could put people in a treatment algorithm and still treat them like human beings. The two paths—the medical, which had to do with human biochemistry and physiology; and the emotional, which had to do with human reaction to the arcs of their lives—were intertwined, could co-exist, were not exclusive, and should not be separated.

The head and the heart. The head and the heart did not have to contradict each other. They did not have to gird themselves for battle, take out knives and clubs, and beat each other senseless. They could help each other. One could strengthen the other. Louis understood this.

What about himself? What about his own belligerent spirit? What of his own pain? Could he wrestle his own reluctance to make peace, his own skepticism, his own brokenness, enough to finally heal?
When Harry talked about Louis’s talent in surgery, Louis realized, he was addressing both his head and his heart. He was talking about both Louis’s book smarts, his technical talents, and also his spirit, his ambition and persistence, his kindness and generosity. Harry could see him more clearly than he saw himself. Or rather, Harry saw a distilled version of Louis that was nicer, purer, and better than the version he saw in himself.

Maybe it would be possible to be that pure, if one person believed in you. Maybe love does give one presence.

***

A man doesn’t have time in his life
to have time for everything.
He doesn’t have seasons enough to have
a season for every purpose. Ecclesiastes
Was wrong about that.

A man needs to love and to hate at the same moment,
to laugh and cry with the same eyes,
with the same hands to throw stones and to gather them,
to make love in war and war in love.
And to hate and forgive and remember and forget,
to arrange and confuse, to eat and to digest
what history
takes years and years to do.

-Yehudi Amichai, “A Man in His Life”

Something that I keep forgetting: we’re all waiting for the moment but the moment is continually passing. A man has no time; life and love do not wait.

Picked up Lady from the Azoffs next door. Their son Jeff, who is in high school, comes every other day to take her for a walk while I’m doing the ER rotation.

She’s so good to snuggle with when I get home. You’d think I’d be dead after working 24 hours, but it takes a good half hour to come down from the adrenaline rush. I play a few tunes and eat a banana or drink a protein shake, a couple minutes of yoga, then snuggle in with Lady and we’re both good for a few hours’ nap time. She’s warm and soft and puts her face on my chest, digs her
paws into my ribs. It never stops being ticklish.

So last night L sewed up a little boy. I was there. He asked me to help him. He asked me. I wanted to slap him, it was so adorable!

He’s twenty-six tomorrow.

I live here on my knees
As I try to make you see
That you’re everything I think I need here on the ground.

But you’re neither friend nor foe
Though I can’t seem to let you go.
The one thing that I still know is that you’re keeping me down.

You’re keeping me down, yeah
You’re on to me, on to me, and all over...

Something always brings me back to you.
It never takes too long.

***

On the morning of his twenty-sixth birthday, Louis Tomlinson went to work at 5:30 AM. It was a cold Boston day. A light rain drizzled as he and Niall drove down Commonwealth Avenue to get onto Storrow Drive. The road was dark and slippery, the lanes narrow, the curves on Storrow sharp. Louis felt as if they were professional drivers filming a commercial on a trick course at night. Fucking Boston winters, the days were 90% dark. The Christmas wreaths and ribbons on the lamp posts were somber shadows, with flashes of red under the bright lights as they passed them. They were less festive than sacrificial.

Christmas, a blood sport, thought Louis. Internship has warped your brain. You are seriously fucking homicidal. Or maybe it’s not seeing the sun for the next four months, and not having seen it for more than one day a week for the last five.

“So, the big birthday,” Niall said. “Dude, how old are you now?”

“Twenty-six,” said Louis. “Twenty-six years old and still working for the Man.” Louis had dragged Niall through a Starbucks drive-through this morning. He had his morning tea, splash of milk (don’t turn your nose up; it’s lovely—milk, no sugar, that was his order) and a blueberry scone, and was less grouchy than usual. Niall sipped on his double espresso, savoring the dark brew, heavy on caffeine.
“Aren’t we all?” Niall replied. “Happy birthday, buddy. We should go out for a celebration.” Both of Niall’s hands gripped the wheel, negotiating the slippery drive; every once in a while, one hand let go to lift his coffee. If only coffee came in injectable form, he mused.

“No need,” said Louis. “Being ancient as dinosaurs is its own reward. I always knew I’d be an intern one day, but it really doesn’t feel satisfying, you know what I mean?”

Niall nodded. “It’s a shit job. Gotta start at the bottom of the stairs, as they say.”

“Yeah, well. We’re almost halfway through it. Can’t believe that. Seems like yesterday we were moving in?”

“Thank God,” said Niall. “If internship were two years, I’d honestly shoot myself. Or I would trust you to shoot me. That’s what good friends do for each other.”

“Anyway, Niall, I’ve been meaning to ask, how’s it going with you and Alice?”

Even in the dark, Louis could feel Niall choke and blush with heat.

“Wow. That came out of nowhere.”

“Come on, Ni. Spill it,” Louis said. “You’ve both been very hush hush. Are you working for the CIA or what? What’s up with you?”

“Not that it’s any of your business,” Niall said, drawing out his words for emphasis. “But it’s going well. I believe you are already acquainted with Alice.” Niall turned his head away, embarrassed.

Louis teased, “And?”

“What the fuck, Tommo, do I have to introduce you? You could interrogate her, you know. She talks, too.” Niall said, trying to divert Louis from his own shy feelings.

“But you're my little ball of sunshine, Niall. So I'm asking you.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sakes, are you my mother?” Niall ran a hand through his hair and flushed even more pink. “All right. You know what? She's beautiful, she's funny, she's smart. Looks and personality. She's the whole package.”


Niall turned to look at Louis, taking his eyes off the road very briefly, “What can I say? She’s very lovable.”

Louis laughed loudly and clapped Niall on his back. Niall enjoyed his torture and laughed along.

“Alice and I—you could say there’s chemistry. But you know, we barely know each other. We’re just in the beginning stages of dating. I mean, she's gorgeous. Totally my type: petite, brunette, extroverted. We just click, you know?” Niall sipped his coffee, now nearly cold. “We’re very different, but somehow—we’re great together. I like watching sports; she would rather do sports than watch it. She comes from a big family; I just have one brother. I like curry; she likes Italian. But she’s—she’s not like the others. She doesn't shrink from giving her honest opinion. She's smart. I trust her.”

“And, obviously, she likes you?”
Niall laughed heartily. “I’m guessing. Either that or she’s a total masochist and enjoys having dinner with someone she despises.”

“You little shit. All this time, making your move,” Louis said. “I’m glad for you, Ni. Sad for Alice, though.” Niall waved a middle finger in his general direction. “She could've done so much better, but here we are. Beauty and the beast.”

“You too, Tommo,” said Niall, watching Louis out of the corner of his eye. “Don’t think I don’t see it.”

Louis’s stomach dropped and his throat closed. The car became a tomb of silence as Louis listened to the pounding blood in his ear.

“Wha—what do you mean, Ni?”

“You and Harry. What happened at Tulane, exactly?”

Louis glanced at Niall, who was giving him a look that said, *spill the beans, mysterious one, or else I can't help you.*

“Harry? Harry and I were friends. He left to go to Hopkins. End of story.” Louis kept his eyes straight ahead. He hoped to give nothing away. Unfortunately, as he talked, his voice had hitched up an octave. Niall heard it.

“Is that why you didn’t talk to each other for the first four months?” Niall asked. “Weird, if you ask me. Friends avoiding each other like that? Looking at each other like you do?” Louis shot him a quick glance. “Yeah. You're damn right I noticed.”

Louis squirmed in his seat. He considered Niall a close friend—probably his best friend in Boston. He wanted to be a good friend and an honest person, but talking about Harry would bring out a side of him that he had locked away. It would also rekindle an unacceptable, absolutely unacceptable, hope for love, a hope that no matter how much his heart wanted, his head told him would never, never happen again. The kind of love he had for Harry in New Orleans was all out. It was an all-encompassing, no holds barred, head over heels, all consuming, Romeo and Juliet kind of once-in-a-lifetime love. It had been a conflagration. Louis could not rise from the ashes; he should not, he must not hope to.

“Really, Niall,” Louis said, quiet. “You're seeing conspiracies where there aren't any. I don't know what else to tell you.”

“All right. I get it, Lou,” Niall replied. “It's private. If you ever feel like talking about it, you know, Liam’s always available, 'cause I'm shit at it.”

Niall ducked as Louis threw a punch his way.

“Joking! Jesus, of course I'll listen,” Niall looked at Louis sympathetically, “Look, some things take time. Maybe Harry isn’t ready either. Don’t hold grudges for the sake of holding grudges, that's all I’m saying.” Louis looked down, silent. “You could be missing something really special. You don’t want to live life regretting, you know?”

“Ni, there’s literally nothing—“

“—to talk about, yeah. Okay.”

They pulled into the parking garage. “Louis,” said Niall, “if there's anything I can do. You got me?”
Louis nodded his head silently and got out of the car.

Happy birthday.

***

Louis and Niall parted inside the hospital as Louis headed toward the emergency room. The ER interns’ call room was just behind the emergency room, in a hallway not far from Room E-10. Because patients came into the emergency room round the clock, interns almost never got to sleep here. Nevertheless there were two twin beds and a bathroom, in case the emergency room slowed in the early mornings and the interns wanted a nap.

Louis dropped off his bag in the call room and noticed that Harry’s bag was in a corner of the room. He had dropped his things off and was already in the ER, working. Louis couldn't help himself; he walked over and glanced at the bag, which lay partly unzipped, and saw a hint of something familiar, a band of vermilion. It was Harry’s red leather journal, or at least a version of it. At Tulane, Harry had recorded his thoughts in the journal: poetry, songs, drawings. Once upon a time, Louis had pointed out all the dumb things he drew in there, made fun of them mercilessly, shared jokes and stories. He often drew and wrote things too, in the margins. It had been a book of memories.

Louis knew it was unforgivable to read the journal. It was Harry’s private property and was strictly off limits. They were only professional peers now, right? Not even friends, really, merely co-workers. He had no rights to the book.

Still, the journal beckoned to him. What if I just took a peek, just one page, just a skim, not even really reading it? What if Harry planted it here on purpose, because he knew I would see it, because he wanted me to read it? Louis rationalized hard, standing over the bag with his angels and demons on each shoulder, fencing each other.

He bent down, tentatively reached his hand out to the bag. Just then, the door to the room opened, and Harry walked in.

Louis sprang up like lightning and turned around. Harry, surprised by the sudden movement in the room, glanced over and saw Louis, away from Louis’ own bag and standing right next to Harry’s bag. A curious look passed Harry’s face—indignation, amusement, a hint of anger. The look passed in a fraction of a second. He regained his composure.

“Hey, Lou. Good morning.”
“Morning, Harry. Here early today?”

“Yeah. Just forgot my phone.” Harry looked from Louis to his own bag. Louis jumped aside in a nervous fit.

“Sorry! I'm in your way.”

“No problem, it’s fine.” Harry retrieved his phone from the bag and seemed about to say something else, hesitated, and then said, “Are you headed over to the ER?”

“Yeah,” Louis said, “I'm ready. Right. Let’s go, yeah.” He talked too much and too fast. With a pang of shame, he knew that Harry knew. He skirted around Harry and walked awkwardly ahead, aware of Harry’s gaze on his back.

They worked steadily throughout the day. The second day was better than the first. Louis saw patients faster and smoother than on the first day.

Ruthann came back to have her packing changed. Her leg was improved. The antibiotics were working. Louis arranged for her to remove the packing at home in a couple of days and finish her antibiotics. She left with a flurry of gratitude for her handsome doctor.

It was a Friday night. The ER was packed with patients who had waited with their ailments until the end of the week, and people doing stupid things on weekends: drinking too much, getting into fights, fender benders.

Around 10 PM, a few patients were brought in at the same time. They had all been in a bar fight down the street, and all were three sheets to the wind. Louis, in his little clinic, was given a patient with a three-inch cut from his thumb toward the middle of his palm, from a broken bottle. Harry, on the other side of the ER, got the worse patient—a man thrown out of the bar face first, with more than fifty cuts on his face.

“All right, sir,” Louis said to the patient on his exam table. “Let’s see you close and open your hand.”

“It hurts too fucking much,” the patient slurred. “Can't you just knock me out?” He was covered in dirt, his hand smeared in blood and mud. It would be unpleasant to clean him up. Louis started to get everything ready.

Harry steeled himself to approach his patient. The patient was middle-aged, with greasy hair. He had the stale, sweet and sour smell of hops and mash, mixed in with sweat, cigarette smoke, and body odor. His gaunt face was criss-crossed with an abundance of tiny cuts, too deep to glue and too shallow to suture. Bits of glass were stuck to his face and scalp. It was going to be an ugly job sorting this mess.

Harry sighed. The patient would take a few hours to repair. He probably wouldn't remember any of it and would complain about how it looked afterward. His new nickname would be Scarface.

Harry got a basin of sterile water and started cleaning the patient’s face. He was too drunk to cooperate, but awake enough to bleat out a string of curses steadily.


“I'm sorry, sir. I need to get your face clean so I can start putting it back together.”

The patient looked at Harry as if realizing he was there for the first time.
“Hey, doc! Sorry, it just really fucking—goddamn it—it really fucking hurts. I'm sorry about the language, too.” The patient smiled. “I'm a little drunk.” He breathed out, a flume of rancid hops filling the room.

“Yeah, just a bit,” said Harry. “I'm going to inject you with something that will numb up your face. Then we'll start suturing.”

“You do what you have to do, doc. Hey doc,” he said, loudly.

“Yes?”

“Don’t take this the wrong way.”

“Yes?”

“I love women. Don't get me wrong. But. You’re really, like, really fucking handsome!” The patient slurred, his breath in Harry’s face.

“Thank you.”

“No, I mean it. Like, you're really fucking—ah, shit!—fucking handsome. You look like the movie star—what’s his name? You know, the guy in— What the fuck? That really fucking hurts!”

Harry continued small injections in the face, around the temple, the eyes, the cheeks. The lacerations felt interminable. He wasn't done with injecting a third of them.

The man suddenly tapped Harry’s hand.

“Doc, I don’t feel good, really—can I sit up? If I sit up, I think I’d feel better.”

Harry stopped what he was doing, looked at the patient, decided he was sober enough, and said, “All right.” He let the patient hold his elbow and lean on him to sit up.

All at once, the patient’s arc of movement continued as he simultaneously vomited and toppled over Harry, falling over the edge of the bed onto the floor, partially falling on Harry. Harry’s astonishment turned into fear, then into an anxiety that the patient’s problems were about to get much worse. He tried pushing the patient off himself, but the man was unconscious, dead weight. Harry was covered in his vomit. Harry struggled to sit up.

“I need help!” Harry called. “In here! Need some help!”

A nurse ran by and saw him on the floor. She pulled the alarm for Code Blue. The klaxons sounded overhead as residents and interns began running toward Harry and his patient. Harry lay helplessly in some embarrassment: second day in the ER, trapped under an unconscious drunk and his vomit.

Dave and Finn, the residents on call with Harry, pulled the patient off. With the nurse’s help, they began placing intravenous catheters and transferring the patient to a stretcher, securing him.

Finn Wellington glanced at Harry’s vomit-covered scrubs and chuckled, “Harry, go take a shower. Come back when you’re clean. Take your time—you’re gonna need it.” Harry nodded. Spittles of vomit dotted his hair. His scrubs were soaked through. He felt like garbage marinated in alcohol and vomit. He had made a rookie mistake—letting the patient control the encounter. It was amateur.

Louis had heard the code blue, but couldn't abandon his patient in mid-suture. There were plenty of other people for the code. He was bandaging him up when Miriam, the nurse, came by.
“What was the code for?”

“I think some patient coded on Harry,” Miriam said.

Louis swiveled his head as if attacked. “What did you say?”


“The patient just fainted. He’s alive. But Harry…”

“What happened to Harry?” Louis said, trying to sound casual.

“Harry’s a mess.”

Louis didn’t need to hear anymore. He asked Miriam to clean up the room, and said he was going for a bathroom break.

He ran to the call room. What if Harry was hurt? No one had ever coded on Louis before. It must have been traumatic for Harry. Was he okay? Did he need help? It was the ER. Everyone was short-handed; no one ever offered to help. Anyway, Harry would never ask for it. Louis knew that Harry could probably take care of himself. He knew that it would seem odd for both interns to be missing from the emergency room. These thoughts faded when compared with his worry about Harry. He would just do a quick check, just to be sure his boy was fine.

***

The call room was empty. Their bags lay on the floor just as they had been deposited this morning. Louis heard the shower going through the closed bathroom door, accompanied by a muted hum. Damn it, Harry was singing in the shower.

I've got to have my love in the morning
Or the rest of my day is positively mayhem
    I'm a regular monster
How do you like your eggs in the morning?
Oh, God, he was such a dork. He was singing about breakfast! Despite his reservations, Louis sat down on the bed, his mouth curled up in a fond smile. Several minutes must have passed while Louis sat there, listening to Harry singing. Louis was in his own world, oblivious to his surroundings, as he imagined Harry singing a song at the kitchen counter while cooking eggs for breakfast.

Suddenly the shower shut off, and the bathroom door opened. Harry came out rubbing his eyes, his waist wrapped in a towel, his hands twisting a towel around his head. He startled when he saw Louis sitting in the bed, legs dangling over, and Louis, also surprised, was knocked out of his reverie. They stared at each other wordlessly.

Louis broke eye contact finally, embarrassed to be staring. He got up and turned, ready to leave.

In a second, without any warning, Harry crossed the distance between them and pushed Louis backward, into the bed. Louis gasped in surprise, falling wordlessly. He looked up to see Harry pinning him with an intense glare, coming closer until he was just hovering, inches away.

Louis felt his exhalations like sparks lighting in Louis’s face, one after the other, a chain of warmth like Christmas lights turning on.

Louis could smell his Harry scent mixed in with the harshness of hospital soap and shampoo, a few strands of hair escaping the towel and dripping onto Louis. Without thinking, all inhibitions cast to the wind, Louis closed his eyes and leaned in.

Harry’s lips connected with Louis’s, tasting him tremulously. Louis was lost in the dream of the kiss, the unreality of it protecting him from thinking too much, the feeling of Harry like a second sense, familiar and happy. Their lips moved slowly, trying to be careful.

Harry’s hands moved to encircle Louis, to hold him. Louis raised his arms around Harry’s neck.

Louis opened his lips first, wanting more, scared for more but not able to stop himself. Harry darted his tongue across Louis’s lips, then deeper, connecting with his tongue in a sensual dance. Louis let out a whimper, which drove Harry to give him more, to swirl his tongue tasting Louis’s throat. The old familiarity of Louis’s sound was a ghost from the past, a ghost visiting them. Harry straddled Louis, his towel falling open.

Louis stroked Harry’s broad chest, traced his hands across the swallows in flight, then, palm flat on his skin, he felt Harry’s butterfly with his fingertips, in gentle waves like the sea. He reached down to caress the double laurel leaves, their direction pointing unmistakably one way, down. The ink seemed to leap off the skin; it was lucid, alive, radiant. Harry responded by closing his eyes and sinking into the touch.

"Lou... I..."

“Thank God. Thank God you’re okay,” Louis rushed. His fingers brushed Harry’s jaw, trying to relearn its curves.
“What?” Harry leaned back. “What are you—?”

“I was so worried. They said someone coded—“

“You were worried—about me?” Harry’s eyes opened in surprise. “Why?”

“Because,” Louis said, unable to explain. “You’re an idiot.”

Harry pulled Louis tighter into himself. They didn’t speak any further, just holding each other. Harry caressed the small of Louis’s back, using his large hands to encompass Louis’s waist. Louis buried his face in Harry’s chest, breathing him in, rubbing Harry’s upper back, felt his powerful shoulders as they exchanged touches.

Louis felt his eyes mist as he lay against Harry. So much emotion had gathered and dissolved in him at that moment, falling away as Harry held him. His cheeks still against Harry’s shoulder, a tear formed and fell onto Harry’s collar bone, collecting in the deep groove of pink, damp skin, followed by more tears, one after another. Louis blinked, but the tears were unstoppable. Harry lifted his chin and kissed the tears as they fell, kissed his lips, tears smearing his own face. Louis cried silently; it was unclear whether he cried in joy or sadness. The well of tears were so deeply embedded, he felt he was crying from his belly, from his toes.

Just as softly, Harry swallowed, a choking sound in his throat. They kissed as they never had before, a trespass sweetly urged, tear-stained and absolved. They were only kisses. Yet in their history, there had never been kisses like these. They could have kissed each other into the morning, into another lifetime.

Harry pulled himself away.


“Haz,” Louis looked down and away, unable to say more.

“What time is it?”

Louis looked at his watch. “Hmm. My watch says 11:47.”

“Oh, God. Just in time,” Harry’s face was a mixture of happiness and sadness. “I’ve been meaning to find you all day. Happy birthday.”

“You remembered?”

“Are you kidding? Twenty-six years ago, the sweetest, smartest, most ruggedly handsome doctor I know was born.”

Louis smiled. “Harry.”

“Louis,” Harry lifted Louis’s chin and gave him a small peck. “We have to go back to work now. But in the morning—“

“In the morning?”

“Come home with me?”

Louis nodded.
Harry fidgeted in the lobby of the hotel. His father Des had dropped him off this morning, before leaving to teach his English class at the Universitat de Barcelona. Harry was to join a tour group with other teens, to see the sights of the city. He was here for a week’s visit, and then he and Gemma would join his mother and her husband Robin in England for another week.

Harry was peeved that Gemma didn't have to do the tour. She was allowed to stay at their dad’s place to read for her exams. It was unfair. Harry didn't want to walk around in the hot Spanish sun and see a bunch of rusty armor and old churches. No thanks! His father had given him money for souvenirs, but that hardly made up for the forced fun he was going to have to endure.

“Hello, young man,” a man with an American accent walked over. “Is your mom or dad here for the surgery conference?”

“What? No,” Harry said. “I'm here for the city tour. I'm supposed to meet the tour group here.”

“Ah, excuse me. My mistake,” he said. “I'm looking for—“

At that moment, a woman in an elegant beige suit approached them.

“Joshua!” she cried.

“Johannah! Nice to see you!” The man and woman exchanged embraces. “Did you just arrive?”

“Got here yesterday to get my talk ready,” she said. Harry noticed that she was quite pretty: light brown, wavy hair, hazel eyes, rosy cheeks, and long eyelashes. She did seem serious and intimidating, though, her voice sharp and clipped, her stance upright.

“Where is your son? Is it Louis?”

“Louis, yes,” she replied. “He’s here somewhere. Always running off. I signed him up for the city tour today but—“

“And how old is he now?” Joshua asked. “Eleven? Twelve?”

“No, Joshua. He’s thirteen! A teenager. Can you believe I’m the mother of a teenager? It seems he was just toddling around yesterday.”

A teenage boy, around the same age as Harry, sulked up to the lady. He had on a navy blue and white striped T-shirt, persimmon-colored pants folded up at the ankles, and Toms shoes. He was also wearing a beanie. Harry marveled at the kid’s bold, flamboyant fashion sense. He obviously dressed himself. And there was absolutely no need to wear a beanie in this blazing heat. It was solely for decoration. His boldness was exhilarating. Harry couldn't stop looking at him.

“Mom, I just don't see why I can't hang out at the hotel while you do your conference,” he said, his
voice high-pitched and clear as a bell. “I'm thirteen. I'm not a child.”

“Louis,” Johannah said sternly, “this is not open to discussion. You should be grateful you’re in this city, able to see a tour, as a young American. It's an opportunity to learn, Louis. Your sisters wish they were lucky enough to be here. Now, come.”

Louis reluctantly walked to Johannah’s side. He had seen Harry looking at him, and now he returned the curious gaze, sizing Harry up. Harry was wearing an aqua polo shirt and khaki shorts, a nautical rope bracelet on his wrist. He felt Louis’s gaze go from his head to his toes.

“Louis, I want you to meet Dr. Joshua Fernbank,” Johannah was saying. “He’s one of my oldest and dearest friends. We did our surgery training together. And someday, maybe he will train you.”

“Nice to meet you, Dr. Fernbank,” Louis said, offering his hand.

“And you, Louis. I hear the tour will be excellent. Barcelona is a charming, artful city, with some beautiful architecture. You’ll enjoy it.”

“I guess,” said Louis, listlessly.

Johannah left them to find the leader of the tour group. Louis excused himself and wandered over to Harry.

“Hi, I’m Louis Tomlinson,” he said, extending his hand. “Some people call me Lou.”

Harry took out his hand, dropping the travel brochure he had been holding. “Oops, shoot,” he said, bending over to pick it up. “I'm Harry Styles.”

“You’re American.”

“British-American. You?”

“Yeah, from Louisiana. That’s my mom. She’s here giving a surgical talk—she’s a surgery professor at Tulane.” Louis waved his hand at Johannah carelessly. “Are your parents here for conference?”

“No, I'm visiting my dad. He’s an English professor at the university—he’s British, but he’s on sabbatical this semester.”

“Going on the magical mystery tour then? “ Louis asked.

“Yeah. Dad signed me up for the tour. It sounds like a major drag.”

“It does to me, too. What a way to waste a perfectly good day.” Louis’s face puckered in thought. “You know, we might not have to do it.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked. “We can't not go. We signed up. They’ll contact our parents if we go missing.”

“We might have to do all of it, is what I’m saying,” Louis winked. “Have you ever had an adventure?’”

Harry’s insides suddenly felt foamy and funny. Being defiant was not Harry’s style. He was not going to go missing in a foreign country. He was not going to make his parents worry. His parents made sure he was loved and cared for, but his side of the contract said to follow rules, be good, make them proud, prove their love worthwhile.
Yet here was a boy saying *do it, do it*, his blue eyes like two fog lights steering into mischief, his confidence contagious. Harry was oddly stimulated by the suggestion of rebellion, even as every fiber of his body warned him against it. Why was this stranger so compelling?

They boarded the tour bus and saw the first few sights, the Olympic park, the exterior of the Sagrada Familia. The bus drove down the busy Passeia de Gràcia with its beautifully paved, wide walkways, the elegant Art Deco lamps and benches arching over the walks, crowded with visitors. The guide was telling them about the history of the city, but Harry’s heart pounded loudly in his ears, drowning out any sound. All he could hear was his own voice arguing against itself.

When they approached the old city, Louis pulled Harry close to him. “This is where we make our escape,” he whispered.

“Lou,” said Harry, “are you sure? We don’t even have a map.”

“Would it make you feel better to have a *map*, Harry?” Louis rolled his eyes, made a face. “What difference does it make? We’re in a completely foreign country where we can’t speak the language or read the signs. We don’t know anywhere from anywhere else. What good’s a map?”

Louis watched Harry’s face, worried yet excited. He knew that Harry just needed a little nudging.

“If I’m lying, I’m dying.” Louis looked deeply into Harry’s eyes. Harry wanted to laugh, but he was also, in a surreal way, mesmerized. Louis continued, “Harry, I’ll be your compass. If you get lost, I’ll be your light. Okay? We’ll always find our way home.”

“Yes, of course,” said Louis with insouciance. “Besides, the tour bus will come get us. Eventually.”

“But how?” asked Harry. “Why would they?”

“They’ll get us when we’re ready to come back. They will never let two American boys be lost in Barcelona. Makes them look bad.”

That was true. *Louis is clever*, thought Harry. *Clever but devious. He might not be one who always used his brains for Good. Mum would say he’s a bad sort of kid. But I bet she’d like him.*

“What about our parents?”

“Listen,” Louis said. “As soon as we take off, I’ll call the hotel and let mom know, and you call your dad. Then, a few hours later, we’re back on the tour bus. No harm done.”

They waited until everyone got off the bus. They were on La Rambla, a sprawling, tree-lined pedestrian walk that stretched from Plaça de Catalunya in the north to the Christopher Columbus monument, at Port Vell, a mile or so to the south. Near the beginning of the street, high remnants of Roman walls and a Roman gate protected the city, towering over the pedestrians below. The tour began to move down the street, until they were standing in front of a large opening to a building on the right. A sign identified it as “La Boqueria.”

The tour guide announced that they would take a thirty minute break here. He asked the boys and girls to break up into small groups of two or three, and to reconvene at the same place. La Boqueria
was a large indoor market that sold fresh fruit juices, seafood, tapas, candy, snacks and foods of all kinds. It was dark and crowded. Everything being sold was displayed on tables at waist height, in a kaleidoscope of colors and textures. The guide told them to get some lunch, and buy small souvenirs if they wanted to. But, he warned, be back in thirty minutes. The group would take off without them, he admonished, no matter what.

Harry and Louis walked through, bought small bites of tapas and paella and shared them. Louis bought a kiwi strawberry juice. Harry got a mango one. Other kids were eating bread dipped in olive oil, fried calamari and anchovies, squid and Iberian ham, sliced into paper-thin sheets and twisted on a stick.

Two girls from the tour, about their age, had been following them, laughing and giggling. They approached Louis and introduced themselves as Hannah and Ellen, English school girls on holiday. They were both pretty. Hannah had long brown hair in a ponytail. She wore a short, flowery diaphanous dress of two layers. Ellen had reddish blond hair and freckles, and wore a pink T-shirt and white shorts with sandals.

“Are you from America?” Hannah asked.

“As a matter of fact, we are,” Louis said. “I’m Louis, and this is Harry Styles.” Louis crinkled his eyes in amusement. “He’s a famous pop star in the States. Have you heard of him?”

Louis saw their eyes grow larger, their mouths open in silent excitement.

“Are you really?” Ellen said.

“Swear to God,” said Louis. “Harry’s band’s got millions of views on MySpace.”

“That’s why you look so familiar!” The girls turned to each other. “I think I’ve seen your picture before, Harry. What group do you play with?” Ellen asked.

Harry racked his brain quickly, “I sing with a band called—White Eskimo. Maybe you’ve seen our videos?”

Ellen knitted her eyebrows. “Hmm, I’m pretty sure I’ve heard of it.”

Hannah said, “What’s your best song, then, Harry?”

Harry improvised, “It’s a song called Better Than Words. Do you know it?”

“If it's the song I'm thinking of, it's brilliant. I love it!” Hannah sighed.

Harry hummed a few bars of his nonexistent chart topper. Louis supplied the air guitar riffs in the background. Harry strung together the titles of various songs he knew to make the lyrics.

Hannah said, “We were wondering if you’d want to hang out together today.” Both girls looked at Harry dreamily.

Harry bit his lips. He took a sip of his mango juice and shifted his feet.

“We can't,” Louis said. “We’d love to, but we can't. You see,” he motioned for them to lean in, “Harry is trying to be incognito on the tour. Sometimes crowd control can be a big problem, and he doesn't have his manager here. It's risky for him.”

Hannah looked disappointed, but Ellen was skeptical.
“Are you sure it’s safe to be walking around, then?” Ellen asked. “Perhaps you’ll be recognized?”

“I feel like,” Harry said, “sometimes it’s worth the risk. It’s worthwhile to live like a normal person, just for one afternoon.”

Louis took Harry’s elbow and started turning him away. “If you’ll excuse us, girls, we’ll see you later.”

They walked away quickly, leaving the girls in increasing skepticism. Once out of earshot, Harry and Louis exploded in laughter.

“What a rotten trick, Louis!” Harry cried, bent over in laughter. “*Harry Styles, pop star!* I can’t believe that they believed you.”

“White Eskimo? *Better Than Words?*” Louis asked. “I think you must be the worst ad libber on the planet, Haz. You couldn’t think of anything better? Seriously, I thought the joke was blown right then!”

They walked out of the market and into the open air. Louis spotted their tour guide waiting under a street lamp, and quickly took both of them behind the guide and into a side street.

“Harry,” Louis said, “the girls seem to like you.”

“Oh, I think they liked both of us, Louis.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?” Louis asked cautiously. “Have you had many girlfriends?”

Harry laughed. “I’m, kind of, in between girlfriends right now. No one serious. How about you?”

“I’ve got a girlfriend back home,” said Louis. “Her name’s Kirsten. She’s nice.” Louis started to say something else, but then abruptly stopped. Harry watched him closely, too involved to conceal his interest. Louis could feel Harry’s attention, but didn’t turn to meet his gaze. After another second, Louis said, “I like her a lot. Yeah, I think I like her.” Then he added, “I thought.” He didn’t say anything more.

Harry didn’t know why, but despite Louis’s rebellious and bad inclinations, Harry felt comfortable talking to him, continually entertained by him. He felt as if he could tell Louis anything and Louis would understand, wouldn’t judge him. He almost wanted to tell Louis about his doubts that he would probably never have another girlfriend. But he held back. Louis was a stranger he’d just met today. It was too personal. But, the funny thing was, Harry felt Louis would empathize.

Louis and Harry made their phone calls to their parents, telling them they were fine and having fun, and then wandered through the streets aimlessly, going in and out of stores to look at souvenirs and clothing, at all the amusing and shocking window displays. They passed a sex toy store with its doors flung widely open to the street. Louis pointed out the vibrators on display, and he and Harry giggled over the psychedelic colors and fantastic, exaggerated shapes. Honestly, adults were so stupid and funny sometimes. Another store had Nintendo and Xbox video games which they played for a few minutes.

Another store sold music CD’s and vinyl records, old rock concert posters, tour T shirts. Harry tugged on Louis’s shirt to go inside.

“Harry, you like music, for real?”
“I do, Lou. I really do. I have a turntable at home.”

“A turntable! What century are you living in? Don't you have a CD player?”

“It’s inherited. Was my dad’s old turntable—it’s ancient. But he had a lot of records and didn't want to get rid of them. So I’d take them home to the States a few at a time.”

Harry headed to the back of the store. He looked through vinyls seemingly at random, skipping from rock to blues to jazz, quickly flipping through the titles with practiced ease. It was much easier to talk about music than about girls.

Louis asked, “What’s your favorite, then?”

Harry giggled shyly. “You're going to think this is stupid, Lou, but I like old music. Like, old. I just think it sounds better.”

Louis shook his head in amazement. This Styles kid was more than a pretty package. He had depth, the little shit. And he lived up to his ridiculous name. Either that or he was being pretentious in a really earnest way.

“And you know all these records?”

“No, ‘course not,” Harry said. “But, like, this one, for instance,” he held up an old record with a black lady on one side against vertical stripes of orange and green. It said *Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Cole Porter Songbook*. “This is pretty much a classic of jazz. Everyone has their favorite Ella.”

“Well, I’ve never heard of her. Let’s play it,” Louis said. He took the record from Harry’s hand and walked to the clerk at the desk. In English, he asked whether he would play the record for them. The clerk replied to him in Spanish.

“H! Can you come here?”

The clerk spoke again, this time to both of them.

“Does he not want to play it?” Louis whispered to Harry.

“No, no,” said Harry. “I think— I think he’s asking which song—which song we want to listen to.” Harry looked at the song titles. “What do you think, Lou?”

Louis looked at Harry’s face, scrunched in serious concentration. Louis felt a smile start to creep in. Harry was endearing. He wanted to mush his cheeks. Louis looked down at the list of song titles, but they meant nothing to him.

“You choose, Harry.”

Harry pointed to the track, and the clerk nodded, taking the vinyl out of its sleeve.

Soon, they heard the scratches and pops of the recording come alive in the room. The record was old and had a lot of noise, but Harry’s face was one of rapturous joy. Louis watched him intently. Harry seemed completely unaware, lost in his own universe.

Woodwind instruments came in, and then violins. A woman’s voice, sounding like a twenty-year-old girl whose heart had just been broken, started to sing.
Ev’rytime we say goodbye, I die a little,
Ev’rytime we say goodbye, I wonder why a little,
Why the gods above me, who must be in the know.
Think so little of me, they allow you to go.

When you’re near, there’s such an air of spring about it,
I can hear a lark somewhere, begin to sing about it,
There’s no love song finer, but how strange
the change from major to minor,
Ev’rytime we say goodbye.

Louis loved music, too, but his favorites were Backstreet Boys and AC/DC, fast, energetic rock and pop songs, some acoustic music. Jazz was a foreign language to him. Instead of being annoyed or bored, however, Louis was instantly struck by the emotion of the music, the haunting hopelessness of the words, the lyrical beauty of the poetry. Harry seemed too young to understand the meaning behind the words, right? Surely he just like the tune, or the singing. He couldn’t understand what it felt like to be abandoned by someone he loved?

“It’s a depressing song, Harry,” Louis nudge him.

“I know,” Harry answered, only half joking, “I love the pain.”

The boys left the store and walked out into the Barcelona heat. They wandered around some more, arrived at the Catedral de la Santa Creu i Santa Eulàlia. They watched the square swarm with pigeons and small birds scooping up crumbs from tourists. Crowds of people filed by, queuing up to tour the gothic cathedral.

“Look at this church,” said Louis. “It’s massive. Thirteenth and fourteenth century, it says. Loads of people probably died making it.”

“Nah, it’s okay,” Harry shrugged, diffident.

“What, you’re not impressed, Harry?”

“That ice cream shop on the corner—did we pass it before? I’m kind of in the mood for ice cream now.”

Louis looked at Harry, who had sat so still listening to Ella Fitzgerald that it had been almost like worship. What an interesting contrast it was to see him bored by a church—a huge, intricate, weird-looking church at that, with spires and gargoyles and saints carved into the front face.

“But Harry, don’t you want to see the church? It’s pretty awesome. I mean, look at it. It’s historic.”

“Hmm,” Harry shrugged his shoulders again. “Not that important to me. A church is a church. It’s just a building.”

“Harry, don’t you believe in God?”

“What does that have to do with churches?” Harry had said. “If God exists, God loves me for what I
am, not for visiting a church.”

After their deep discussion on divine omnipresence, Harry had insisted that they get an ice cream at the shop on the corner. Louis got mint chocolate chip. Harry got bresca, honeycomb.

*He has a terrible sweet tooth,* thought Louis. *After all, you are what you eat.*

After walking another five or six blocks, they turned into a small alley with signs for hot chocolate and churros.

“Have you had Barcelona chocolate?” Harry asked Louis.

“Why? What’s so special about it?”

“Hmm. No Spanish hot chocolate, Lou?” Harry stopped in front of a shop. The menu was posted in a glass case near the door, in Catalan, English, Spanish, French, and German. Half the menu, or roughly 20 items, were all variations of drinkable chocolate. Churros only came in one serving size, one flavor. The boys read the menu.

“Swiss or French?” Harry turned toward Louis. “Personally, I prefer the straight Spanish. It’s the thickest and darkest, the best for dunking. It’s like dunking a churro into a melted bar of chocolate.”

“Haz, we literally just had ice cream.”

“So you agree to Spanish, then,” Harry took Louis’s hand and pulled him in.

They entered the tiny shop. A waiter motioned for them to take any table. A granita machine churned frozen lemonade, the thin spatulas inside steadily flipping and separating the ice crystals. Small demitasse cups and large mugs were turned upside down on the shelf behind the counter. Waiters in white dress shirts and black aprons bustled about, carrying trays of drinks and pastries from counter to table. Each table had salt and pepper shakers, a tin for napkins. There was a delicious mix of bitter chocolate and fried sugary dough smells in the air. The murals were paintings filling the wall spaces, glazed in ceramic. Louis realized that the pictures were of patrons eating and drinking inside the shop, painted in the style of cartoons, like pop art. *Pretty cool place.*

Several other tables were occupied—by couples, families with younger, and also older, children. Several glanced up when Harry and Louis came in, but quickly turned back to their own conversations.

Studying the menu again, Louis asked, “Are we ordering the Spanish chocolate then, H?”

“I highly recommend anything with whipped cream,” Harry said. “I’d go Spanish or Catalan.”

They ordered Catalan chocolate with extra whipped cream and a plate of churros to share. They played thumb wars while waiting for the food, their hands twisting to hold the other’s thumb down. Once or twice, their elbows shoved the table, making a commotion. The condiments fell. Louis yelled at Harry indignantly, and Harry, giggling, tried to pick them back up while Louis seized the moment to cheat and try to pin Harry’s thumb down. This made Harry giggle even harder, almost toppling over in his chair. The waiters turned to watch their shenanigans once or twice, but left them alone.

The food arrived quickly. The chocolate was as thick as a fondue. After the churro was dipped, there was a fudge-like layer on the pastry and no drip. The chocolate was as pretty as a picture.

A waiter came by to ask whether they wanted confectioners’ sugar for their churros. He had a small
canister to sprinkle.

“No, this is great as it is,” said Louis.

Harry looked at the waiter and added, “He’s sweet enough.” The waiter impassively turned and left. Louis grinned at Harry, who grinned back at him.

“This is incredible,” Louis said, taking a bite. “You're right, Haz. There's nothing like it.”

“See? I told you.” Harry leaned down for a bite of his churro, tongue out, smearing a bit of chocolate on his cheeks.

“Erm.. Harry, your left cheek,” said Louis.

Harry raised a hand to his face to check for the smudge, spreading it even more. “Did I get it?”

“Yeah, you did,” said Louis. “Gone now.”

When Harry straightened up and craned his neck to look at the mirrors along the walls, he realized that Louis had in fact lied; there was a bigger, more ridiculous smudge on his face. It looked like a tiny Australia splattered down on his left cheek. He turned around, ready for revenge. As Louis looked down at his cup of chocolate, Harry flung a spoonful of his own chocolate at Louis’s face, catching him on the lips just as he was ready to take a bite.

Louis looked up in surprise, chocolate caked on his lips and nose, simultaneously clownish and angry. Since this was Catalan chocolate, there was minimal dripping.

“What? You little—“

Louis dipped his churro into the chocolate and reached across to smear it on Harry’s face, but Harry’s hand caught him in time. Both of their hands were covered in churro crumbles, whipped cream, and chocolate. Louis’s chocolate-covered hand rubbed Harry’s chin, then his nose, then Harry’s left eye. Harry used his spoon as a weapon and painted Louis’s chocolate all over his face. Both their eyelashes were caked in whip cream, their noses dark brown in smears of chocolate, sugar and crumbs on their faces and hands. It was chaos.

Their commotion caused the other patrons to turn and look at them.

They were a chocolate-y, sugary shambles. They looked at each other and howled in laughter, unable to get control.

“You look so stupid!” Louis cried. “You're a mess! A stupid mess!”

“You look worse, Lou. You look more stupid! You look like a stupid alien from stupid planet churro!” Harry rolled his r’s as the Spanish did.

The waiters were remarkably tolerant. They must have been used to food fights, or Americans, or teenagers, or all three. After they drank their chocolates with their chocolate faces, they went to the bathroom to wash their hands. It was a single room with a single sink and toilet. Harry and Louis jostled at the faucets and bumped into each other, trying to hog the water, turning it into a water fight. They flung water at each other until their clothes were damp, wet spots on the front of their pants.

“You look like you peed your pants, Harry.”

“You look like you pooped your face, Lou-eh.”
They had another round of laughter and fighting and finally came out of the bathroom. Louis noticed that despite his best efforts, Harry still had a smudge of chocolate on his cheek. Louis chose not to say anything.

The sun began to dip in the horizon. A sea breeze kicked up in the street. Louis and Harry considered the time, trying to decide whether they should call the tour guide and let him know where they were.

They walked down the street toward the port, stopping by to watch sketch artists and cartoonists drawing with charcoals and pastels on paper. Louis took out the money he had left in his pockets.

“Haz, how much do you have?”

They counted what they had pooled together. It was just enough for a double portrait. They approached a lady waiting for a subject.

“Excuse us. Could you draw both of us?”

“Oh!” she smiled widely. “Are you brothers?”

“No,” said Harry, “he’s a threat to the world and I’m babysitting him.”

“Actually,” Louis said, “he’s just left the mental hospital. There’s something wrong with his mind. Short-term memory loss. I’m trying to return him to his parents.”

The lady looked puzzled. “So—portrait. Together?”

“Yes, please,” they said in unison.

They sat down. Louis slung one arm around Harry’s shoulder.

“Perfect!” the lady said. “You’re both so cute. Hold it just like that. Don’t move.”

Because time never freezes, can never freeze, because life perpetually passes, after a few minutes, the boys shifted, shoulders sore, faces stiff.

“My face is getting a cramp,” Louis said.

“Your face is a cramp,” Harry said. “I don’t know if it hurts, but it hurts me.


The day was drawing to an end, the sun canting at an acute angle, its blaze tinged with shadows. Harry wondered how much longer it would be before they had to call to be picked up. In the back of his mind, he cringed, knowing the enormous trouble they must have caused. He imagined a city-wide alert looking for two lost American boys. He imagined his mum’s horrified face on hearing the news, his dad’s anger. He imagined Gemma standing over him yelling at his selfish behavior.

It hadn’t been only a couple of hours. It was a whole day. The sun was setting, after all. Louis didn’t look worried in the least. It was as if he did this all the time. Yet, despite everything, Harry trusted him. He knew everything was going to be okay. Louis had promised him.

He really wished the day didn’t have to end. He wanted the day to last another twenty-four hours. Another week. A whole lifetime.

The lady continued drawing them patiently, precisely, taking time around their eyes, their noses and
mimics to get the proportions right. The light was perfect, diffused in the afternoon by the slant of umbrellas and shadows all around them.

Harry, bored, begin to whistle a tune.

“Is that an Ella Fitzgerald tune, too?” Louis asked.

“Ah, no,” Harry said. “It’s from an ex-Beatle.”

“Which one?” Louis asked. “John or Paul?”

Harry said, “Neither. It’s George Harrison. It sounds sad, but—it’s not.”

“Can you sing it for me?”

“Nope,” Harry said. “Gimme your hand.”

Louis extended his palm, and Harry wrote out a song title in it with his fingers. Louis watched with fascination and then said, exasperatedly, “How am I supposed to read that? Your fingers are too fat and I don’t know what you wrote.”

“Haha!” Harry said. “For me to know, you to find out.”

“Harry! Tell me right now!”

Louis frowned, drew back his hand and stared hard at it, as if willing the letters to emerge. The first letter had been a B. The second a small L. Then an O, and a W. But Harry had written too fast—the rest was a jumble.

Harry smiled at Louis. The golden light was fading behind him.

“Tell you later,” Harry said, “if we ever meet again.”

“Ugh, I hate you,” Louis said, “Harry Styles.”

“Hate you more, Louis Tomlinson.”

***

Met a super nice kid today, but, it was his last day in Barcelona, and since his family lives in New Orleans, will probably never see him again. His mum is a surgeon—really cool. His name’s Louis
Tomlinson. Nice name, isn't it? I like it.

Never met anyone like him. He’s kind of loud, and spontaneous. He breaks all the rules. He acts like a maniac. We left the tour and got in a lot of trouble. Like, so so much. Got yelled at, banned permanently from the tour company. Dad was screaming, and Gemma nearly lost her mind. Mum called from England and yelled at me too. She was crying. Felt bad. I don't like it when people yell. We weren't in any danger. They said we might have been kidnapped. That's actually funny because Louis did kidnap me—I'm a kid, he napped me. Haha.

But it was still the best day of my life. Right away we just got on. It was like I met someone just like me, but better. I've never had a friend like him. We laughed so hard. He was just so cool, so funny. We got a portrait together and he kept it, because there was only one. Actually I really wanted it. Now I have nothing to remember him by. I don't even have his address. I bet I won't even remember him, after a while. Feel bad about that, because I want to—remember him, that is.

He told me something. And I think I can never go back to being the old Harry. Something in me changed. I'm not being fake deep. I'm serious.

We went to a cool record store. We heard Ella sing, but the day was more like a George Harrison one.

I wish I could describe to Louis how he cleared things up for me. But, I just couldn't tell him, I couldn't. He might think less of me, that I was sharing something so personal. I mean we're almost strangers, we barely just met. And there's no one here I can talk to—that's the worst part. I know something so big about myself. It's both scary and good—good to know it's not just me, not just a sickness, not a mood or a phase or something. But there's no one to talk to about it. I have to tell someone, so I guess you're the lucky one.

I don't have the words, but George Harrison does. Thank you, Mr. Harrison.

Day turned black, sky ripped apart
Rained for a year 'til it dampened my heart
   Cracks and leaks
     The floorboards caught rot
       About to go down
         I had almost forgot

   All I got to do is to love you
   All I got to be is, be happy
All it's got to take is some warmth to make it
   Blow away, blow away, blow away

Sky cleared up, day turned to bright
Closing both eyes now the head filled with light
   Hard to remember what a state I was in
     Instant amnesia
       Yang to the yin
All I got to do is to love you
All I got to be is, be happy
All it’s got to take is some warmth to make it
Blow away, blow away, blow away

Wind blew in, cloud was dispersed
Rainbows appearing, the pressures were burst
Breezes a-singing, now feeling good
The moment had passed
Like I knew that it should

All I got to do is to love you
All I got to be is, be happy
All it’s got to take is some warmth to make it
Blow away, blow away, blow away

Note: Please see this fantastic pastel art by Nina.
Chapter 5

Louis met Harry after the emergency room shift was done, at the call room. Liam and Trevor, the interns working that day, were just coming on their shift. Instead of a bone-weary fatigue, as there usually was after a 24-hour work day, Louis felt as light as a hot air balloon, untethered, soaring above ground.

“Harry, Louis, how're you guys feeling?” Liam called, dropping his bag in the call room. “Was it a rough night?”

Harry said, “It was the usual dog and pony show. Wasn't it, Lou?”

“The usual and a bit more,” said Louis.

Liam looked back and forth between his two friends, who were barely able to conceal their smiles. He raised one eyebrow. “What happened?”

Harry said, “Well, it's not every day that a drunken patient codes on you.”

“No extra charge for hurling all over you,” added Louis.

Liam’s face screwed up in disgust. “You’re kidding me—someone threw up on you, Harry?”

Harry nodded. “And coded, don't forget. In fact, I still smell a bit. I wouldn't come too close if I were you, Liam.”

“Oh, God,” said Liam. “What happened?”

“It was my own dumb mistake,” Harry said. “If a drunken patient on a stretcher asks to sit up without the guardrails up, never let him sit up. The ratio of vomiting to syncope tends to be quite high.”

Liam shook his head. “Oof. That's tough! And disgusting.”

“It was.”

“Well, have a good day off, you two. You have any big plans for the day off? It's Christmas, you know.”

Harry winked at Louis, “It is Christmas, isn't it? Maybe we can expect a Christmas miracle.”

Louis said, “You're right, Liam. Actually, I had forgotten about it. It feels odd to be in the hospital on Christmas Day, doesn't it?”

“Wasn't it your birthday yesterday, Louis?” Liam said.

“It was, yeah,” Louis said, giving a quick glance to Harry, who returned his look, and then looked away quickly.

“Happy birthday! You going to celebrate today? Pretty cool. A double celebration.”

“Think I'm just going home to sleep,” Louis said. “I'm beat. Merry Christmas, Liam.”

“Merry Christmas,” Liam said.
“Yeah. Merry Christmas to you, Liam,” Harry said.

Was Liam imagining things, or were these two giving off a weird, chummy vibe? Like there was an inside joke between them.

Maybe it was Christmas. Christmas was a wondrous holiday. He had never seen a bigger smile on Louis or Harry. They must have felt the holiday spirit.

Aww, that's nice, Liam thought, as he watched them go.

Louis and Harry walked out of the hospital to the parking garage, up two flights of stairs to Harry's car. Louis couldn't help laughing when he saw Harry's Prius.

“Can you even fit in this car, Haz?”

“It's more than big enough for—most activities,” Harry said, arching both eyebrows at Louis. Louis rolled his eyes but couldn't help turning his head to the side and laughing. Harry was funniest with a dirty mind.


“I try not to drive at all, if I can help it,” said Louis. “I'm from New Orleans, so I usually rely on the kindness of strangers.” Louis intoned with the accent of Deep Louisiana, “I mooch rides.”

Harry looked puzzled at this reference. Louis stopped in his tracks.


“Ah, right. The movie.”

“And the play,” Louis interjected.

“And the play. It takes place in New Orleans, right?”

“Whew. For a minute there, Haz, I was worried you were culturally illiterate.”

“I've never seen it,” said Harry. “Heard about it, though. It's about a washed up, crazy Southern belle, isn't it?”

“Yeah. Blanche Dubois,” Louis said, holding up crossed fingers. “She and I are like flaming birds of a feather.”

“Louis,” asked Harry, his face composed, “in all seriousness, though, would you like to ride my streetcar?”

“If that is a strange sexual metaphor, Harry,” Louis said, “then the answer is, always, yes.”

“Oh, shut up and get in.” Harry gave him a little slap on the ass.

They got in the car. Harry stared Louis down until he buckled his seat belt, then backed out of the parking spot. The skies were still dark at 6 AM, but a hint of color, a band of reflection, lined the saturnine gray of the horizon, and the glass windows reflected the pale dawn light. The world woke up at this time, just as the interns started to go home, the sun climbing onstage, the moon fading like
an aging actress.

Harry lived just off Charles Street. It was close enough to the hospital that he didn't need to drive. He had been too tired to walk home after the first ER day, however. The December days were short. He wanted to get home as soon as possible. He was at the top of a townhouse divided into six apartments, two on each floor. He had to drive around the block a few times to find a parking space. Finally, after he parked, they walked to the front door.

Louis remembered their first time, after the oyster tour in New Orleans, how he had hesitated at the door, how Harry’s very presence had shaken off all his doubts. Louis was older now, had been through more. He thought he could assess himself and Harry better now. But there was always a nagging uncertainty in the back of his mind, especially now, after all he had experienced, a question mark. The worst part was he was unsure who or what the problem was, whether it was his own negativity and doubt, or whether he was right to keep Harry—or anyone—at arm’s length. It was difficult to admit that the person he loved may not be the person he thought he was. As much as Louis wanted to be loved, he wanted more not to be deceived. The earth had become unsteady beneath him. Everything he held dear about romantic love had been shaken.

Now they were outside of Harry’s apartment once more, and Louis, like before, wanted so much just to go in, and trust, and love, and be loved.

“Harry, I—“

“Lou, come here,” Harry pulled both of Louis’s hands toward himself. Then he wrapped his arms around Louis and craned his head down, to the side of Louis’s face, so that his nose was just touching Louis’s hair. Harry rested his head easily, tenderly, as if to say, I trust you.

It was so easy to love Harry Styles. There was nothing difficult about it. His charm, his talents, his looks, his depths were so obvious, so self-explanatory, so evident that loving him was not a subjective choice but seemed a fact; Harry’s magnetism was Science. Louis felt like a fool even having any misgivings. There was no one who could resist him. Even Louis couldn't resist.

He held Harry closely. Louis breathed in Harry’s warmth, his body, the entirety of Harry’s physical being. And yet. And yet.

If Harry wasn't the person Louis thought he was, then maybe Louis wasn't the person he believed himself to be either. Maybe Louis was afraid to be the person who was capable of giving love completely and selflessly, a person who loved a sparrow regardless of whether the sparrow loved him back. A person chasing a sparrow. An artist shaping a window for a sparrow who had left the picture—who was so loved by other people that Louis’s love was not unique or exclusive. Louis’s love might be special only to Louis.

Could he love like that? Could he love without the expectations of being loved in return? What did that say about his self-respect? Or was selfless love a form of transcendent purity?

Louis was loyal to an idea of love as devotion. To love someone exclusively was to protect and respect that person. Love without commitment was foreign to him, a diluted form of emotion, like weak, tasteless tea. It was not satisfying. He did not want to invest energy in it. Louis felt that such a love was a house on a foundation of sand, unstable from the beginning, inherently weak.

But maybe that was the love Harry felt—a love without demands, unconditional, infinite. It was easier. Maybe Harry could live with such feelings for more than one person. Maybe… maybe… so many maybes. Long ago, Harry had claimed Louis for himself. Did he still want to?
It was a rhetorical question without an answer. And without a person to ask it to, if he was honest. If he asked Harry, he knew what the answer would be, and it was unfair to ask. Harry shouldn't have to prove anything to him. It was the very opposite of trust.

Love was a philosophy of unspoken assumptions. Once spoken, love evaporated, or so Louis believed. And such a philosophy could have no firm equations. As he hugged Harry on that December morning, it was enough for Louis merely to recognize that the philosophy existed.

The philosophy told him that the past was past. A story had its arcs and complications. What knots were tied, what cards had been played, what love had created or let escape were insubstantial things, like clouds skimming a mountain top or the colors of foliage, that lay in some part of his and Harry’s mind, along with good memories, and neither should have greater weight.

*Come what sorrow may; it could not countervail the exchange of joy.* It was enough to be in his arms. It was the purest way to love him, Louis believed. It may have been different for every other person. But this was Harry, his Harry. His Harry whom he could deny for only so long.

These thoughts reverberated in Louis as they went inside and walked up the stairs. After Harry unlocked his door, and they went in, Louis saw that Harry lived in an open studio, with his bed in one corner.

“Lou, I need to go get Lady from the neighbor. Do you mind? It’ll just be a minute.”

“I'm okay, Haz. Take your time.”

Louis looked around the apartment. Harry’s taste in décor, like his physical appearance, seemed to have changed immensely in the past two years.

The first thing that a Louis noticed was Rainbow Bondage Bear. He was on a nightstand next to the bed. Despite all the changes, RBB had stayed, dressed in his simple bondage collar, clean and bright. It was an unusual decoration to have in one’s apartment, both childlike and mildly scandalous.

The apartment was painted in white, with two large abstract oil paintings on the walls. One was in pale green, ochre, and sapphire, with patches of lighter color on which were scribbles in pencil and ink. In the corner was a signature Louis couldn't make out. The other was slashed in black and white oil, the paint so thick that it had texture.

Hanging on another wall was a portrait, a photograph in color, poster-sized and encased in a huge black frame.

It was a photo of Harry, similar to the one he had seen in the Hopkins Annual online, with clothes this time. Harry’s hair was styled to hang in waves from his face, which gazed out at the frame with wanton sultriness, lips parted, eyes locked to the camera. He wore a suit in vermillion and black print, no shirt, no belt, the pants flowing full and long, partially covering a worn pair of pink, high-top Chuck Taylors. His butterfly tattoo seemed to alight from his stomach muscles, defined yet soft. It was such a sensual photo; Louis looked away, swallowing hard.

The apartment had only one table, one chair, one bed, one dresser, and one sofa. The lack of furniture was more than made up for in the high fidelity audio system. Two eight-foot tall speakers dominated the room, along with smaller speakers mounted from the ceilings and a subwoofer on the floor. There was a wall of dampers along one side of the room, diffusers of thick foam cut with deep grooves.

A thick Oriental wool carpet covered most of the listening area. A battalion of vinyl records
overwhelmed the other wall. The effect was of a room with almost no echo: sound stopped right in front of one’s face. It was as if one wore ear plugs, except that sound in the room was crystal clear everywhere, and every pin drop was heard precisely at the spot where it had dropped.

Next to the bed were two night stands (the only paired furniture in the room, Louis thought) with candles on one and RBB on the other, and a very large bookshelf filled with books. A set of free weights rested along the wall.

Curiously, very few of the books were actual medical textbooks. Most were books of poetry, books about music and art, or novels. Many had bookmarks inserted in the middle. Louis picked up one and flipped it open. It was by a poet named Charles Bukowski, the book *Love is a Dog from Hell*:

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I know that some night
in some bedroom
soon
my fingers will
rift
through
soft clean
hair

songs such as no radio
plays

all sadness, grinning
into flow.
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Louis thought of Harry reading this alone, at night, in his apartment of one chair, one table. But of course, it had to be a façade, Louis thought. He wouldn’t always be alone? He was Harry Styles. He was never alone, even now. Right? He was the star intern, the great hope of surgery. He was the brightest, most beautiful star. He couldn’t be lonely?

Louis suddenly felt tremendous sympathy for Harry, understood how a man would read this poetry to separate himself, to define himself in solitude, even as he was surrounded by people who admired and loved him, people who wanted a part of him, who loved his ability to succeed in everything he did, wanted to be associated with him.

Reading poetry created a mental room of privacy for Harry—a space for reflection and meditation. It was a need that was foreign to Louis, who struggled to block out any time alone by creating distractions, seeking attention.

Harry came in the door with Lady on her leash, unclipped the leash and removed her collar. Lady bounded up to Louis right away, yelping out a few short, joyful barks.

“Hello, beautiful girl,” Louis said, picking her up and cuddling her in his lap. “How are you?”

Lady put her face into Louis and licked him. Louis scratched the top of her head and rubbed her back. Louis thought it adorable that Lady, who was no longer a puppy, still had puppy-like enthusiasm and curiosity.

“Lou, are you tired? You can have a nap, or, I can cook some breakfast?” Harry himself looked
exhausted.

“Maybe a glass of water, Harry, if that's okay?”

Harry took out a pitcher from the refrigerator and filled a cup of water. They sat on the bed while Louis sipped the water. Louis watched Harry from above the cup. Harry made a funny face, and Louis sputtered into the cup, causing bubbles to jump. Still laughing, he set the cup down on the table.

“Lou, I'm very happy you're here.”

“Me too, Harry.”

Harry reached across and held Louis’s hand. They sat for a minute on the bed, holding hands, breathing quietly, thinking.

Then Harry got up and took off his scrubs, letting them fall on the floor. He came to Louis and took off his top, then the bottom scrubs. Louis saw that he had missed one of Harry’s tattoos before; he didn't know how, as it was beautifully detailed, and prominently displayed, on his left arm. It was a rose without thorns, a rose in the peak of bloom.

Harry held Louis’s face in his hands, looking down at his delicate features, the dark circles under his eyes, his angular cheekbones defined by gauntness and fatigue, the rough shadows of his beard. He leaned down and gave Louis a deep, long kiss. He took Louis’s hand and led him into the bed, pulling back the cover.

He let Louis get in bed, and then tucked himself behind Louis, wrapping his hand around Louis’s waist. His lips were against the nape of Louis’s neck, lightly brushing it. Louis wrapped his hand around Harry’s, their legs intertwined, trying to create heat against the cold sheets. After a few minutes, Harry’s steady, deep breathing told Louis that he was asleep. Louis closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, enjoying the scent of Harry in the bed, the feeling of Harry against his back, the softness of the sheets, the stark whiteness of the bed like a loft of heaven. Soon, Louis, too, was asleep.

***

Dans ma cervelle se promène,
Ainsi qu’en son appartement,
Un beau chat, fort, doux et charmant.
Quand il miaule, on l'entend à peine

-Le Chat
In the early afternoon, Louis woke up, disoriented in the unfamiliar bed, the soft white pillow covers unlike his own. It took him a minute or two to come around and remember he was at Harry’s. He was wrapped in a double layer of blankets, a light blue quilt on top, a down comforter underneath. He felt warm and cozy. Louis swiveled around but no one else was there in bed, nor even in the apartment. Lady was gone as well. He called out Harry’s name, but the stillness in the air confirmed that Louis was alone.

Louis sat up at the side of the bed. He realized that he didn't have any clothes with him except last night’s scrubs. Not even a pair of clean underwear.

He went to the dresser and opened a few drawers, pulling out a T-shirt, sweat pants, clean boxers. Harry’s clothes would likely be too big on him, but at least they would be clean.

Louis went into the bathroom and put the clean clothes on the toilet. The bathroom was unlike his own in being completely clutter-free. A marble covered counter contained one sink. A cup, toothpaste, and a toothbrush were by the sink. A bottle of lotion and one of soap were next to the cup. Cologne was in a corner of the counter, next to a comb and some hair gel. That was all. The bathroom was dark navy, with a thickly piled ivory rug on the stone-covered floor. Louis set the clothes on the counter and turned on the water.

After he had showered and washed his hair (smelling like Harry), Louis put on Harry’s clothes and opened the bathroom door. A smell of bread toasting greeted him. The room was alive with activity. Lady padded to the bathroom and barked once. They were back.

“Harry,” called Louis, in greeting. “What time is it?”

“Hi, Lou!” Harry called from across the room, near the kitchen counter. “Good afternoon! You were sound asleep—looked like you were hibernating. I took Lady out and we got some bagels and lox. Do you like lox? I have cream cheese and jelly, too. Oh, it's nearly two. You must be starving.”

Louis came toward the kitchen area. When Harry saw him, he barked out a surprised laugh and smiled widely. Louis was swimming in Harry’s clothes. The T-shirt hung loosely off his shoulder. The sweatpants looked like an older sibling’s hand-me-downs that he had yet to grow into. He was a vulnerable orphan with too-big clothes, an Oliver Twist. All he needed was a street urchin’s cap. His hair was damp and swept to one side. His face still had the unformed softness of naps and showers.

“Lou, you look like a sleepy kitten!”

“I'm not a kitten. Gimme a break. I'm big,” Louis protested.

In response, Harry came to him and swept him up, settling down in the chair and putting Louis in his lap. Louis struggled to get free while Harry held his waist and legs, laughing.

“Let me go! Don't manhandle me! I’m not a kitten, I’m—ah, for Christ’s sakes!”

“Poor sweetie. Are you trapped in a tree? Did you get all carried away climbing up the tree, and now you’re trapped and you can’t get down? Poor wittle baby.” Harry couldn't stop laughing with Louis sitting on top of him, making indignant faces.
At the same time, holding Louis was a comfortable feeling, a nice tease and a lovely struggle. Louis’s ass bounced enticingly in Harry’s lap. In the past two years, through a more intense work-out routine, Harry had also become bigger and more muscular, stronger, broader. The difference in their sizes was even more pronounced. Harry was hardly huge, which made Louis seem even daintier. Harry enjoyed the feeling of overpowering Louis, just as Louis secretly loved being overpowered.

Eventually Harry let Louis go, who brushed himself off with mock vexation. Harry got a plate for Louis (So he has more than one plate, thought Louis) and silverware. Louis helped himself with a toasted bagel, lox, and cream cheese. Harry had all the fixings: capers, slivers of onions, paper-thin tomatoes. Louis held up a sliver of lox and ate it like a cat eating a sardine. He licked each finger clean.

Harry carried a mug of tea to Louis. Black English breakfast tea, no sugar, with a quarter cup of milk—very milky, in other words—the way Louis always drank it. It was hot and satisfying with the warm, toasted bagel. Louis thought, with a pang piercing his chest, he remembers.

“Thank you for breakfast—or, I guess technically we’re having a late lunch?” Louis said.

“Yeah, our days are upside down,” Harry said. “What do you do when you wake up? I usually try going for a run first, before I lose the motivation.”

“No, no, no, Lou. Don't be silly. You're a special guest. I make time for special guests.”

Louis looked at his lap like a cat with a dish of milk. This day was turning out to be too easy, too fine. Louis had no idea what to do with it.

Harry said, “And you, Lou? What do you do on your days off?”

“Well... after I wake up, it’s so late that it’s usually time for dinner and sleep,” Louis replied. They both laughed at Louis’s habits. He was grouchy without sleep, and especially grouchy if not completely wrapped in layers of blankets. “I get some dinner. Sometimes I go downstairs and bother Niall, see what he’s up to. I watch some TV, play some video games, work on my research a bit. I can do most of it from home, so, that’s convenient.”

“Right. I’d forgotten—you and Niall live in the same building?”

“Yeah, on Commonwealth.”

“In the Back Bay, right?”

“Mnhm,” Louis nodded. Louis gestured around him. “Harry, this audio equipment—it’s a little out of control.”

“Oh,” Harry seemed embarrassed. “I bought them piece by piece, mostly used or reconditioned. Couldn't afford it otherwise—the pieces are expensive enough used.”

“And the vinyls. Holy crap. I had no idea you had so many! Are they all your dad’s?”

“No, no, just a small fraction,” Harry said, crossing the room to his wall of records. “I'm ashamed to say it, but I actually have a few still in storage. I pick them up here and there. There’re actually decent record stores in Boston, one not that far from where you live, Lou.”

How do you know where I live? thought Louis.
“So, how do you organize—alphabetical?”

“Well, hmm. Actually it’s kind of—a unique system. They’re divided into, like, time periods.”

“’50’s, ’60’s, ’70’s, like that?”

“Not exactly,” said Harry. “They’re divided by the time periods of my life. When and what I was doing, where I was living, every time I got one of these records. They remind me of everything that’s happened to me, in chronological order, if that makes any sense.”

Louis got up and walked over.

“So, Haz, give me a tour of your life.”

Harry paused. Louis could see that he was internally debating how much to say.

“Oh, okay, Lou,” Harry said. “Over here are mostly dad’s records,” he pulled out a few to show Louis: Rolling Stones, Beatles, The Doors, Pink Floyd. All the covers were in good condition, some a bit yellow and worn at the corners, but cared for. “Next come a few I picked up before college—thrift stores, garage sales, places like that. I didn’t know what I was doing then, picked up a ton. I’ve sold most of it. At the time I didn’t have any audio equipment, really. Everything sounded, kind of, okay, not-so-great.”

They moved down. “This is college and medical school. That’s when I started getting a lot of jazz records, mostly the old things.” Harry pulled out Coltrane, Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, Herbie Hancock. “After I got my amp and pre-amp, finally, these old records sound so beautiful, Lou, so warm and alive. You can hear the musicians playing right here in the room, right next to you. The diffusers help image the sound. They get rid of the noise bouncing around all the hard surfaces. The woofer gives the bass gravity, and the trebles are imaged from those speakers up there,” he pointed to the ceiling speakers. “They’re really pretty superfluous. The McIntoshes,” he gestured to the huge speakers on the floor, “are more than up to the task.”

“What’s your favorite record, then?”

“Sorry, Lou. I tend to ramble on about hifi. Give me a swift kick if I’m boring you, all right?” Louis smiled at him fondly. “There are so many, it’s just too hard to choose. But here, let’s play something.” He pulled out a record. It was a re-issue of a vintage record, and Louis thought the woman on the cover looked familiar.

“Ella!” cried Louis.

“Yes! You remember—yeah, it’s Ella Fitzgerald. Her voice is just amazing in here. It’s like the smartest person who was ever in love is singing to you.” Harry grinned at Louis. “She’s going to be in this room in a minute. You ready for her?”

Louis, eyes crinkled, nodded.

Harry switched on the audio equipment. He opened the turntable cover and gingerly set the record down by the edges. The needle slid into place, and the ember-like hiss of the record filled the room. Louis heard the cascading arpeggios of an old and glowing piano. The time was 1956. They were in Harlem.
There's a saying old, says that love is blind
Still we're often told, Seek and ye shall find
So I'm going to seek a certain lad I've had in mind

Looking everywhere, haven't found him yet
He's the big affair I cannot forget
Only man I ever think of with regret

Louis sat on the floor, listening to the confidence of this voice, knowing its own persuasive powers, conveying certainty in the singer’s feelings of trust in her love, sadness in her loneliness, wistfulness, hopelessness. She was Ella, a queen, and Everyperson. She sang for anyone who was ever left behind.

“Louis, there’s a place to hear her here,” Harry said. “Come on. You'll hear Ella as if she’s in front of you.”

Louis looked up, dazed.

Harry crossed the few feet between them and extended his hand to pull Louis up. He led Louis to the center of the room where they stood next to each other. Louis looked down, and saw that, on the hardwood floor, a small “X” was marked in masking tape on the floor. Harry the audio nerd had walked around and marked the best acoustic spot in the room. Indeed, Ella imaged a few feet in front of them, the piano just behind, the piano player’s head bowed, wearing a dinner jacket, and Ella herself in a deep navy gown with a beaded long skirt, her hair clipped neatly with a rhinestone barrette, her eyes faraway and lips in deep crimson lipstick. She looked at Harry and Louis, her demure eyes kind and full of meaning, holding her microphone, singing to them.

I'd like to add his initial to my monogram
Tell me, where is the shepherd for this lost lamb?

There's a somebody I'm longin' to see
I hope that he turns out to be
Someone to watch over me

Harry’s hand, still loosely linked to Louis’s, wrapped around Louis’s hand. Louis felt the warmth of it, the dry skin turning supple and alive where there was contact. Tiny red blood cells squeezed through arterioles and venules to kiss at the edge of the dermis, the heart hurrying their journey. Their palms were the edge of the known frontier, the microscopic nerves recording their excitement, one firing after another. Celebratory corks of epinephrine popped in their thumbs, their knuckles, their wrists. Pop. Fizz.

Harry turned around and pulled his arm in, making Louis’s body involuntarily turn in toward him. Harry raised their joined hands, bending at the elbow, close to their bodies, his other arm wrapping
around to hold the small of Louis’s back, pulling him in close. Louis, unprepared, suddenly found his chest against Harry’s, his face inches away.

Harry was slow dancing with him. The mixture of surprise and intimacy created a flash of warmth between them.

Harry’s legs swayed slowly to the music, bringing Louis with him. Their bodies were barely touching. Harry tightened his hands on Louis and drew him just a few millimeters closer, just so Louis was aware of their contact from shoulders to toes.

Ella sang to them, her voice strong and tender, wishing they could see how each was the lost lamb, how each could be the longed-for man.

I’m a little lamb who’s lost in the wood
I know I could always be good
To one who’ll watch over me

Harry’s face rested next to Louis’s hair. They could hear one another breathing. They felt each other’s quick heartbeats through their chests. The delicacy of the moment suspended them. Louis looked down, his lashes damp. Harry could feel each exhalation like cotton flowers on his chest. Harry leaned in closer, so that his lips were just on Louis’s ear, brushing the top of it lightly, nibbling gently. Betraying him, Louis’s body shivered, his shoulders shook lightly.

Although he may not be the man some
Girls think of as handsome
To my heart he carries the key

Won’t you tell him please to put on some speed
Follow my lead, oh, how I need
Someone to watch over me

Louis tilted his head up, closed his eyes, and kissed Harry. Harry tasted like the salty sea, the salt of the bagel and the oil of the lox mixed with the bitter fragrance of tea. They kissed and swayed together for a minute after the music was done. Harry’s lips opened over Louis’s, lightly biting the bottom lip, ending it with a small suck. Louis’s hip leaned in and Harry responded by kissing him harder. His hand curved around the back of Louis’s and held him still, kissing him steadily, sending the kiss to the bottom of Louis’s groin.

Louis held Harry with both hands, feeling the muscles in Harry’s lower back, the smooth firmness of them, the inward curvature of the waist and the dips in the spine.

“Pretty smooth move you had there, Styles,” Louis said. “Do you seduce all the boys this way? This is the best listening spot. Come stand next to me.”

Harry erupted in laughter. “Boys? There haven’t been any boys.”

“No?” Louis’s heart beat faster.
“Lou, you're jealous.” Harry looked into Louis’s face. “Aren't you?”

“Shut up,” Louis whispered, caught out.

“Aww, Boo,” Harry cupped his long index finger and thumb around Louis’s chin. “I like your imagination, though. You’re pretty slick yourself. You must have gotten an A in Flirting 101.”

“You think I took that course?” Louis’s lips turned up at the corners. “Darling, I taught the course.”

Harry gazed at Louis, face glowing from sleep and tea, lips cherry red and perky from kissing.

“You did, huh? Remind me of the course syllabus again, Lou,” Harry said.

“First,” Louis said, nibbling on Harry’s skin, “be a nice person. Have a nice smile, a good sense of humor.” Louis ran his hand up Harry’s arm, tracing his biceps, touching him lightly, curving around the muscles.

“Hmm,” said Harry, mouthing Louis’s upper lip. “So many pre-requisites.”

“Good things take time, Styles. What's your hurry anyway?”

“Oh, I'm in no hurry,” Harry said. He brought his right hand lower to dip inside Louis’s waist band. His hand teased the skin there, skimming below the waistband but no further. “I can take as long as you want.”

Louis hitched his breath. “Goddamn.” He took two deep breaths. “Part two, sexy, sad music. Sad enough to make them a little bit sorry for you—sympathy never hurts.” Louis watched Harry’s bemused expression, his eyes never leaving Louis’s lips. “But not so sad to bring the mood down. Sexy for—well, obvious purposes.” Louis pushed his hips gently against Harry’s thighs, feeling the growing tension there. Louis felt himself harden and swell, yet his face stayed flirtatious, cool, collected.

Harry mused, “Not sure what constitutes sad, sexy music. That could be a seminar all on its own?”

“Now, now, Harry. I think you know very well what sexy sadness is.”

“Oh? Why?”

Louis nodded toward the framed poster of Harry on the wall. “Look at that thing.”

Harry followed his sightline, saw the poster and smiled. “You like it?”

“Like it? I want to fuck the hell out of it.”

Harry laughed out loud. He broke away from their embrace, tilted his head. “Today might be your lucky day.”

Louis could see the outline of Harry’s cock through his jeans. Even though Louis felt the same, he couldn't help feeling a little triumphant that Harry was aroused, was aroused for him, after years of thinking about Harry, dreaming about him. He smiled devilishly.

Harry walked to the vinyls and selected another, opened it gently and set it on the turntable by its edges.

An electric guitar rolled out a blues introduction, followed by the shimmering roll of cymbals. A moan of violins preceded a husky, singing voice.

“You approve?”

“It was an excellent year,” murmured Louis, his chin in his right hand, hip cocked. “1969. I’d say top notes of fun, with a foundation of horniness, and hints of foreplay.”

“More than hints, babe.” Harry turned toward him.

Need someone's hand
to lead me through the night
I need someone's arms
to hold and squeeze me tight
Now, when the night begins, whoa
I'm at an end because
I need your love so bad

Harry stared at Louis with open desire, eyes wide, hands at his side, weight resting on one hip. His arousal was obvious from the blossoming bulge in his pants. Louis returned his look with a sly, seductive grin, running his tongue over his bottom lip. They stayed stationary while their eyes danced.

I need some lips
to feel next to mine
Need someone to stand up, to stand up
and tell me when I'm lyin'
And when the lights are low
and it's time to go
That's when I need your love so bad

“Anything else on the seduction syllabus?” Harry asked huskily.

Louis shrugged, letting his too-big T-shirt fall from one shoulder, his shoulders and collar bones delicate, hollow, inviting. He dipped his head and gazed through his long lashes at Harry, fluttering them.

“I don't know,” Louis said. “You tell me.”

Harry, as if on command, crossed over, grabbed Louis’s hand, and pulled him to the bed. Louis flopped on the bed, feet dangling off the side, looking irresistible, lost in his oversized knits. His hair fell off his face and his blue eyes glinted, his mouth a brutally beautiful grin.

“Stop talking, Louis,” Harry growled. He peered from under his eyebrows at Louis, his glance
intense and mesmerized. Louis’s cheekbones shone in the soft afternoon light, his eyes like jewels.

“No, I won’t. It's my mouth.”

Harry responded to that by pressing down on Louis’s mouth, using his tongue to open it, hungrily, impatiently, pulling all protest out of Louis, kissing his words away. Louis kissed Harry just as hungrily, ready for him, a flame licking inside him, built from the embers of flirtation. Harry’s leg was flung across Louis’s smaller frame, pinning him to the bed. Louis felt deliciously trapped. He wriggled.

Harry held him with a steady force, not painful but hard enough that Louis had almost no room to move. Louis put his hand under Harry’s shirt, feeling his taut muscles, his fingertips stimulating nerve endings to fire along each fibril, a chain of roiling muscles like erupting points in a caldera, steam and smoke signaling the lava underneath.

“Stop,” said Harry. “Stop talking. Or else—“

“Or else what?” Louis said, his coquettish face upturned mischievously.

“Or else I’ll lose it,” Harry said, breathing quickly and heavily. “You don’t know what you do to me, Louis.”

“You're passing Flirting 101 with flying colors,” whispered Louis. “Now onto Seduction 201, a sophomore-level course.” He slowly bucked his hips up, to meet Harry’s, rolling in a circle, ghosting over Harry’s pants. His hand palmed Harry through his pants, rotating gently in a clockwise motion, rubbing the wet stain and spreading it.

“Fuck, Lou,” said Harry. “You fucking tease.” Harry took off his shirt and pants, took off Louis’s as well. They had on only their boxers. “Now see if you can talk.”

Harry leaned down to kiss the side of Louis’s neck, sucking a bruise into his skin, then another, then another. He marked a trail of stars, broken blood vessels spreading in a violaceous stain, each burst leading to yet greater need. Louis keened in agony, for a moment too lost in the painful pleasure to say anything. One hand dug into Harry’s arm, clutching him tightly. Louis breathed in short, high-pitched hitches, his world swirling. His right hand traveled to Harry’s chest, palm to his nipple, feeling the soft puckered skin harden beneath, giving a gentle rub with his thumb, a circular flicker, teasing him. Harry flinched.

“Harry,” Louis huffed. “I’m going to—“

“Louis—“ Harry mouthed the hollow at the base of Louis’s throat.

“I’m going to give you—“

“Yeah?”

“You’ll be hard when you even think about today, Harry.”

Harry’s erection pressed against Louis. Harry rutted against him, creating friction, wetting Louis’s thigh through his boxers.

Harry grunted. “You promise?”

“You will, Harry. You’ll come for days.”
“Fuck.”

Harry pushed Louis further up the bed, and then roughly rolled him to his side. He cupped Louis’s ass in his large hands and spread them, and then pressed his prick against the cleft, pulling Louis toward himself. He rutted roughly against Louis, the wetness traveling through the thin fabric of their boxers. Harry exhaled, and Louis could feel his warm breath against his back. Louis closed his eyes. His own prick thickened and strained against his stomach.

Louis broke away and rolled over on his stomach, took the waistband of his boxers down slightly, only enough to reveal the beginning of his buttocks. He flexed the gluteal muscles so that they shimmered like a wave. He circled his hips suggestively and winked over his shoulder.

“Dessert is served, Harry.”

“Oh, God, Lou,” said Harry, “you are so bad.”

“Come up here and take your boxers off already,” Louis said, rolling his boxers down so his ass was completely exposed. “I want to taste you.”

Harry took off his boxers and climbed into bed. Louis slinked next to him, putting his hand on Harry’s hip, and nuzzled his face into Harry’s crotch.

His face still buried, Louis started lapping Harry’s testicle in small, kittenish licks.

“You taste like heaven,” Louis said. “Like cookies and cream.”

“Youre delicious. You’re a lava cake, a cream pie,” Louis said, holding Harry’s cock and licking around the base of it, feeling the blood rush in, responding to his touch, growing it with every lick and every stroke. The muscles and blood vessels sprang to life, a flower blooming, crimson red, the veins prominent, the tip glistening. “You’re my favorite ice cream sundae with whipped cream on top. Mint.” Lick. “Chocolate.” Swirl. “Chip.” Louis licked and stroked Harry lazily and slowly, wet and lush, sucking in here and there and holding the skin in his mouth. “Turn around, love.”

Harry flipped on his stomach, and Louis put a finger between his buttocks, tracing lightly. Harry clenched involuntarily to his touch, his muscles tightening. Louis spread his cheeks apart and teased his hole, running a finger around the perimeter.

“I want to taste your rim, Harry,” said Louis. “Are you—is it okay? Are you clean? I am. Haven’t been with anyone since you. I’m going to fuck you with my tongue. I hope it’s not rude.”

Harry groaned audibly, shifted his ass into the air and spread his legs. “Yeah, I’m clean, Lou. I give my word. Being polite—is that part of your pla—”

His words were cut short by the fantastic sensation of tongue on his sensitive rim, alive and tingling, his nerves waking, coiling, firing. Uncontrolled, Harry moaned and muttered, his insides roiled and tumbled. Louis’s tongue circled the puckered muscles, alternating the pressure, and then entered, swirling and pushing. Harry could not help pushing back into Louis’s tongue, feeling vulnerable. Louis’s face met him fully, his hands grasping Harry’s ass cheeks to spread them further apart. Harry’s hand strayed down to circle his dark, tumescent cock, to give lazy, firm strokes in sync with Louis’s tongue. Louis himself was throbbing.

Louis worked his tongue until he felt Harry’s muscles shudder, tighten and release, a sign of his impending orgasm. He pushed his tongue firmly in and out, hearing Harry’s rough breathing, his soft
exclamations. Harry stroked himself in the slow and smooth way he liked, his breath choking, close. He flattened his palm and stopped himself, abruptly.

“No,” said Harry. “not yet. I want—“

Louis pressed his thumb around Harry’s rim, circling it, massaging it. “Yes?”

“I want you in me, Lou. Can you?”

“You want me to fuck you?”

“Yeah,” breathed Harry, turning to look at Louis, his face obscured by his fallen hair, his eyes half-closed in sensation and lust. “I want to feel you inside.”

Louis said, “That's the most romantic thing you've ever said, Mr. Styles. You get an A+.”

“Can you please shut up and do it already?”

Louis’s hand wrapped around himself. He said, “Do you have lube and—“

“In the nightstand,” said Harry. “On the right.”

Louis opened the nightstand drawer and riffled around. He found a tube of flavored lubricant and a roll of condoms, snapping off a package. Underneath the condoms, something familiar peeked out—a book of matte, red leather. A worn, red leather book. Next to the book were two studded, black leather wrist cuffs, similar to what Harry had worn to the Trestle Tavern, but thicker.

“Harry,” Louis said.

“Yeah?”


“What?”

“Seduction 201 is a bit more advanced, involves some playing. Do you like to play?”

Harry turned and looked at him. “What do you have in mind?”

Louis smirked at him, rubbing Harry’s ass cheek. Then, without a warning, his right hand came down, smacking it brightly and sharply.

“Motherfucker!” yelled Harry.

Louis doused the fingers of his left hand in lube, and smeared them over Harry’s rim. The other hand rubbed Harry in the bright red spot that had just been spanked. The combination of sensations was torture for Harry.

“Do you like that, my pet?” Louis asked.

“God, I do. It’s hot, Lou,” Harry groaned. “I don’t want to like it, but I do.”

“You naughty, naughty boy,” Louis said. His hand cracked down again, causing Harry’s ass to quiver, the shaking spreading to his rim, which Louis massaged. Harry moaned. Louis inserted his finger gently, tracing its outlines, fluttering in and out. “You have a pain kink.”
“You've—discovered—my weakness at last.”

“Have I?” Louis hand smacked down, Harry’s ass turning bright red. His hand massaged the spot, and then he leaned over and kissed it, licked it. “Such a terrible boy.” His mouth moved toward Harry’s rim. He licked the rim while his fingers worked in and out, the sensations alternately painful, pleasurable, unbearable. “Mmm. So sweet. A boy who wants to be fucked, who needs it.”


Louis added a finger, then another, spreading them slowly apart, his lips wet with lube, tasting the fruity scent of it with Harry’s own scent. His fingers found Harry’s sensitive spot and stroked it slowly, Harry keening in pleasure, relishing the sensations, the coming down from pain intersecting with an ever-growing arousal. Harry pushed back against Louis’s fingers, hips restless, grinding rhythmically.

“Lou, I can't take much more.”

“You're so pretty, Harry.”

Harry moaned and ground against Louis in response.

Louis said, “Harry, can you put the condom on? My hands—“

Harry turned around and tore the package open, rolled it on to Louis’s stiff cock. Louis could see that the sheets were wet, and Harry was engorged. He couldn't help touching Harry—his cock was gorgeous, just veiny enough, stiff and dark red. His hands grazed the tip, which twitched beautifully in response.

Then Harry turned around and got on his hands and knees. Louis parted his cheeks and slowly pushed into Harry, with a gentle insistence, one centimeter at a time, until he was as deep as possible. Harry exhaled and relaxed, letting his shoulders sink. For a moment they stayed still, adjusting to the feeling of being connected to each other. Then Louis grasped Harry’s hips and began to move.

Louis moved slowly at first, relishing the feeling of warmth and tightness. Harry took in the strain, the tension of being stretched, being teased in his bright, erotic spots. He loved this, the position of vulnerability, being a bottom who still had control, who still was an equal half. They moved in sync. Harry could feel Louis’s rhythm become steadier and faster, his thrusting more purposeful, more forceful. Their connection heated, slid, pushed and pulled. The friction inside lit like a candle, glowing.

“Come on, Lou,” Harry's breathed. “Harder.”

“Haz.” Louis’d hand slid around, touched the base of Harry’s cock, so rigid and thick against his belly. “You sure?”

“I want it, Lou. Go harder.”

“Do you?” His hand circled Harry, stroked and caressed him. Harry felt the gentle caress like a series of kisses.

“I do. Give it to me.” He leaned into Louis’s touch, gave him friction in his hand and his cock. As Harry pushed back against him, Louis’s hand tightened, his grip on Harry less a caress than a stroke, long and smooth, a kayak gliding through water, against the current, firm and steady. Harry’s muscles pulsed in his hand, enormous, fevered.
Harry ground back against Louis, who slipped in and out with ease, their bodies a study of perfect friction. Louis’s balls slapped against Harry with every thrust, a muffled, rhythmic noise, the bass to the melody of their vocalization. They traded moans, listening and responding to each other, winding each other up. Louis’s hand reached up and touched Harry’s long locks, holding them lightly, giving a slight pull which made Harry wince in pain and pleasure.

“You're quite a—quite a sight, Haz.”

“Lou, I'm so glad—“

“Haz, babe.”

“So glad it's you.”

“Me—me too, Harry. Me too.”

Louis’s voice was an extended, broken song of huffs and moans. A nimbus cloud had built in his abdomen, and now the storm advanced. His legs shuddered. Harry could feel his difference, the ramp up in speed, his greater urgency, his increasing lack of control.

Harry called to him, encouraging him. “Come on, Lou. Come on my back. Come all over me. I want to feel you.”

“No? You really want it?”

“Babe, come on me. I want it.”

“Talk to me—“

“Mark me, Louis. Make me wet with it.”

“Ahh!”

Louis came out, whipping off his condom. His cock throbbed at the verge of orgasm. Using the lube between Harry’s cheeks, he fucked into the crease, the friction warm and tight. Both hands gripping Harry’s ass, Louis pumped his hips, chasing the last peaks before he went over the edge. He groaned and gasped loudly, releasing, spurring onto Harry’s back, across the shoulder blade, pulses jagged and irregular. At the same time, Louis felt Harry’s cock firm and wet in his hand, unreleased.

Louis continued to rub himself for a few more seconds, quivering on Harry’s crack, one hand still firmly on Harry’s hips. Harry turned around and looked at him. “That was hot, Lou.”

Louis, with a sated and suggestive smile, said, “We’re not done yet.”

“Oh, no?”

“Have to take care of you, darling.” Louis looked lasciviously at Harry’s cock. With Harry still on his hands and knees, Louis placed two fingers in his wet, stretched hole, and a hand around his erect cock. He patiently, gently worked Harry until he was panting in high, flying gasps, bringing Harry to the edge, and then slowing down. Each time, he stroked Harry, causing more demand, more leakage, until Harry was pleasuring. Then, with a few short, tight strokes on his tip, Harry was coming into Louis’s hand, his back arched, pushing into Louis’s fist, moaning uncontrollably. He shot spurt after spurt, filling Louis’s palm, leaking onto the sheets below.

Louis got up to go to the bathroom. He rinsed his mouth in the sink, washed his face, got a towel
from the bathroom, to clean himself and Harry. He placed a bath towel over the damp sheets.

After he had wiped them both down, Louis stroked Harry’s smooth, muscular ass and looked down at it thoughtfully. “Harry,” he said, “you never told me you liked cuffs.”

“I—but how—?” Harry turned to look at Louis.

Louis reached across the nightstand and took out the wrist cuffs. “If you want to, Harry,” he said. “Only if you want to.”

The truth was, Harry did like restraints, and it was intimately tied (pun intended, his mind said) to Louis, to his use of the Mardi Gras beads on their last day together. The memory of that encounter was so complex, he didn’t even know how to process it. There was desire so overwhelming that the pain of the beads intensified it. Louis had used the beads to restrain him and lock him away, but the pleasure of it also brought them so close together, in that moment, their sexual understanding of each other closer than at any other time, of what they liked, of what turned them on, of the curious tug between dominance and submission. There was the overwhelming anger that had forced his hands apart, breaking the beads, a moment of transcendence. It was a knowledge that softness and intimacy could never teach him, that only a controlled kind of violence could. In fact, that control was itself a form of intimacy, a play of power, a succumbing.

He had bought the wrist cuffs online, but had never used them. He had never tried because the dynamic was never right. The play of control, trust, love, madness waited only for one person: Louis.

But now that Louis was here, a scrim of anxiety passed over Harry, because it was too real and too close. Too much, too fast. The restraints had always only been symbolic, but now they were on the precipice of being functional. The idea of using restraints brought back memories of that day. Harry debated in his mind, his decision fraught with remembered feelings of anger, sadness, and arousal.

Before Harry could reply, Louis said, “Put them on me, Haz.”

Harry’s brain scrambled in confusion.

“What? Why—what?”

“I’m ready to go. Put them on.”

“Are you sure, Lou? Have you ever—?”

“Yes, I’m sure,” Louis said. “No, I’ve never. But I am okay with it.” Harry looked at Louis questioningly. “Harry, I trust you. It’ll be fun. Come on.” Harry stared at Louis for another minute. Louis’s eyes told him that he understood—he understood the allure of cuffs. He remembered the Mardi Gras beads as well. He understood Harry’s complex feelings. And he did not want Harry to be in a submissive position again—he was taking that on himself. He was giving Harry control.

This time, Harry gently looped the restraints around Louis’s delicate wrists until they were tight, and threaded silk scarves through the steel loops to tie them to the bed posts. He glanced back at Louis to make sure his chest was not too tight, that he was comfortable.

“You’re irresistible, you know that?” said Harry. “I crave you.”

“Haz,” said Louis. “Come up here.”

Harry brought his face close to Louis’s. Louis licked his face, and Harry giggled. He kissed Louis softly. Then he moved down and kissed Louis’s neck, nipping a bite at the base, kissed into his
sternal notch and inhaled his scent. His hands played with Louis’s nipples. Louis rattled his wrists, struggling, his hips bucking up.

“Haz, can I watch you?”

“Hmm?”

“Play with yourself. It's part of our education. It will drive me wild not to touch you—or myself. If you're comfortable with it.”

Harry winked at Louis. He stood up so that Louis could see all of him, and ran his hands from his shoulders down, lightly tracing over the skin, chin up, a ghostly smile, tongue licking his lips. He circled the butterfly’s, framed both hands around his groin, ran them in a clockwise motion. Then he lazily grasped his cock and traced the length of it, bucking his hips forward, as his cock hung, half-engorged. He licked a finger and brought it to the slit at the tip of the cock, painted it, spread the wetness in a quarter-sized circle. Then he sucked his finger.

Louis’s eyes dilated and the muscles in his face became rigid as he stared.

Harry turned around to sit at the edge of the bed, his back facing Louis. Louis marveled at the defined muscles of Harry’s back, elegant and strong. Harry glanced back at Louis with hooded eyes, and turned three quarters around, letting Louis have a glimpse of his hand, touching and swirling the tip of his swollen cock. He began to pump in small, gasping strokes. Harry’s eyes closed, his lips quivered, and he moaned. His long hair coiled around his throat, slightly damp, desultory. Louis enjoyed the theatrical aspect of it—Harry was a showman. He turned around, one hand cupping his balls, the other grasping his cock, playing, tugging, smothering it. The other hand strayed back, teasing as he kept pumping.

“Now who’s the filthy one?” Louis inhaled.

“You like it, Lou?”

“Like it? I think I'm going to come again from watching you. You look like a sex god.”

“Really. It's too bad there's nothing you can do about that,” Harry said, edging closer to Louis. “I'm so hard for you.”

“Fuck my mouth,” said Louis. “Please, Harry. I want to taste you.”

“Do you?”

“Come up here. Want to swallow you.”

Harry straddled Louis, knees on either side of his face, as he fed Louis his cock. Louis’s mouth was alive, his tongue licking the underside of Harry. Harry moved in and out, deeper each time, not quite hitting the back of Louis’s throat as not to gag him. Louis’s face was beautiful with his mouth wrapped around Harry, lips pink, nose perky, the outline of the dick visible through his defined cheeks, his angular cheekbones. He was a vision.

Harry’s hands were on the headboard: he pulsed in and out, calling Louis’s name, as Louis grazed and sucked him. They played with pressure and heat.

Harry took one hand down to pump at the base of his cock, adding to the flood of sensations. He pulled out briefly to pump harder, rubbing and stroking the tender, warm, wet skin.
“Come on, gorgeous,” Louis said. “It hurts me to see you.”

“Louis…”

“Haz, you can come in my mouth, or come on my face. I want to taste you, feel you.”

“Ahh! The way you talk!”

“And you! I want all of you, anyway you want.”

Harry pulled on himself, harder and rougher, his breath ragged. His other hand touched the hair at Louis’ neck, tugged on it, releasing it. Louis mouthed at his tip, licked his crimson slit, coddled and sucked. Harry’s face writhed with feeling, his full lips engorged, his cheeks hollow. Harry’s buttocks clenched. Louis felt the tension in his thighs suddenly increase, pushing on Louis. He could smell Harry’s light flowery fragrance mixed with the musk of sweat and sex. The wetness at the tip of Harry’s cock dripped down his hand, onto Louis’s chin. Harry’s pubic hair tickled him. He could see the curly light brown hairs trailing down from Harry’s belly button, and it stirred something in him. He took Harry’s tip into his mouth and trapped it, sucked and teased it. Louis’s wrists were in restraints, but with Harry’s cock in his mouth, it was as if they had traded positions. Harry submitted his ecstasy to Louis; Louis held him enthralled. Every lick and suck was a stroke of control, bringing Harry closer to the end. He may as well have tied Harry’s hands down, so complete was Louis’s hold. Harry’s thighs shifted, clamped down on Louis, his shoulders tense, his face a picture of agony. His moans stopped and he held his breath. And suddenly, pulling back, Harry let out a cry and spurted in small, tight squirts over Louis’s face and hair, dotting his neck, his lips, his long lashes. He stayed motionless for a moment, flying high from the intensity of the orgasm.

Louis licked his lips, letting his tongue linger. Harry worked his hand, creamy and slippery, to a decrescendo, his moans sustained and helpless.

“That was incredible, Haz.”

Harry’s face relaxed, the pumping of his hand slowed. A shy smile crept into his face. He looked at Louis with joyful tenderness. “Lou, you’re a mess. I’ll clean you up.”

“I’m your mess, Harry.” Louis’s face was smiling broadly, coated with smears of Harry everywhere, and he was happy. “I think this was the best Christmas ever, not counting the year I got a bike.”

Harry laughed. “I’m so flattered! I’m a better ride than your bike?”

“I got a lot of mileage out of that bike. We’ll just have to see how you hold up.”

“You naughty elf,” Harry said, reaching for tissues to clean Louis up. “Had enough for today?”

“Never enough. I could be with you all day, every day. Any day.”

“Aww, Lou.” Harry untied his hands, undid the cuffs. “Come on now. Shower time.”

Harry’s shower was not really big enough for two. They crowded in, soaping each other, taking turns under the water, giggling, splashing each other, like school kids. Then Louis turned Harry around and gave him a deep, happy kiss, their tongues barely touching, teeth colliding. Harry palmed Louis’s ass and gave it a squeeze and a smack, a little pay-back.

As they toweled off, Louis pointed to Harry’s rose tattoo.

“That one’s new.”
“Yeah,” Harry answered. “New since Tulane. I have a few,” he laughed, gesturing to his body.

“A rose—it’s beautiful. Does it mean anything?”

“I think I got it because it was just a cool tattoo,” Harry said. “I just liked the design, and it was big. Can’t miss it, can you? This was part of a pair, went with a dagger.”

“Oh?”

“Rose and dagger. The beauty and pain. The ephemeral beauty of life. The constant threat of death.”

“But you didn’t get the dagger.”

“I feel like the dagger doesn’t belong to me. Not yet. Only when I am able to marry the two ideas: that I’m aiming for something true, that I’m not afraid to die for it.”

“Ouch,” said Louis. “dark.”

“Nah,” said Harry. “Pain gives beauty its intensity, doesn’t it?”

“Does it?”

“Death makes life all the sweeter. We reach for the stars in life because we know we’re going to die.”

“Harry,” Louis said. “You’re quite morbid, you know that? Also quite deep. You’re sort of scary.”

“No, I’m not,” said Harry. “You know who is, though? About all of this. Beauty, love, death, spirituality?”

“Who?”


“Haz,” Louis stared at Harry entrancingly, “what a terrible joke. You’re beautiful even when you’re super creepy.”

Harry crossed to the bookshelf and pulled down a thin volume, flipped to a bookmark. He showed Louis the page.

“This one, for example. John Donne,” Harry said, “talking to God like a lover.” Then he began to read.

Batter my heart, three-person’d God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o’erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurp’d town to another due,
Labor to admit you, but oh, to no end;
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captiv’d, and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you, and would be lov’d fain,
But am betroth’d unto your enemy;
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

“What does that even mean?” said Louis.

God frees when He binds. To be imprisoned by Him is to be in Paradise. He gives you life when He breaks you, burns you, overthrows you. All of the metaphors here, all the images—are ones of domination and submission. The faithful want to submit. They want to be dominated. To be dominated by God is freedom.”

“What the fuck,” said Louis. “Religion is a Stockholm Syndrome, and so is love.”

“Yeah. Bondage is on the same existential plane as sacred worship,” Harry chuckled.

“Does the Pope know about this?”

“Ha,” said Harry. “But the bondage is pleasurable—it’s holy, it's divine.”

“I'm no priest—but it seems kind of—blasphemous? Like, it blows my mind.”

“If it’s blasphemous,” Harry said, “it was written by one of the most devout metaphysical poets—Donne never wrote to his wife that way—or at least he always circled back to God.”

Louis blew out a breath, officially aroused by metaphysics. “Haz, you don't—like, think about this stuff, during—uh—“

“Sex?” Harry said. “You can say it, Lou.” Louis hit him in the arm. Louis wasn’t a prude, but Harry was definitely no saint. “No, most of the time I don't. Not because there's anything wrong with it. I think the part about bondage is pretty hot, actually. The more I’m restrained, the more I want to be free, the harder I struggle.”

*Most of the time. As in, with other people. But Harry had said there weren’t any others…*

“During sex, I'm not usually thinking that much,” Harry looked at Louis. “Too busy.”

“Oh, my God, Harry.” Louis thought about the sex they just had, the light bondage, Harry submitting himself to Louis’s control. How turned on he was—they both were. How the restraints drove them deeper.

Harry winked. “Love is the holiest imprisonment. Isn't it?”

Louis thought back to the first time they talked about God. Why was it always like this with Harry? One minute he was giddily having ice cream, or making a bad pun, or having raunchy, steamy sex, and the next minute he’s swerved from tattoos to metaphysics and existentialism. The man was fluid, Louis would have to give him that—fluid to the point of having no boundaries. He was as wide as he was deep. He could swim in Harry’s ocean all his life and never reach the end, never touch bottom.

Louis could get lost in this world, if he wasn’t careful. *But remember,* Louis thought. *Remember it's not only for you. Remember it's wide open; Harry’s world was for everyone. Not only you. Let him breathe. Let him go.*
Freedom was a kind of prison.

***

Louis wanted to take Harry out for New Year’s Eve. They finished their emergency room rotation in the morning and went back to their own apartments.

After a nap, Louis got up, logged on to the computer and started combing through the latest code for his animation imaging research.

Dr. Enright had asked him to design code that was abbreviated yet flexible, that could be loaded onto micromodules for surgical procedures. He specifically asked for code that could translate computerized images to real-time 3-D animations of coronary arteries. That meant images from CT scans could be loaded onto modules, instruments—even micro-robots—to perform live heart surgeries, without doing open heart surgery.

So far, they had run into one snag or another. The company that made many of the computer tomography, or CT, machines, would not release the code for image conversion, citing proprietary copyright protection. Louis had been working backward, reconstructing code from hardware, in order to patch his code into the machines, linking them to the surgical instruments. To do this, he actually had a sample hard drive from a CT machine at home, tracing the code backwards painstakingly, line by line. However, he was near the end of the unraveling. He had run through hundreds of thousands of lines of code, and now the massive program made sense.

Louis understood the code the way a surgeon understood the body: as a macro-organism with many functioning parts, but also at a cellular level, knowing about structures so small they could not be seen with an optical microscope. A body was both brain and heart and other organs, and DNA and amino acids and other cellular things.

He was about to crack the code.

Louis knew, instinctively, that this could be a huge advancement in surgery—that it was worth millions of dollars, if not billions. Yes, most of it involved technical jargon and it wasn't sexy, the way blood and adrenaline were. But it made a leap into the next phase of surgery—less invasive, safer, with faster recovery.

Computers did not have sleep deprivation. Computers did not make visual errors. Computers did not forget anatomy. Computers did not have human fallibility.

In the back of his mind, Louis knew that his research deserved to be presented in Barcelona conference, if he could get his animation code patched into the machine code in time. He was confident that it would be a highlight of the conference. But until then, there were thousands of steps yet to finish. He bent over the computer and worked in concentration, not an easy task on New
Year’s Eve, just before his date with Harry.

At 5 PM, he gave up on the task and got ready. He showered and dressed in a heather green merino sweater, the sleeves slightly long, and fitted wool pants. He picked out suede boots to wear, a black wool coat and hat.

He was meeting Harry at Copley Square. They were going to spend their first First Night together. First Night was a Boston tradition: a way to celebrate New Year’s Eve with outdoor activities, mostly not involving alcohol, to keep it safe for families.

Louis came out of the subway train. Despite the winter chill, at the exit of the station were the usual barkers, a girl singing on a microphone to a guy accompanying her on guitar, a newspaper stand selling magazines, cigarettes, candy, soda, a row of plastic tubs containing bright bouquets of flowers from the tropics: carnations, lilies, roses, sunflowers. Louis stepped outside into the cold air, his breath steaming. He had agreed to meet Harry by the front arches of Trinity Church. He left the station and headed toward the Plaza. The streets were already crowded with people shopping, eating, sightseeing—couples, small groups of friends, families.

Harry was waiting there, hands in his pockets, curls tucked behind his ears. He wore a dark blue beanie, a shearling coat, black skinny jeans and black boots.

“Harry!” Louis called. They hugged. Louis turned his cheek and gave Harry a small peck. “You smell nice.”

“Thanks, Lou.” They turned to head toward the Plaza. All around, enormous ice sculptures were spaced at equal intervals, people crowding around to marvel at them. “This is pretty cool.”

“It is, isn't it?” Louis’s breath puffed into the cold air. The Plaza glittered with holiday colors. The incandescent lights of the church and the Public Library sparkled in the background, forming an open rink. Harry took Louis’s hand and squeezed it. The tip of his nose was pink and his lips, a bright fuchsia.

The ice sculptures had been carved that morning, and had melted just enough for the edges to lose their sharpness. There were displays of mermaids, Santa Clause and his elves, an icy Christmas dinner table with an enormous turkey, igloos, and palaces.

Vendors sold cups of hot cocoa, coffee, spiced apple cider, the smells mingling in the air. The ground was dusted with a thin scattering of fresh snow. Stores open for First Night had their lights on, their doors decorated with thick red felt ribbons or strands of bright holiday lights. Many public places had open houses, and there were concerts everywhere, some free of charge. Celebrants had the large official First Night button on their lapels. Off in the distance were sounds of caroling, bands, bells.

They walked along, hand in hand, stopping to point out interesting sculptures or decorations. A cold wind hovered in the air, sometimes blowing dry flickers of snow high above their heads. After an hour or so, Louis felt chilled to the bone.

“Shall we go to dinner, Harry?”

“Lou?”

“Yes, Harry?”

They walked along the broad sidewalk of Boylston Avenue, people passing them every which way. It was still early. Most of the celebrants were families and couples. Everyone was in the holiday
spirit, polite and kind, smiling in greeting. Parents and kids carried bags, ice skates, jogging strollers to handle the icy walkways.

“I'm glad we’re spending tonight together.”

“Yeah, me too,” Louis said, leaning over to kiss Harry on the cheek. His scruffy beard was frozen like wire bristles.

“I feel like—Christmas and New Year’s are holidays for families. I mean, they're for everyone, obviously, but especially for families—to celebrate together.”

Louis thought Harry was feeling sad without his family here. He said, “I'm sorry you're missing your family, Harry.”

“No, that's not—” said Harry. “I mean, I do; I miss them. But that's not what I meant to say.”

Harry paused; Louis waited in silence.

“It's very domestic, isn't it?” Harry said. “It feels like home.”

“I suppose it is, Harry. First Night is for families, so… What’s your point?” Louis glanced at Harry’s face, scrunched with emotion. “Hey, are you getting all sentimental on me?”

“I'm glad you're here,” Harry said. “You're the closest thing to family for me, Lou.”

Louis was taken aback. He had inured himself against any expectation of belonging to Harry, of ownership or claim. This wasn't exactly a declaration that they were together, but it was nice.

“I am thankful you’re in my life, Harry,” said Louis. “You mean a lot to me.” You’re everything, he thought. Everything you couldn't possibly even imagine. You're my past and my future, my desire, my doubts. You're the star around which I seem to orbit, never pulled in, always at a distance. My anchor. My butterfly. My rose.

Harry pulled Louis close to him and hugged him. His emotions blossomed like ink in water, spreading their tendrils until they were barely perceptible, emotions deeply rooted and true. “Lou, I'm sorry.”

“Why? What for?”

“I'm sorry I never— I'm sorry about Tulane. I'm sorry we never discussed Hopkins before everything went to pieces. I know it's too late now. But here it is—I never meant to hurt you. I'm so, so sorry.”

Louis had a delayed reaction to this declaration, frozen in incomprehension, then the meaning of the words slowly sinking in. Harry watched him closely, apprehensively.

“Haz…”

“I know I was shit. I felt like you were angry at me and wanted to punish me. I felt like we could never be friends again.”

Louis contemplated what to say. He was touched by Harry’s apology. But he did not want to relive the pain. Even though they had many good memories, the parting was not sweet sorrow—it had been such bitter, angry sorrow.

“Haz, we’re here now,” said Louis. “Let’s let go of the past. I was a shit too. I did and said things in the heat of the moment that I wish I could take back.”
“I'm sorry we lost touch,” said Harry. “I didn't know—I wondered if you would even respond to me.”

“I kept waiting for your call. Every day I thought about you,” Louis said.

“You did?”

“Not one day went by when I didn't think of you.”

Harry bowed his head. “That day played over and over in my head. I wish I could take it back, rewind, do things differently. I kept hearing your words. Even though I heard them a thousand times, I couldn't believe them. I just couldn't.”

Louis thought back to what he'd said, because he remembered them vividly, too, words he’d said deliberately to hurt Harry as deeply as possible. *It was for fun. It didn't mean anything to me. It was just sex. It was a fling.* The words were so far from the truth, he felt nauseous from them.

“I’m sorry, Harry. I was—an asshole. I was so hurt, I said things in spite.” He turned and held Harry’s face in his hand. “But I didn't mean them. I could never mean them. It's too late—I know.”

“I was waiting, too,” said Harry. “If you had texted me, or called me once, I would have given up everything. I would have come right back to you.”

“No, don’t,” interjected Louis. “Don't sell yourself short. Don’t put yourself second. Harry, you're amazingly talented. You don't need me to tell you. Here you are, intern extraordinaire, getting published in the biggest medical research journal…”

Harry bit his lips. “Lou…”

“No, listen to me. No matter what happens to us, or any relationship you have. Don't ever give up. I want you to succeed. Always try your best. I'm happiest when I see you like that.”

They were talking so animatedly that they didn't see the light change as they started to step off the curb. Harry pulled sharply on Louis’s sleeve a second before they heard a screech of brakes. Louis’s arm jerked back, his step faltered. He stopped. A black SUV stopped abruptly to their left, just short of contacting Louis. They glanced at the driver, a lady behind the wheel.

Slowly, she came out the car door and stepped in front of the headlights. A small crowd had gathered. She must have been in her 40’s or 50’s, dressed in a puffy down jacket and black leggings. “Are you okay?”

Louis, still trying to register what happened, looked at Harry, both of them unscathed. “I think we're fine, thanks.”

She said, “No harm done. I’m just glad you're okay. You sure?” Harry nodded his head. She inspected the front of the car for scratches, found none. She looked at them again, slightly stunned, making sure she had missed nothing. “Well then, take care—Happy New Year.”

“Yeah, to you as well.” Harry waved at her.

They watched the car drive away. “That was close,” said Louis. “Thanks for saving my life, Harry.”
“Oh, quiet, you,” Harry said. “She wouldn't have hit us. Low rate of pedestrian fatalities, remember? Traffic’s too slow to do any damage.”

“Still, you're my knight in shining armor.” Louis gazed at Harry, comically batting his eyelashes. “I might have died. Or, at the least, become horribly disfigured.”

“Come on, you adorable damsel in distress,” Harry said, linking their arms. “Let's go get some chowdah.”

Louis felt aloft with the reprieve. Averting a near fatal injury was one manifestation of a good day.

***

A Boston seafood restaurant was a shrine to freshness. Sometimes, as in the restaurant they came to, the décor resembled like a luxury ocean liner, all gleaming surfaces, polished wooden beams, large stuffed sporting fish like marlin and tuna hung overhead.

The waiter had seated them at a table in a corner, per Harry’s reservation. The table was decorated differently from the surrounding tables. A pair of tapered candles provided the lighting, instead of the electric, flickering, fake candles at the other tables. The lights were dimmed, and the table had a golden, stage-like glow. There were two place settings on the table cloth, with linen napkins. Between the two settings was a single, thornless rose in full bloom. On each plate was a small printed menu, and on the front of the menu was the drawing of Harry’s rose tattoo. Through the rose, a dagger gleamed in diagonal. Under the drawing were the words, Given a chance. Louis saw that it was in Harry’s cursive handwriting, which he didn't use often, usually preferring to print in block letters.

Harry read the menu and let out a delighted cry.

“Lou, oysters,” he said, “from the Gulf! I was hoping they would have them. I requested them especially.”

“No fucking way,” said Louis. “These New Englanders and their snobbish Yankee oysters, I never thought they'd have Gulf oysters on the menu.”

“We can order a sampler, with a mixture of oysters,” Harry said, winking. “Single-blinded controlled study. You up for it?”

“Are you,” stuttered Louis. “are you challenging me, Styles? Are you saying I can't even tell what my heritage is, what runs in my blood? That's quite insulting. I will take your damn challenge.”

The dozen oysters came in different sizes, shucked on ice, with lemons, chopped ginger, cocktail sauce, and a dish of horseradish in the ice. When the waiter started to speak, Harry shushed him, had
him whisper the varieties to Harry’s ear. He made the waiter repeat it two more times to make sure he had memorized them all. Louis’s face was full of incredulous indignation, annoyance that he even had to stoop so low. New England oysters, for Christ’s sakes.

“First one, Lou. How do you want it?”

“Just a squirt of lemon, please. Keep it pure.”

“Purity, right. That’s what oysters are all about.” Harry smirked suggestively.

“Shut up and feed me already. No innuendos. No dirty jokes.”

“All right. Absolutely serious, then.” Harry intoned, “There was a fellow from Nantucket—“

“Harry!”

“Close your eyes, Lou.”

Louis opened his mouth and Harry put the oyster up to his lips. Louis slurped up the oyster with its juices, the rough shell scraping his bottom lip, the upper lip ghosting over the pearly lining of the inside.


“You’re good, Lou!” Harry exclaimed. “Long Island.”

Louis smiled smugly. “I’m telling you, Haz. It’s all about the brine.”

They continued for two more oysters, another from Long Island and one from the Cape, both of which Louis got right.

“Better feed me a Gulfie soon before I get too full,” Louis said. “The others are good but they’re not —“

“The right kind of loogie burger,” Harry joked. “I hear you. Be patient, Lou. I need to have the element of unpredictability. Come on, close your eyes.”

The next oyster Louis tasted brought him back home. He was in New Orleans, on Bourbon Street, listening to conversations in the French Quarter, smelling the chicory coffee and cigarettes and weed in the air, tasting a buttery praline, listening to hippie violinists, stirring gumbo. Although the small, succulent oyster tasted only of the sweet brine of the sea, Louis swore there was a hint of vanilla, a note of Kentucky bourbon. “It’s a Gulf oyster,” he said. “No doubt.”

“Wow,” Harry said. “You’re not just a legend in your own mind. You’re really good. Okay, now, last time, close your eyes.”

Louis closed his eyes once more, and felt a shell slide over to his lips. He opened and slurped, but instead of an oyster, there was something hard, flat, round. He opened his eyes and spat it out into his palm.

“Harry, what the hell?”

His hand held a ring, platinum, inlaid with opalescent mother-of-pearl. The silvery glint shone in his palm, smooth, cold. It was sized to his ring finger.
“Harry?” What was the ring supposed to be? Was it—? Did Louis dare to think—?

“Happy belated birthday, darling Lou,” Harry smiled proudly. “Read it.”

Inside the ring was a tiny inscription, so small that it was difficult to make out. Louis held it at an angle so he could see better in the light.

“One ring… to rule them all…” he squinted cryptically.

“Lou, stop it!” Harry said. “You're ruining the moment. Be serious. It's a birthday ring. I had it specially engraved.”

Louis saw a small line of calligraphy. He could make out some letters. An $h$, a $w$. An $r$?


“I want to be with you everywhere,” said Harry. “I've always wanted. I've been waiting for you everywhere, and I’ll wait, however, whenever.”

_The Fleetwood Mac song. Of course._

Louis looked down. The words had so much meaning, so much weight, yet they were coming from Harry, whose face glowed with an inner light and a lightness. Louis would have leaned across to kiss Harry if this had happened two years ago—before he became enmeshed in this impossible love, before he knew that love was not whole or complete, was not only a presence, but was an absence as well, was being lost, was a reconciliation, was a returning to a harbor that had irrevocably changed. He reached across and took Harry’s hand.

“Harry—“

“Boo,” Harry said. “I know we can't see the future. I’m not asking you to feel the same—it wouldn't be fair. But I'll be there, always. Wherever you want to go. Waiting for you.”

A silence settled over the table as the restaurant hummed around them. Waiters walked past with trays stacked in dishes and glasses. The conversations of nearby tables bubbled in a low susurru.

“Harry, thank you. This is very sweet,” Louis said, weighing his words. “It's so lovely and I love it so much. But, I don't want us to get hurt again. You don't know what's going to happen. You can't know that.”

Harry looked at Lou, a slight worry clouding his face. Louis knew exactly how he felt at that moment, unfortunately. Louis knew too much about Harry. He knew Harry’s vulnerabilities, his optimism, his capacity for love, and his desire to be loved. Harry was the little spoon. He did not _need_ protection but he _loved_ it. It was his security blanket. Louis knew that Harry refused to see the clouds on the horizon, refused to give up. But Louis also knew that Harry dreamed too much. His world was stained glass and roses. Harry had an enchanted life. He always succeeded, didn't know how much failure hurt.

Harry said, “I _know_, Lou. I know you, and I know me.”

Louis wished he had Harry’s certainty. He would give so much to have it.

“I've waited so long to say it,” Harry said. “I _know_.”

Louis wanted to believe it. The past few days had almost cast a magic spell, the days of hard work
mitigated by feelings of love, being cared for.

Despite his entire pre-frontal cortex shouting at him, *Stop! Think, you idiot! Mastodon-sized emotional crater on the road! Swerve, swerve!,* Louis was tired of being guarded.

His heart was cotton candy. Hope, a thing with feathers, fluttered in his chest, beating against his rib cage, rattling to come out.

“Harry, I hope I don't sound insane. I feel a little insane.”

“Boo?”

Louis hoped he wouldn't regret this. To believe in *forever* was a childish delusion, wasn't it? Yet Harry’s words, his actions, and his look of calm certainty, of the absolute lack of doubt, buoyed Louis's heart, lifted him like a rising tide. He threw caution to the wind. “I—I think…”

Louis looked up at Harry.

“I think I’m in love with you,” Louis said. “I love you, Harry.”

“I love you, too,” said Harry. “And I always will.”
Chapter 6

The pieces were nearly all in place.

Niall and Alice knew to bring the cake from the bakery. They had all gone cake tasting together, at the bakery in the South End that specialized in freshly made buttercream frosting. The cake would be in three layers, with fresh fruit and whipped cream in between the layers. The top was vanilla buttercream, the middle chocolate, and the bottom strawberry. The fondant had to be special-ordered, as it had to be constructed a week in advance. It was an audiophile’s high fidelity audio system, with all of Harry’s components in miniature, down to the tiny turntable.

Liam would go to the printer’s to get the sign. Louis had designed it himself, using the professional animation software in his computer. It was decorated with a montage of cartoons of what internship had been up to this point. He was especially proud of the Tiffany windows in the sign, whose significance no one but Harry would understand—the figure of Jesus on one end of the sign, a cartoon of darting swallows on the other end, like the tattoo on Harry’s chest, but animated, with the swallows in flight, one twisting in a turn, looking back at the window. In between were textbooks, surgical instruments, photos of friends and family, and photos of Harry running with Lady.

Gemma and Anne were coming the day before and staying at the Four Seasons Hotel overlooking the Public Garden.

Stan and Jimmy were flying in the day before as well—they had wheedled and traded for days off in their own internships in order to come. Both were flying in from New Orleans.

Still, Louis felt nervous, as if he were forgetting some important detail.

In a week, it would be Harry’s birthday. Louis wanted his surprise birthday party to be perfect. He had been planning this party for three weeks. It was not much time to get everything done—he had gotten his gifts at the last minute, hunting on eBay and other sites for the exact item. Harry was such a stickler for details, and Louis was a perfectionist. The two of them together could be a full-package type-A nervous breakdown.

It was also awkward to plan the right amount of conversation with Harry about his birthday. Too much, and Harry’s suspicions would be roused. Too little, and Harry would know that Louis was avoiding the topic on purpose—also suspicious. If Harry was a bad liar, Louis wasn't much better. He was afraid that his nerves would give him away, that he would blurt out something inadvertently, that he might make a dumb mistake in sending a text to Harry that was supposed to go to Niall or Liam, or have Harry read an email from Gemma over his shoulder. Consequently, he acted overly casual in a nervous way, closing his phone whenever he heard Harry approaching, turning off the computer browser as soon as he was in the room. He felt like some sort of terrible spy. In real life, he would probably already be dead. He also felt Harry look at him strangely, once or twice shooting a questioning glance his way immediately after some oddly secretive action.

Disclosing Louis and Harry’s relationship to Niall had been easy. He had already suspected anyway, and had given Louis a hug the minute he told him.

“I knew it! I knew you had something going. It was just too weird between you two.”

“Niall, you're full of shit,” Louis had smiled. “You wouldn't know a train was coming until it hit your ass.”
“Not true,” Niall defended himself. “I have very good hobo senses. Which is why no one can sneak up on drunk Niall—my drunken sixth sense will always protect me. Gift from the mother country.”

“It’s just when you’re sober that you’re hopeless?”

“Nope. I’m like a ninja. Spidey senses tingling all the time. You can’t say I didn’t call it, back on your birthday.”

“What are you talking about, Niall?”

“You know, when I asked you about Harry, in the parking garage,” Niall said. “Remember?”

“Don’t know what you’re foaming on about.”

“You can deny it all you want, Louis. I knew something was going on. The cagey way you were acting, the weird avoiding-each-other thing. Whatever it was, it seemed like a lot more than just friends falling out.”

Louis shrugged. Anything he said would be too little, too much.

“So what happened? How did you kiss and make up?”

“It's a long story,” sighed Louis. “Maybe another time.”

Niall looked at Louis, waiting for him to elaborate. When he didn't, Niall turned his head and chuckled.

“You don't have to tell it, Tommo. I'm just glad that whatever happened, happened. Like, you're a much nicer person now.”

Louis flipped his middle finger, “Fuck you.”

“Might I add,” said Niall, “now that you have a boyfriend, my fridge seems to stay stocked and I have to shop much less? Produce doesn't vanish anymore, Tommo. I actually get to eat my leftover pizza now.”

“I guess if you're staying at your girlfriend’s all the time, you don't have to bother to stock your own fridge that much,” Louis said. “Also, your beer selection sucks? And there are never more than a couple of bottles?”

Niall laughed. “You're hilarious. The beer's terrible and there's not enough of it!”

Louis warmed at the thought of Niall calling Harry his boyfriend. They were a couple, weren't they, now? Every day, Louis felt a tiny bit more secure about them, although he was a long way away from making long term plans. And he still felt that, somehow, he couldn't talk to Harry about it. It was both his own hang-ups about jinxing the relationship, and his image of Harry as an elusive, metamorphic creature.

Louis had still to reconcile himself to this new Harry that had emerged in internship. He was so utterly changed from the person he knew at Tulane—no longer the nervous, emotional creature who wore his heart on his sleeve, the boy who came to Louis with every joke and every sorrow, sharing the joys and disappointments as if he and Louis were one person.

Harry no longer had that vulnerability; in the intervening years, he had developed an armor, a protective, invisible shield. Part of that shield was intellectual—his philosophical sophistication, his
knowledge of art, literature, and music seemed to wrap him in a cocoon from which he was insulated from the slings and arrows of everyday life. Normal failures were trivial for him.

Unlike Louis, Harry did not seem to be anxious about public speaking or presenting in front of residents and attending. He seemed less an intern than their peer, someone with an ethereal confidence, whom no one could break down. It seemed to Louis that Harry had been born to perform. It was second nature to him. He didn't even have to screw up courage—it was just—there. He was a natural showman.

The other part of the difference was—it was hard for Louis to articulate. Emotional? Moral? It was as if their protective positions had been flipped somehow. Harry was no longer the one who doubted, no longer the infatuated puppy following Louis. They had parted, there had been a holy fire, and through it, Harry had emerged burnished. He had a certitude at the core of his being that gave him gravity and beauty; he was the essence of truth. He experienced what was beautiful so much more strongly, securely, and intelligently than anyone else, because he had survived what was ugly and unfathomable, because his soul found a purity that made him even more beautiful. He was human art, evolving in time, endlessly fascinating.

Yet while he was aware of his own beauty, his disregard toward the external somehow made him gorgeously removed, a wild thing. No one else was quite like him—Louis wasn't intimidated, exactly (what was he, a school child?), as much as he felt that Harry’s uniqueness separated him, somehow.

He was a man who flew, who was motion itself, who had escaped the terminal velocity of being human; he was the essence of his butterfly tattoo. He was the center of everything, of Louis’s heart. Yet he flew, he was uncaged, he belonged to no one. It was the source of Louis’s affection and heartbreak.

How did you give someone like that a birthday party, anyway? Birthdays were the superfluous markers of human existence, marking the temporal passage of time. Minutes, hours, and years didn't matter to angels and ghosts. And Harry, the spirit of Harry, hovered like an angel and a ghost.

***

Louis had told Harry that they would meet for dinner on Saturday, the night of his birthday, and then they could see a movie afterward. Harry answered that he would be done with work on Saturday at 5, and would come pick Louis up at his place right afterward.

Louis spent Saturday picking up around his apartment, so the place would be presentable for the guests—and for Harry’s family. He had not seen Gemma since Harry left Tulane, and he’d never met Anne. He wanted to make a good impression. He was also looking forward to seeing his Tulane classmates. It would be great to catch up with Stan and Jimmy. He hoped there wouldn't be too much complaining.
Digging through the dirty laundry, the opened textbooks (so that’s where his surgical anatomy book was!), the dishes and cups everywhere, he threw away bits of opened candy bars, study notes, half empty bottles of beer and soda, and take-out containers. Man, he hated to admit it, but Horan was right. He was kind of messy. He wiped down all the surfaces with cleaner and swept the floor. He cleaned the bathroom until it gleamed. The video games and controllers all went back to their proper storage under the television. The rest was stuffed into his bedroom closet.

He came across the application he had picked up for the Barcelona surgical conference, due in a couple of weeks. The conference was six weeks away. He’d have to kick the research up a notch if he was going to present; the code was all there, but the interface between hard drive and surgical modules had still not been completely written, let alone tested. He didn’t discuss it with Harry, but assumed that Harry would be attending since his research was doing so well.

The fact that it was Barcelona was so sweet that it hurt his heart. He wondered how Harry felt about it, but deep down he knew. He knew how Harry remembered everything by its emotional weight—how he categorized the past, how he held on to memories, how he was haunted by feelings. He knew how Harry carried pain as if it were a physical part of his body, as if it seared scars that ached and burned.

He knew that on occasion, Harry would wake up incoherently, sleep-talking. Harry had a recurrent dream, one he had had since Tulane, one that had evolved but recurred and plagued him. He would sit up in bed, as if he were awake, say things about water, about running, about traffic and crosswalks, saying, “Stop! Stop!” and other utterances. On occasion, Harry would even get up, get a cup of water, put it by the nightstand, and fall back to sleep, completely unaware, recalling nothing in the morning.

Louis knew this was just Harry. It had been happening for years and wasn’t anything abnormal. Still, that didn’t stop him from worrying about Harry. Why did he have these bad dreams? Why did he, at times, seem so spooked by them? Sometimes he woke up crying, and would shake it off, saying it was just a dream, it was nothing, relax, Lou, go back to bed. But then, other times, Louis would wake up to an empty bed beside him, and see Harry staring out at the window, watching the sidewalk below, or cuddled up with Lady at the chair, sitting alone in the dark.

In the morning, Harry would be softly snoring in bed again, or snuggled so tightly next to Louis that he almost pushed him off the bed. Louis wanted to take a giant eraser and erase the nightmares from Harry’s brain. Or else he wanted a huge blanket to wrap around Harry at all times, to protect him from being hurt. Being hurt by what? That was the question. Harry was invincible in all the real-life ways. What he could not stop were the nightmares from within.

***

Dr. Nestor called last night. We’ve been invited to give a special seminar at the ISC in Barcelona;
it's huge. He wants me to be lead presenter.

Nestor met with some reps last Thanksgiving, and they were impressed with our work. Apparently enough that there might be investment interest. He told me the company—some tech company near Hopkins. Seems like a big deal. I'll meet them in Barcelona.

Haven't talked to Louis about it—haven't talked to the surgery department, actually. Not sure how they would take it, presenting for Hopkins. I feel a divided loyalty—comically like a double agent. Nestor was the one who gave me the opportunity. Not fair for MSH to get the credit. On the other hand, all the MSH docs will be there, and some colleagues. Would be a bit awkward.

Still, I can't deny that this invitation is a great opportunity. It would put the research at the forefront of surgery—it's technologically formidable, and the micro-robotics is undeniably sexy. Might lead to some career opportunities—Nestor said the biotech companies might be willing to underwrite clinical trials. If we can get it off and running, we should have study subjects right away. This is research begging to be developed. All very thrilling—lots of potential.

I know I should. Talk to him.

The other day, Louis and I cooked dinner at home—my apartment, I mean. I can't believe it's us again, he and I, like before. What a feeling it was, to be right there beside him… I know that, in spite of his nonchalance, his brave front, Louis is scared. I know we've both changed, outwardly anyway. He has a shell of stoicism, pretends like he doesn't care, but it's a fragile façade—if anything, he cares too much. I see how he is with patients, how he talks kids into trusting him, how he makes even the outcasts, the damaged people, feel all right, feel loved. Whatever change is holding him back, I wish he could believe in us.

I'm in love with him. I know we're right for each other. How to make him see that?

*Oh, I will carry you over
Fire and water for your love
And I will hold you closer
Hope your heart is strong enough
When the night is coming down on you
We will find a way through the dark*

Louis and I stayed up talking after dinner. We talked about our rotations so far, different specialties we might consider. Obviously he thinks I should do cardiothoracic surgery, but I'm not so sure. It's a certain personality. I'm just not sure it's for me. I think he would be superb at it, but he just waved it off. If only I could make him see what everyone else sees.

What do I love most about him? Besides the fact that he makes me laugh, all the time? Besides his sass, his cheekbones, his chiseled chest? His fab ass? The way he fits perfectly in my arms? The way I can lift him up and kiss him with his feet off the ground? The zombie he is before his morning tea? The way his voice drops when he's so turned on that he can't think?

His perfectionism, that drives me mental, picking at every detail, cooking food like a damn engineer—of course you use a measuring spoon, Haz, otherwise they wouldn't write it this way? It says UNSWEETENED butter? Yes, we SIFT the flour? EXTRA-large eggs? It's DARK brown sugar? Ugghhhh, the man is nuts and I love to hate him! His eyelashes. The way they fan his cheeks,
curtains to his soul, gatekeepers to a heavenly blue. They’re like some ridiculous Saharan camel lashes; could keep out desert sand for days.

No, I'm kidding, of course. What I love most is the love I see. He looks at me like he has an inextinguishable light. It tells me that there’s an infinity to the love, whether he admits it or not. He’s worth the chase.

***

Running a bit late, the text said.

No worries, Louis texted back. L’Espalier will wait.

Will just hop in the shower. Grueling day in urology today—lots of blocked catheters. Have to wash off the grime. Get pretty for you.

Take your time, love.

Louis had picked up Stan and Jimmy earlier from Logan Airport. Now they were sitting in his apartment, giving him a hard time, helping set everything up. Liam had just arrived with the custom designed birthday sign, and was standing on a chair, with Stan holding the other end, trying to tack it to the wall. In large letters, “Happy 26th Birthday, Harry!” was written across a white banner, with photos of Harry from infancy to the present printed in collages all along the banner, and some extra touches like photos of his family, Lady, the sparrows, Congo Square, the Public Gardens, the Tiffany windows, textbooks and instruments. Louis and Jimmy were setting up the kitchen counter and tables for the caterers, who were coming at 5:30 exactly. Anne and Gemma were arriving at 5:30 as well—and Niall and Alice—where the hell was his cake, his custom-ordered, three-tier, multiple-flavored buttercream frosted cake? They were expected fifteen minutes ago.

There was a sudden knock on the door and the Niall barged in, with Alice in tow. They were carrying an enormous cake box and a gift bag, stuffed with blue and silver tissue paper and curled ribbons.

“What took you so long, Horan? Were you last-minute window shopping?” Louis’s voice climbed into a higher register.

“How about ‘Thank you, Niall. Good job, Niall. You're a saint, Niall, for taking the time out of your day to do this, Niall.’ I get shit all day at work, and now I have to come home to it!”

“Sorry, Ni,” Louis said, contrite. “I just want everything to be perfect and the cake—I mean, it's not a birthday party without cake, is it?” Louis took the gift and put it with others on a table. “Ni, Alice, I’d like you to meet my good friends, Stan and Jimmy, my best friends from Tulane.”
Niall and Alice shook their hands.

Stan had long layered hair and warm brown eyes. He wore a long sleeve T-shirt and jeans. Stan had eyes that seemed to always be smiling skeptically. Jimmy was tall, with jet black hair, freckles across his cheeks. He wore a white oxford shirt and jeans. Both had the baggy lower eyelids of the jet-lagged, but both seemed happy to be on break.

“Are you both interns, too?” Stan asked.

“Unfortunately, yes,” said Alice. Stan thought she was very cute—petite, dark eyes and hair. She also seemed very taken by Niall, who stood close to her and sometimes put a hand on her back.

“Listen,” asked Niall. “Was Louis this much of a pain in the ass at Tulane? Did he order you around like his own personal slaves?”

“Louis’s always been the bossiest, but he's also very motivational,” said Jimmy.

“Bossy and sassy, I’d say,” said Stan. “He was—what did we call it? Head student or something?”

“Student liaison,” said Jimmy. “And he did manage to get the administration to pay for the first years to get a cocktail tour of New Orleans. I mean, how awesome was that?”

Stan said, “Louis was always more carrot than stick.”

Niall said, “Oh, believe me, he’s gotten stickier with time. Goddamn painful dictator is what he is.”

“Stickier, bossier, but also a great team player,” said Alice. “Attendings love him.”

There was a knock at the door. The caterers arrived, bringing in their chafing dishes and the food. They were two ladies in their mid-thirties. They were brisk-like in getting everything ready to go. They were having chicken Marsala, a kale slaw with pistachios and dried tart cherries, and roasted fingerling potatoes. In addition to cake, there would be cardamom and cinnamon ice cream.

Louis had set up a bar for mixed drinks—mainly Kentucky bourbon, vodka, and red and white wine. Now he went around getting drinks for everyone.

Stan leaned in, “Since this party is for Harry and all, did you ever hear about Harry’s dog?”

Liam said, “You mean Lady? The dog he has now?”

“Yeah, I think Harry mentioned that,” said Liam.

“We rescued her,” said Jimmy. “She was a cardiology lab dog. She was supposed to be euthanized at
the end of our dog lab, but in the middle of the experiment, Harry decided to rescue her. He was quite adamant, despite my protests. Also, Louis saved her life.”

“Technically, we all did,” murmured Louis.


Louis shook his head and smiled cryptically.

Stan said, “It was our second-year dog lab. The dogs were under general anesthesia, and we gave them sympathomimetic and parasympathetic drugs to study their physiology. After all the other groups were done, Louis told the instructor to get lost, then we sewed her up, put her back together.”

“And Harry took her home,” Jimmy added.

Niall whistled, “You're telling me second-year medical students sewed up an anesthetized dog and took her out of anesthesia.”

“Oh, we never let sleeping dogs lie!” joked Jimmy.

“And she didn't end up with all sorts of infection, or damage, or whatever?” Liam asked.

Alice asked, “How did you ever get her out? How did the instructor not know?”

“Louis magic,” said Jimmy. “He has this way, he mesmerizes people. They do anything for him. The teachers ate out of his hands. So many times, they’d just look the other way.”

“He led us ruthlessly and we loved it,” said Stan. “We broke so many rules, it wasn’t even funny. Tulane practically paid us to graduate.”

“Don’t ask me how he does it, but, like, every time,” said Jimmy. “He just has this—Louis way. I swear half the students were in love with him.”

“Only half?!” said Louis, incredulously. “What kind of fucking insult?!” They all laughed, even though they all suspected it was true.

“You make people do things that are inconvenient—like fly halfway across the country for a birthday party,” said Stan. “And we do it. The only person who could tell Louis what to do was Harry. But then again, Louis would have done anything Harry asked him to.”

Niall smiled, but Alice and Liam had expressions of surprise on their faces.

“Oh, okay,” interrupted Louis, making a ‘cut’ signal across his throat with his hand. “That's enough. Stan, Jimmy, we’re not here to swap embarrassing stories. You're not going to trash my reputation. I don't want to talk about it.”

Niall interrupted, “Tommo, is that true though? Because if it is, I absolutely want to hear more about it—what a fucking sap you were. You give people shit to no end, and here you are, the biggest romantic sap in the world, helping your boyfriend save a puppy. Aww—oh my God, this is stuff you'll never live down. Cuz I'm gonna remind you every fucking day.”

“I want to hear about it too,” said Alice. “What were they like? Harry and Louis?”

“They were the worst,” Jimmy said. “Their heart eyes made me lose my lunch on the regular. They were like teenagers.”
“We’d catch them making out in the hallways,” said Stan.

Alice’s eyes widened. She exchanged looks with Liam.

“Oh, yeah, they were handsy,” continued Jimmy. “Even when they weren’t even touching, just the way they would look at each other—it was rude, honestly. They just tuned everyone else out. Forget about trying to talk to them.”

“Yep,” Niall said. “Been there.”

Alice looked at Niall, “Niall? You knew about this? And you didn't tell me.”

Niall shrugged.

“And they’d do things like bring coffee for each other, or buy little stuffed animals for each other, like they were some kind of gross engaged couple,” Stan said.

“Everyone was constantly gagging around them—or maybe a little bit jealous,” Jimmy said.

“They dated—each other?” Liam asked, a shocked expression on his face.

“Not only dated,” says Stan. “They were the power couple, the most ridiculously in love, the most married. Lady was, like, their love child. Everyone expected you two to stay together, Louis,” Stan turned to him. “We really did. You would expect Louis to be close by if you just saw Harry, and vice versa.” Liam’s eyes grew round with concentration. Niall giggled silently.

“Do you remember that one time—“ Jimmy started, pausing for effect.

“Which?” Stan asked.

“That time Harry was sick with the flu—second year, it was. Do you remember how ridiculous Louis was?” Jimmy said. “So in love, I swear to God.”

“Oh, geez, yeah,” Stan made a nauseated face.

“Guys, please! That’s not how it was! We were just friends,” Louis said.

“Just friends, my ass,” Jimmy said. “Do friends make twenty gallons of homemade chicken soup for each other? Made sure he took cold medicine every six hours? Tucked him in bed every night? Got all his favorite shows lined up on Netflix? Please, Louis. You act like no one noticed this shit.”

Liam’s eyes widened. How had he never seen this between Harry and Louis? Maybe they were such consummate professionals that he had never noticed even an inkling of intimate feelings. Or maybe Liam was fucking clueless. He was beginning to wonder.

Niall clapped his knees while laughing so hard that his laughter became silent, and Alice stared at Louis as though he’d grown another head.

“Oh God,” Louis groaned. “We were friends. You would have done the same for me, Jimmy.”

Jimmy smirked. “Yeah, right. I might have, but maybe not with such enthusiasm. Then again, I might have enjoyed watching you suffer a little.”

Stan said loudly, over the laughter, “Do you remember our cardio lab instructor? That whole rigmarole about missing the IV lab? Only Harry Styles may be medically excused from lab. Louis Tomlinson has not been excused. He has an unexcused absence. Remember, Lou?”
“He was such an asshat,” Louis muttered.

“You see,” Jimmy explained. “Louis tried to argue that Harry was too sick to take care of himself, and Louis deserved to be excused from the lab so he could take care of him. Mr. Smitten over here. Mr. Domestic and Whipped.”

“I made up the lab, didn’t I?” Louis argued. “We both did.”

“That lab was one for the books, though,” said Stan, giving Louis a knowing look.

“What are you talking about,” Louis stared at him.

“Do you not even remember?” Stan persisted.

“What?” Louis asked, genuinely puzzled.

“So,” Stan turned toward the Boston friends. “Harry was getting over the flu, pretty slowly, despite Louis making, like Jimmy said, like, thirty gallons of chicken soup for him. From scratch. I'm talking whole chickens, carrots, onions, everything. Did I ever tell you, Lou, that Harry secretly hated the soup?”

“He did not,” Louis said. “He loved it. It was my special recipe.”

“Why, ’cause he told you so?” Jimmy asked, nudging Louis, giving him grief. “Ask him sometime.”

“Whatever,” Stan continued. “Anyway, Harry was still not feeling himself. We were lab partners, and when I put the practice IV in him, he fainted, just like that.”

“No way!” Alice exclaimed.

“Swear to God,” Stan continued. “Unconscious. Flat on the ground. We’re surprised, a little bit, like, deciding what to do, right? Everyone just stood around looking at him, including the lab instructor. But not this one,” he pointed to Louis. “Boyfriend here saunters into lab late, takes one look at Harry on the ground, has a heart attack, and, like, bolts over to give him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.”

The Boston friends collectively inhale, and then burst out screaming with laughter. Niall was laughing so hard, he was haunched over in pain. Liam’s eyes narrowed into tiny slits.

“No way!” Niall howled. “You did not!”

“I was a second year,” Louis said. “I didn't know. Give a man a fucking break!”

“That is not the point,” Jimmy protested. “Lou, you were looking for an excuse to suck face with Harry, and you took the opportunity when you could. He was fine, Louis. You didn't have to fucking inhale him. Jesus.”

“Oh, it was pretty cute,” Stan said. “We died, right there.”

“Of secondhand embarrassment,” Jimmy added.

Louis looked like a disgruntled cat about to kill a mouse.

“And Harry? Was it mutual?” Alice asked.

“It was mutual alright,” Jimmy said. “They discussed it.”
“They were the worst. Inseparable. I mean it was a shock, really, when Harry just up and left.”
Stan’s smile halted midway and he glanced at Louis’s fallen face. “Oh, shit,” he said. “Okay. Shit. Sorry. I'll leave it to Louis to tell the rest.”

“Come on,” prompted Liam.”I didn't know any of this. Louis? You and Harry—you dated at Tulane? What happened? After Harry came to Hopkins?”

Jimmy glanced at Louis, at his tight smile, his pursed lips.

“Sorry, Liam. The boss has spoken,” Jimmy answered. “You can't force any more out of us.”

“But what happened? Why did Harry leave?” asked Liam. “You can't leave it hanging like that. What happened?” He looked from one person to another, all of them now slightly, awkwardly silent.

At that moment, Louis’s bell rang. Gratefully, Louis got up, but not before he gave a piercing, meaningful look to Stan and Jimmy.

Louis opened the door to Anne and Gemma standing nervously in the hallway. They were dressed beautifully, Anne in dark green velvet, Gemma in tight, black taffeta with cascading ruffles. Louis welcomed them in with a hug and a kiss.

“Louis,” Gemma said, “how nice of you to rent an apartment for the party. Surely this isn't yours? You can actually see the floor?”

Louis rolled his eyes. “I love you, too, Gemma. I happened to have spent all day cleaning. Found some useful stuff too, that I’d been looking for—some cold pizza, newspapers from the ‘90’s, a George Michaels CD.”

“Gross! You didn't!”

“No, I actually did. Love that Freedom music video.”

“I didn't mean gross, George Michaels, you idiot. I meant your cold pizza—so disgusting. So, tell the big secret,” Gemma said. “What did you get Harry for his birthday?”

Louis smiled enigmatically. “Well, it wasn't easy,” he said. “I had to hunt high and low, and was almost outbid on eBay a few times—who knew old records were so in demand?”

“You got him a record?” Gemma squealed. “Sweet! Which one?”

“It's a surprise,” Louis said. “You’ll see.”

“Louis,” Anne said. “It's so nice to meet you, finally. Harry has spoken so highly of you.”

“No, no, the pleasure is mine,” said Louis, coming forward to hug her and kiss her on the cheeks. “I've looked so forward to meeting you.” Louis leaned back and held his hands behind himself, lightly twisting them. How much had Harry told Anne about them? About Tulane? Surely she knew they had been good friends, but Louis wondered whether she knew their history—or how much detail Harry had given her.

“It's so nice of you to organize this for Harry. Do you think he suspected at all?”

“I don't think so, no,” Louis answered. “He's coming any minute now. We’ll find out.”

“I was surprised,” Anne said, “when Harry mentioned you were in his internship class.”
“Oh?” Harry mentioned this—when?

“Yes. I remember he saw your name online—on Facebook, maybe? Even before he came to Boston. He was—happy—to find out, Louis. I think he really looked forward to working with you again.”

Louis watched Anne’s face closely, to see whether she was implying anything else. But he read nothing there but a harmless, polite smile.

“It was a nice surprise for me, too. The best surprise.” Stop lying, Louis—she can see right through you. You know you wished for just the opposite. “He’s really changed a lot since New Orleans. In a way, I didn't recognize him.”

“He has,” said Anne. “He’s matured a lot, I think, in a positive way. He does seem more focused.”

“He’s still the same Harry inside, though,” added Gemma. “Still goofy, still funny. Still the kid who loves to tell a dumb joke and get all the attention. You know him, Lou.”

*Do I?* Louis wondered. *I thought I did. At least the old Harry. But do I, now?*

“I don't know what was in the water at Hopkins,” Louis said. “Harry looks like a different person now. I mean, obviously he’s still very handsome.” Anne smiled and Gemma rolled her eyes. “But there's something different about him.”

Liam had walked over, listening to their conversation. “He really has, hasn't he?” Liam said. “He used to be just a kid—he always seemed so young to me, when he first came to Hopkins. We heard about him, actually, before he even came. That he was going to work on Nestor’s project—it was a pretty big deal. Nestor is known to be finicky; he’d interviewed, like, twenty medical students and didn’t give any of them a shot. Then Harry came along, and, boom! Done deal. Now the research is red hot, and Harry’s got so much confidence, and is able to show it.”

“Harry’s a superstar,” said Louis. “He’s shown that abundantly in internship. The staff is in love with him.”

Anne beamed, hearing these accolades about her son.

“I’m not sure what happened at Hopkins,” said Liam. “He seems to have gone through some really tough times.”

“Harry tortures himself,” Anne said. “He can't let go of things. Especially when it's something he cares about, especially when everything looks bleak and hopeless. That's when he digs in his heels. He’s always been like that, and I’ve always worried about him.”

Louis sneaked a glance at Anne to see whether these comments were directed at him, but she did not look his way. It seemed to be merely a general statement.

Gemma said, “Remember the time he left his stuffed bunny out in the rain, and it was ruined? He blamed everyone else and ran around like a crazy person, screaming and crying. And it was even worse when we all laughed at him.”

Anne said, “He wrote that note—’I hate you all. Bunnington’s gone-- that's what he named it, Bunnington—and it will never be the same. P.S. Could we please have macaroni and cheese for dinner? Love, Harry.’ Do you remember, Gemma?”

“He's such a dramatic dork,” she said. “I can't believe he's actually a doctor, treating patients, that he's going to be a surgeon. It's crazy.”
Suddenly Stan shouted, “I see him coming up the sidewalk!”

Louis shushed everyone and bundled them behind the furniture, and then turned off all but a single lamp in the living room. He stationed himself beside the door, a hand on the light switch. His phone vibrated.

*On my way up,* the text said.

*C can't wait,* he texted back. His heart screamed, *I can't wait.*

Harry put his key in the door and turned. As his eyes adjusted to the dim lighting, Louis flipped the light switch and everyone jumped out at him. They brought everything, all of their love and energy. It was something great.

“Happy birthday, Harry!” they all shouted.

Harry’s mouth lay slackly in a daze. All at once, his eyes opened and perked as he took in the decoration—the banner that Louis had meticulously designed, the swallows on the end—his mum and Gemma, Stan and Jimmy! Liam, Niall, Alice, the caterers. All of them standing in Louis’s little apartment, where they were to meet to go to dinner. Harry was speechless. He stood frozen in the doorway, while everyone laughed and shouted greetings to him. His mother walked to him and enveloped his tall frame in a warm, tight hug.

“Happy birthday, darling,” she said. “I'm so happy for you.”

“Mum,” Harry gulped, emotions overtaking him. “Mum, you're here.”

“I’m here, too, you dork,” Gemma walked to him, plastered her body to theirs in a group hug. They embraced for a minute, then Gemma clapped him on the shoulder and brought him inside the apartment.

Harry’s eyes searched for Louis and found him, standing to the side of the door, just behind Gemma. Louis’s eyes crinkled joyfully.

“Lou? Did you plan all this?”

Louis’s smile nearly broke his face in half. “I might have, yeah,” he said. He flashed his right hand, where he wore platinum ring on his fourth finger. “Happy birthday, Harry.”

Harry walked to him and crashed his body into Louis’s, wrapping both arms around him tightly, as Louis’s hands rested around his neck. Harry inhaled the essence of Louis, his generosity and kindness, his protectiveness of Harry. Harry felt completely safe, at home.

“I love you, Lou,” he whispered. “I love you so much.”

“I love you, too, Harry. More than anything.”

They broke apart. Their friends came forward, one by one, congratulating Harry on his 26th birthday. Eventually they made their way to the food and started having dinner.

“I hope you’re not disappointed that you’re not eating at L'Espalier,” Louis said to Harry, as they sat together on the carpet.

Harry answered, “Of course not. Everyone I care about is right here.” He leaned in and gave Louis a kiss on his temple. “Especially you.”
The funny thing was, Harry was dressed in his red, diaphanous, leaving-nothing-to-imagination shirt, with his pearl and cross on chains, and his leather wrist cuff. He smelled like expensive cologne. He was dressed to seduce on his birthday, dressed to have a long, athletic night.

He was in front of family and friends—in front of his mother. Yet he seemed completely at ease, not a bit embarrassed. Louis wondered how Anne was surviving this outfit.

“The last time I saw you in this outfit,” Louis said, “you were going on a hot date.”

“Yeah?” Harry knitted his eyebrows. “I don't remember that. When?”

“You don't?” Louis said. “You really don't?”

Harry shook his head. “Lou, I don't generally keep a diary of how I dress.”

“Listen, you,” Louis bumped their knees. “It was at Thanksgiving, with Niall and Alice. Remember? At the Trestle Tavern?”

“Okay,” Harry drawled hesitantly. “I remember the day. But I still don't remember wearing anything special?”

“Harry, when you wear this shirt, and these pants? The ones surgically transplanted onto your body? You know all eyes are on you,” Louis said. “You're lying if you don't.”

Harry snorted. “I might, yeah.”

“So you admit it, you cheeky bastard!”

Harry laughed out loud. “Louis William, I may be dimly aware of others’ appreciation of my—um—fashion sense. Satisfied?”

Louis leaned in to whisper, “They want to fucking tear your clothes off with their teeth, Harry.” Louis watched Harry’s upper lip lift in a smirk. “And I can't blame them.”

“Let me ask you, Lou,” said Harry, touching his leg lightly to Louis’s. “How am I doing at this seduction thing?”

In response, Louis glanced around the room, and, seeing everyone’s attention focused elsewhere, traced his hand between their legs, up Harry’s outer thigh to squeeze his ass. He watched as Harry’s butterfly tattoo lift on his abdomen, fluttering, the antennas alive. “Later,” he said. “You’ll get all the attention you want.”

“Oooo, punishment,” Harry said. “Can’t wait.”

“That night,” said Louis, “at the Trestle. I think it was the first time Niall and Alice went on a date publicly. Anyway, we were walking out, and you said—um—you said….”

“Yeah? What?”

“You said you’d walk me to the T. But you were meeting someone later.”

Harry scrunched his brows. He remembered walking Louis to the subway station, remembered parting, and then—ah, yes.

“Hey,” said Harry. “I was meeting Dr. Nestor.”
Louis’s face radiated incredulity. “Come on.”

“He was in Boston for the weekend. He wanted to submit a proposal for a presentation at ISC, and it was my only free night to meet with him.”

“You're joking me!”

“Nope. Totally serious.”

“God, for a minute there, I thought you had a thing going with your research advisor!”

“What?!”

“When you said Nestor, I swear it was the first thing that popped into my head.”

“Oh, my God,” said Harry. “My God, Lou. That's simultaneously hilarious and so uncomfortable.”

“I'm sorry, Harry!”

“I mean—I didn't even think about it at the time. I was nervous just meeting up with you. Didn't think about the implications, I guess? I didn't know you were jealous, Lou. That’s kind of adorable.”

“I'm not! I wasn't,” Louis said, wrinkling his nose. He knew he had lost the battle. He quickly swerved. “Anyway, do you always dress like this to see your advisor?”

“Like what?”

“Like you're going to your second job as a gigolo afterward.”

“Tsk tsk, Lou,” said Harry, an appreciative smile on his lips. “No slut shaming.”

“Well?”

“This is how I dress,” said Harry. “I'm pretty comfortable. Maybe someday I'll wear khakis and rugby shirts all the time—maybe for role playing, eh, Lou?” Harry nudged Louis suggestively. “But you know, I like this. For now.”

“You're impossible.”

“Can’t help it. I get hot. I'm a tropical creature.”

“Oh, be quiet.” Louis gazed down with a big smile on his face.

Harry hadn't met with a date that night. He had talked to his advisor and then gone home to sleep, alone, in his apartment with his records and RBB and his books, alone. Alone. Louis pictured it in his mind. He’d never loved loneliness more.

Alice called to Harry. “Birthday boy! Niall and I have to get going soon.”

“You old geezers turning in soon? Bedtime,” Louis shouted, as Alice gave him the middle finger.

“Come over here and open your presents!” Alice said.

Harry got on his feet and walked to the table with presents. An array of bright packages, rainbow-colored ribbons and tissue papers were piled one on top of another. He opened them one by one—a neck massager from Niall and Alice, gift cards from Stan and Jimmy, a new yoga mat and heating
pads from Liam. Anne gave Harry a new wool blazer, black with velvet lapels, for formal dinners. Gemma gave him a manicure set and moisturizers from Kiehl.

“I've got something for you, too.” Louis emerged from his bedroom. “It won't be as good as your present to me, but I think you'll like it.”

Harry saw the wrapped present in the shape and size of a vinyl record.

“Is it Rumours”

“Nope.”

“Tusk?”

“No!!”

“Dark Side of the —“

“Haz. Stop guessing and open it.”

Harry smiled fondly at Louis. He carefully released the tape on the paper, and opened the record. The dark crimson cover was faded but in good shape. On the front was a painting of a man with wild hair, with a peaked, defined nose, in profile.

“God, Louis.” Harry exclaimed, turning the record over. “How did you ever find this?”

“Wasn’t easy,” said Louis. “First press. You’ll see the date on the bottom.”

“Is this—?”

“Autographed,” he said. “Look at the signature.”

The vinyl was Bob Dylan’s Blood on the Tracks. On the front was scrawled, “To Harry, All the Love, Bob. London. June 15, 1978.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “Lou? How?”

“You can't imagine how hard it was to find this,” Louis said. “I literally had to beat vultures off. I went just looking for an autograph, any autograph. Then I saw this pop up on eBay, and I thought, Louis, nothing matters for the next three days of auction but you have to have this.”

“I can't fucking believe—sorry, mum,” Harry glanced at Anne. “I can't—this is incredible. I'm speechless.”

“I have another little thing,” said Louis. He went into the bedroom as the others waited in anticipation. Their friends looked at each other, intrigued by the surprise present, one that had to be secreted away in isolation.

Louis came out with a large black picture frame, the glass facing himself. He turned it around and showed it to Harry. For a moment, Harry stood still, his face one of shock, almost of misery. He sucked both lips inward, biting them between his teeth. Their friends, Anne, and Gemma watched with concern.

The picture didn't seem to be one that should have caused so much emotion. It was a simple portrait in oil pastels, of two boys. It also did not seem very recent—the paper was faded and yellowed around the borders, the pastel colors less than brilliant. However, it was a lively likeness. Anne
recognized one of them as a young Harry, his curls dark gold, with bright yellow highlights where the sun reflected. On one cheek, there was a slight smudge—of dirt, perhaps? And powder, perhaps of sugar. The other boy had his arm around Harry’s shoulders, and had a familiar look about him, his cheekbones sharp and delicate, his lips thin and rosy. Was it—? Could it be—Louis? Young Harry and Louis? But when? How?

“Do you like it, Haz?” Louis asked softly. “I had it framed. Do you remember?”

Harry crossed to Louis and took the portrait from him, his eyes glistening. He stared unfocused past the picture, as if seeing beyond it: Roman gates, a walk toward the sea, lemon trees with their bewitching fragrance. A dark marketplace, a gothic cathedral, English girls, hot chocolate and churros.

“Olives,” Harry said.

“Spain’s greatest export,” Louis answered.

Harry turned to Louis and, without another word, kissed him softly, gently on the lips. Louis closed his eyes. Louis tasted all of Barcelona, the sun beating down on their cheeks, the olives pungent and salty on their tongues, the creamy sweetness of milk chocolate proving the omnipresence of God.

“You remember,” whispered Louis.

“It was the best day,” said Harry.

“It was,” said Louis. “The best.”

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After the caterers had cleaned up and gone, the guests had all left, and all the trash had been stuffed into the garbage bags, Harry and Louis sat on Louis’s sofa, sharing a glass of wine.

“Back to work tomorrow,” said Louis. “More blocked catheters and distended bladders.”

“Speaking of which,” Harry said. He pulled Louis close to him, one hand around his shoulder, lazily draped over his chest. He kissed Louis’s hair.

“Yeah?”

“The ISC.”

“What about it?”

“Did you submit yet?” Harry looked at Louis.
Louis groaned. It was a priority. On the top of his to-do list. But it was a responsibility, and there were miles of code to write, and he’d rather sit here and eat his triple-layered buttercream cake with custom-made fondant. And kiss his boy. And really, he’d rather watch a monkey peel a banana or grass grow, or anything besides work on that monster research project.

“Louis—“

“I know. I will, Harry. I promise you I’m going to get to it, as soon as I can.”

“It's due in two weeks, Louis.”

“Crap on a stick, I heard you!” Harry burst out laughing at Louis’s exasperation. “Why are you so worried about me, anyway?” Louis knew that he was being irrational. It was glib of him to complain about success. He was behaving petulantly.

“Lou, you know why,” Harry said. “It's because your research is groundbreaking, and will help people who are working on the other side, the robotics side, like Dr. Nestor and me. You should be proud of it.” Harry leaned over and nuzzled Louis’s scruffy chin with the side of his jaw. He kissed Louis’s jaw and then the corner of his mouth, the top of his lip where it dipped down into a Cupid’s bow. He wrapped his fingers around Louis’s.

“I was waiting to work on it,” Louis said, “as soon as your party was over.”

“Louis, thank you for the party,” Harry said. “It was lovely.”

“Did you really like it?” Louis looked at Harry tenderly. Harry sucked on Louis’s lower lip and pulled off, made a little popping noise.

“Did I like it? Did I like your caring for me like that?” Harry focused his emerald eyes on Louis. “Seeing my mum and Gemma? Stan and Jimmy. And everyone else. It was incredible. I felt loved, Louis. It was everything.” Louis blushed, knowing how much Harry loved being surrounded by family and friends.

“Speaking of the ISC application. What about you, Harry? Have you done yours?”

Harry paused. He unwound his hand from Louis’s and picked up the wine glass from the table, took a long sip. “Yeah, about that.”

“Haz?” Louis flinched, turning to look at Harry.

“I was going to tell you, Louis,” Harry said. Louis couldn't help feeling unease, the familiar words stirring old, familiar, desperate sensations inside. He waited, watching Harry hesitate.

“Harry, I swear to God—“

“Calm down, duckling,” said Harry. “It's nothing bad. Our research project—I—have been invited to give a seminar at ISC.”

“Wow,” Louis replied, surprised by the magnitude of Harry’s announcement. “Whoa. How far along is the research?”

“The seminar isn’t going to be given through the hospital. We’ve been invited to present and maybe pitch to biotech firms for a clinical study. It's on the third day of the meeting, special sessions.”

Special sessions. The words clanged in Louis’s brain like an ambulance siren.
“Wow. Are the biotech firms serious?”

“Well, at this point, I have no idea. But it seems so,” Harry replied. “We’ve been talking some numbers. I’ve never done this before, so it's all sort of overwhelming. Nestor has talked to lawyers about intellectual property rights, what Hopkins gets, what rights we retain. The project is too big to be developed by a university—the resources are not adequate. So we have to move forward.”

Louis listened to every word with growing incredulity. Intellectual property rights? Project development? Clinical studies? Just how far along had this talk already gone?

“What does that mean for you, Harry?” Harry was surprised by the directness of this question. Louis continued, “Will you drop out of residency? Are you going into biotech development?”

Harry took in Louis’s worried face, his eyes wrinkled and pinched, his lips pressed, trying not to show his feelings.

“Don’t do this,” Harry said calmly. “Don't imagine what hasn't happened yet, Lou.”

“Then tell me!” Louis said. “What's going to happen? What does it mean?”

“It means it's too early to worry about anything, petal,” said Harry. “I promise you I won’t keep anything from you, Lou. I won't do that again.”

Louis sighed. “Harry…”

“Lou, look at me.” Louis continued to look down. He felt that he might start crying if he were to meet Harry’s eyes. He was not going to do that.

Harry stroked Louis’s thigh that lay between them. His touch traced up to Louis’s elbow, then to the scruff on Louis’s chin, and turned Louis’s head.

“Trust me. I will talk to you about every decision. I love you, Lou. Nothing will come between us. Okay?”

Louis did not meet Harry’s eyes. He nodded silently.

Harry put his arm around Louis’s shoulder and pulled him close. He pulled as tightly as he could, mashed them as closely together as he could. He wanted to erase all the gaps between them. Nevertheless, there lay a gulf of expectations between, of careers and successes and potential pathways, partners, fates.

They were young. The roads of life were many. Not all of them pointed in one direction.

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Louis sat outside Dr. Fernbank’s office.

The application had been due a week ago. Louis had not turned it in. He had actually finished writing the interface code and everything was ready to go, but he had held back. When Harry asked him about it, he had lied and said, yes, he’d gotten it in on time, and was just waiting on a decision. Louis felt terrible about this lie. It involved a much larger lie than just the surgical meeting.

The door opened and Dr. Fernbank’s voice boomed, “Louis? Come on in.”

Louis entered and took notice of the cramped quarters. Dr. Fernbank was the Director of Trauma Services and of medical education. He no longer performed surgery, and therefore was lower on the totem pole of departmental power. Louis noticed Dr. Fernbank was using a wheelchair. That was unusual. There was enough room for him to move around, and for a few bookshelves. That was about it.

“You wanted to talk to me, sir?” Louis asked.

“Yes, Louis. Have a seat.”

Louis sat down in the wooden chair that Dr. Fernbank gestured to. He looked nervously at his instructor. Louis had no idea why he was there. Had he done something wrong? Had a patient or nurse complained about him?

“Louis, as you know, applications to present at the International Surgical Conference were due a week ago Friday,” Dr. Fernbank started. Louis clasped his hands together on his lap, holding his face rigid, expressionless.

“Sir?”

“Dr. Enright approached me, Louis. He tells me that you finished a large portion of the research that you had been working on with him.”

“I did. Yes, I recently made a lot of progress—a breakthrough, really.”

“See, what I don’t get is,” Dr. Fernbank continued, “someone like you. You’re one of the stars of our program.”

Louis looked up at him, an expression of unexpectedly pleasant surprise, confusion on his face. “I’m sorry, sir?”

“You’ve impressed quite a few people. Your peers respect you. You have real leadership skills. You are intellectually and emotionally mature, you doggedly pursue interesting questions, and you are a role model for your classmates.”

“I’m—very flattered, Dr. Fernbank. And surprised. I never expected to hear these things. They’re very kind words.”

Dr. Fernbank waved his large hand. “No, I don’t think you should be surprised. You have real strengths and they are apparent to all of us.”

Louis smiled. “Thank you.”

“The thing that I don’t understand is,” Dr. Fernbank continued, “why you hold back.”

Louis faltered. “Sorry?”
“Why do you hold back? Why don’t you want people to know how good you really are?” Louis’s eyes followed Dr. Fernbank as he swung awkwardly around the desk, to sit directly in front him. “Louis, why didn’t you submit an application to the ISC?”

Louis’s face stared blankly ahead, his mind racing, his blue eyes staring into space. He was suddenly at a loss for words, just as he’d been at Grand Rounds. Random words rushed by without any meaning: fear, future, career, separation, love, too much, sadness.

“I guess—I guess, um, that I didn’t think—uh—that my research was at that level yet, for formal presentation,” Louis answered.

Dr. Fernbank met his eyes frankly. “Apparently, Dr. Enright feels differently. He feels you are more than ready.”

Louis chewed his bottom lip. He had met with Dr. Enright two weeks earlier. He had given his word to try his best to get the application in. Enright had been counting on him. Enright was attending the conference regardless of Louis, but Louis’s research was mostly his own work, big and complex work having to do with computer simulation and virtual technology, which was out of the usual realm of medical research. It was interesting, unique. Enright felt strongly that Louis should have the opportunity to present the work himself. Louis knew he was right.

“He told me he had met with you, Louis. He expected you to send in a proposal. So my question to you is, where’s the proposal?”

“I guess I got too busy,” said Louis, softly. “It got delayed. I didn’t have a chance to finish it.”

Dr. Fernbank let a moment of silence pass, to allow that excuse to marinate. They both knew that it was a weak excuse—unacceptable, really, for an intern. There were never enough hours in a day. That was the surgical intern’s life. It was never an excuse not to do work. Time could always be carved out—from sleep, from meals, from bathroom breaks.

Dr. Fernbank was not going to tolerate this weak waffling. “Two days,” he said finally. “I expect your proposal in two days. You’re going to personally put it on my desk.”

Louis met Dr. Fernbank’s eyes pleadingly. He knew that Dr. Fernbank would not compromise, that he would not coddle an intern. When he knew the level of work an intern was capable of, that was the level of his expectation. Louis knew that his success was also his doom. Dr. Fernbank’s mind had been made up before the conversation had started.

“You may go.”

As Louis turned around to leave, Dr. Fernbank called out to him, “Louis?”

“Yes?”

“One more thing.”

Louis turned back, standing with his hands behind his back, fingers clasped, wringing loosely.

“Louis, I wanted to ask you. Your research has to do with imaging the coronary artery system—is that correct?”

“Yes, sir. We are using 3-D animation for guidance in computer-aided procedures, like surgery.”

“You're interested in the cardiothoracic system?”
“I am, sir. I am interested in every system, really, where such animation technology can be useful. But it is particularly useful in areas where laparoscopic surgery isn't feasible—the heart, for instance. Doing bypass grafts. It's all very invasive right now. Surgery takes a long time. Patients have to go on the bypass machine. It take a long time to heal. There is a certain rate of morbidity and mortality—especially in the sickest patients. Animation and micro-surgery could bring that morbidity down.”

“Yes, I am aware. That's what I wanted to talk to you about.”

Louis quickly apologized, “I'm sorry, sir. I wasn't implying that—I know it seems obvious to you.”

“Louis,” Dr. Fernbank said. “I'm a direct person, so let's cut to the chase.”

“Yes, sir?”

“I wanted to let you know. You are one of the top three candidates we are considering for the cardiothoracic fellowship. Your research is fascinating and has great potential. You've been stellar in your performance this year—Grand Rounds notwithstanding.”

Louis’s cheeks flushed. What was he hearing? It seemed too good to be true.

“I'm very flattered, sir. I don't know know what to say.”

“What do you think about that, Louis? Do you have any interest?”

“I feel very honored by the consideration,” Louis said.

“Do you know Jessica Rabenweiler?” Dr. Fernbank asked.

“I do. We've worked together. I admire Jess very much,” said Louis.

“Jess is going to be one of our cardiothoracic fellows next year,” said Dr. Fernbank. “I've talked to her about you, and she will be expecting queries from you. Of course, you're also welcome to talk to me, anytime.”

“Thank you,” said Louis. “I'm very honored to be in this company.”

“Not so fast, Tomlinson,” said Dr. Fernbank. “You don't have the fellowship yet. Don't start packing your bedding. The other candidates are also very strong.”

“I understand,” laughed Louis, embarrassed.

“And there are others, too. Not everyone wants to be a heart surgeon. And not everyone is temperamentally suited, as you know. I think you have the patience, the attention to detail, the energy and stamina, to succeed, Louis, if you want to. First, you'll have to make it through a few surgical conferences.”

“Dr. Fernbank? Um—as you might know,” Louis said, “public speaking is not my strength.”

“Something you must remedy if you want any kind of academic career,” Dr. Fernbank said. “Start with the ISC. Jess will help you. She's given a lot of talks like these. She’s an old pro. Go over your presentation with her—the structure, the questions to prepare for, how to dress, what to bring. She will help you.”

“If I go, you mean?”

“Oh, you’ll go,” said Dr. Fernbank. “I’ll make sure of it. And it's not favoritism or flattery,
Tomlinson. You are sometimes a pain to deal with, a royal pain. But you're going to give your talk, and you'll do fine."


Dr. Fernbank looked solemnly at Louis over his glasses. “Two days.”

***

Louis stood facing the wall on which the PowerPoint was projected, a stack of index cards in his hands. Thirty-two cards, ten seconds each, for a five minute talk with two minutes for questions.

The Mediterranean sun beat through the tinted windows. Air-conditioning hummed like a drone of dragonflies. Louis’s palms were cold and his neck radiated sweat—through his second white shirt of the day.

“Damn it, Louis. Where’s the fire? Your research might be familiar to you,” said Jess, “but not to the audience listening. You have to slow down. No one can follow you if you talk so fast.”

“I know!” Louis shouted. He paced back and forth, his hands wringing themselves. “I’m trying, Jess. I can't slow down when I’m nervous.”

Louis’s voice was so high, he could have started singing *The Sound of Music*. Jess couldn't help smiling to herself at this image—Louis Tomlinson in a dirndl made of chartreuse curtains, tow-headed Austrian waifs following behind him.


Louis glared at her.

“Raise your arm above and head, spread your legs apart,” Jess prompted. “Hold your breath, then slowly release.”

“No offense, Jess,” Louis said, sweeping his fringe. “But I am so beyond fucking yoga breathing right now. All the TED talks in the world are not going to do a thing for me. I need an anti-emetic. I need a benzodiazepine. I need general anesthesia.”

Louis had arrived in Barcelona yesterday morning. He was staying at the Hilton Diagonal Mar Barcelona, next to the Centre Convencion International de Barcelona (the CCIB), where the ISC was taking place. He had slept most of the day yesterday, because of fatigue associated with the flight and jet lag. He had stayed up for three nights before the conference, patching in the graphics to his talk, revising and editing it.
He had to get his suit dry cleaned, buy a few new white dress shirts, and double check his flight time. Consequently, he had hardly talked to Harry in the past week. They had hurriedly traded texts back and forth prior to the conference. Harry was to arrive this morning and text Louis as soon as he arrived—his landing time was supposed to have been an hour ago. He had promised to be in the audience for Louis’s presentation this evening, set at 6 PM.

Louis hoped that Harry would have time to take a nap and maybe shower. The transatlantic flight was grueling and dirty—added to the jet lag, it could take two or three days to adjust. He wasn’t worried that Harry hadn’t contacted him.

Perhaps he was held up by customs, or maybe transportation fell through and he had to take an Uber or a taxi. Perhaps he’d missed his connection. Perhaps his phone was out of batteries.

Louis felt foolishly paranoid. Of course Harry was all right. Louis was going to have to yell at him for wasting his time. *Tell the truth, you watched three hours of cat and dog videos on Instagram, didn’t you?*

Louis’s mother had been here for several days. He was going to meet her as well. Johannah had given a course on colorectal surgery. Louis was going to go over the talk with her, to get some pointers. It was the first time Louis would talk in front of Johannah, as a doctor. He knew her reputation for reducing speakers to cinders, but she was on his side. She would help prepare him.

Louis and Jess both heard a knock at the door.

“Jess?” Louis tilted his head toward her.

“Expecting anyone?”

“No. Are you?”

Louis crossed the room and peered into the viewer on the door. It was Dr. Fernbank. He opened the door to let him in. Dr. Fernbank was in a wheelchair again. He seemed to be having more trouble maneuvering recently, Louis observed.

“How are you feeling, Tomlinson?”

“Overall, not too bad,” Louis said. “Bit of nerves.”

“Louis, it’s five minutes of your life. Not the most crucial five minutes, either. Just remember that.”

“I just need to get over the first few seconds, I think,” said Louis. “I have the thing memorized, but for backup, I’ve got my notes.”

“Just remember,” Dr. Fernbank said. “No one knows this material like you do. This is all yours, Louis. Generally people come to talks because they’re curious—not because they’re looking to tear you down, or humiliate you. There are trolls, to be sure, who will question the integrity or basis of your work. But you have to start from a foundation of confidence.”

“I understand.”

“Your area of research is unique. I know, for a fact, that there are a lot of people from industry here.”

“Sir?”

“What you’re presenting has wide biotech appeal. It’s immediately applicable to patient care, and is
as good as ready-to-go. This type of project—like Harry’s—usually gets fast-tracked for product development. The R&D has basically been completely done for the companies.”

Louis nodded his head. “I know that Harry’s giving a seminar tomorrow night,” he said. “He said something about biotech sponsoring it.”

“Harry’s presentation is highly anticipated, to be sure,” said Dr. Fernbank. “Tech is always scouting for the next big thing. Do a good job. Your research is something that no one else is doing. They’ll be looking.”

“It’s not as if I’m not already nervous, sir.”

Dr. Fernbank laughed. “Don’t be distracted. Focus your talk on your research and do your best. I’ve heard your talk before. You’ll knock ‘em dead, son.”

Dr. Fernbank maneuvered his wheelchair around and headed for the door. “Anything I can do?”

“Dr. Fernbank, I’m just very grateful to be here. Thank you for all you’ve done,” Louis said sincerely.

“See you tonight.”

Louis’s stomach flipped. His talk would have consequences, beyond the academic. He had been working from Dr. Enright’s National Institute of Health grant money, but computer science research relied on hardware, which was always expensive. A flush of industry money would be extremely helpful. He had not expected a roomful of people, in these huge conference rooms that could seat five hundred. He thought maybe that only a handful of people in the field would be there. He was working himself up unnecessarily, but trying to control his nerves made him ten times more nervous.

Louis’s phone buzzed on the dresser and he rushed to check it.

*Meet for lunch today?*

He checked the number. It was from Dr. Enright. He sighed.

*Sure, Louis texted. 1 PM?*

*Sounds good. Meet you in the hotel restaurant.*

Louis turned around. His face must have registered disappointment, because Jess asked, “Well?”

“That wasn’t Harry,” Louis said. “It was Dr. Enright. We’re meeting for lunch.”

“Don’t worry about Harry,” Jess said. “He’s an adult. It’s not his first time traveling. He’s all right.”

“I know,” Louis answered. He wished he could calm down. If only Harry would just send a text.

Louis had seen Dr. Ulysses Nestor last night, when he went down for dinner. He had been chatting animatedly with someone in the hotel lobby, and Louis overheard someone call his name. Ulysses Nestor was about the same height as Louis, in his late forties, with a salt and pepper beard and round, ruddy cheeks. Louis saw that he was wearing Bermuda shorts and sandals with black socks. Typical researcher—dressed for comfort.

*So this is Harry’s mentor, he had thought. The person whom Harry flew down to Baltimore to see. A stab of jealousy ran through him, irrational and unworthy of him. Nestor represented the idea of a greater attainment than the merely domestic—the idea that while personal happiness was pleasant.*
and agreeable, public recognition and achievement were the ultimate life goals.

Looking at Nestor, Louis realized what he feared was being second place. Being second place in Harry’s priority list. Being second place when people viewed them as a couple. The plus one. Being the leftover, the one people pitied and patronized, the one who took care of the mundane household issues so the genius of the house could do his important intellectual work.

Louis almost felt ashamed of himself for thinking like that. Harry had never treated him that way. Nevertheless, with the disparity in their academic achievements, Louis couldn’t stop himself from feeling inferior.

Inferiority wasn’t the issue, anyway—not the only issue. He knew that no couple was ever really intellectually equal, and he knew he was plenty smart. It was the nagging sense that his concerns were somehow less valid, that what he felt in his heart somehow translated to high emotions blown out of proportion. It was a sense of being ignored, being compartmentalized and confined. It was feeling like being a bit player in someone else’s story.

His phone vibrated in his hand.

*Darling,* the text said. *When do you want to meet this afternoon? I'll be available after 2.*

Louis glanced at the I.D. It was his mother, Professor Johannah Deakin.

*Meeting Enright at 1,* he wrote back. *So, 3?*

*Fine. See you then. Hotel bar.*

Louis sighed at the irony of these texts. *Talk about feeling inferior, feeling compartmentalized.* His mother gave a course every year at the ISC, and every year it was well-attended. She was a force of nature, with a terribly imposing reputation. She could afford to wear soft blouses and tailored Chanel suits because inside, she was as hard as diamonds.

“Start again, Louis,” Jess said. “One more time. Talk as if you have molasses in your mouth, and project to the back of the room. Enunciate. Engage in eye contact. Be natural with your hand gestures. Then you have to get out of my room so I can shower and get ready for my talk.”

Louis groaned and flipped on the laptop. He started again at the beginning.

***

“Any last minute questions?” Dr. Enright cut into the swordfish on his plate. Louis stared without appetite at his salad niçoise. He flipped a few lettuce leaves with his fork.

“I've written a few new algorithms since I submitted the proposal,” he said. “but I don't think I'll
“Oh?”

“New algorithms that work with micro-robotics,” he said, “for the CT interface. We’ve been working on the interface code, but there’s a new approach I’ve been thinking about, a shortcut. It would simplify the code significantly.”

“What’s the improvement?” Dr. Enright asked.

“Well, right now the micro-robotics guys are using visible light,” Louis said. “They have mostly been concentrating on maneuvering a small robot through viscous fluid—blood—without the mechanism clogging up. But the robot is a surgical instrument, not a light source. It was never meant to give good visual feedback.”

“What are the alternatives? Have they tried anything else?”

“Nothing as good as computer animation,” Louis said. “Ultrasound is an alternative, and infrared. But they don’t have the resolution needed for this kind of work. It’s just too crude, too spots-and-dots.”

“Even with Doppler?”

“Yep. Doppler gives a dynamic image, but the resolution is still poor. You’d need something like microscopic cameras, computerized fiberoptics. The technology isn’t there.”

“What’s the hang up?”

The dining room buzzed with people from the conference catching a quick lunch. Men and women in suits, some in brightly colored business-appropriate attire, drank and ate and talked. Waiters swirled around them with the clink and crash of plates, glasses, silverware. Bright light filtered through the gauzy Roman shades of the windows, across decorative plants. Soft footfalls were muted by the thick carpeting.

“Hardware,” said Louis. “It’s expensive. No one is going to design electron microscopes that fit on a micro-robot, and furthermore make it disposable. It would be crazy expensive. Impractical.”

“Hmm,” Dr. Enright paused. He put his fork down. “How do you know so much about micro-robotics, Louis? Do you know this for a fact?”

“I have some reliable sources,” says Louis. He looked down and coughed into his napkin.

“How certain are you about the shortcut?”

Louis thought about it. “Not very. I just started, literally, five days before we got here. It’s only in the baby stages. It’s about taking the interface we have now, and cutting out the downloading time, so that there could be real-time imaging.”

“I’d keep it under wraps,” Dr. Enright said. He picked up his water glass and signaled to the waiter for a refill. “Industry is here, and they can be pretty vicious about scoops.”

Louis—the Louis whose intellectual and business senses were equal to a chess master surveying the board for the endgame—had already considered this point when he first lit upon the idea, days ago. “I’ve heard. Is it—are they here mostly to hear Professor Nestor’s talk?”
“That is the hot ticket item here,” Dr. Enright confirmed. “Are you going?”

“Yeah, I thought I’d give it a listen,” Louis said nonchalantly.

“Get there early; that would be my advice,” Dr. Enright chuckled. “Otherwise you might not get a seat. A lot of venture cap guys are around. Too much money, too few geniuses to throw it at. They’re always trying to find the next big tech breakthrough.”

“Is it serious, then? Nestor?”

“Where billions of dollars are concerned, Louis, it’s always serious,” Dr. Enright said. “I wouldn’t mention anything about the interface shortcut. Once it's in the hands of biotech, they will manage to hire programmers for dimes on the dollar and get this code written in no time. If you’re serious about working on it, you need to get a patent on it, Louis. And quickly.”

“I understand.” Louis pushed away his plate. He had lost all his appetite. Lunch was going to be black coffee.

Dr. Enright had connections to the biotech industry, as well as to Silicon Valley. He had numerous patents to his name. Louis had yet to patent one thing—he knew he needed to work on the logistics, in order to protect the research he had done. Computer science was not like most biomedical research. Instead of years for discoveries to be made and verified, for clinical trials and FDA approvals, it moved at lightning pace. A few months made a huge difference in technological capability—one could be obsolete in a year. All the research in the world didn’t matter if someone else wrote better code first.

Dr. Enright paid the bill and they stood up to leave. “Have you had a chance to see your mother?”

“I’m meeting her this afternoon,” Louis said.

“Great! Give her my regards. If you can pass Johannah’s muster, you’re going to be all right, kid.” Dr. Enright chuckled.

Louis stood up in his shirtsleeves. He walked to the lobby of the hotel. There were bulletin boards set up for announcements related to the conference. Index cards with job and fellowship postings were tacked haphazardly to the board. A large, bright pink piece of paper was taped to the middle of the board, with the imprint of a prominent biotechnology company. It was an announcement:

Please join us for a reception to honor

DR. ULYSSES NESTOR
and
DR. HARRY STYLES

Alhambra Room, 8-9 PM
Immediately following the seminar
Microtonics Biotechnology, Baltimore
Louis stared at this announcement as the reality sank in. Harry was being courted by the largest firms. They weren’t even being subtle about it. What they were doing must be huge. Enright had mentioned billions of dollars; was he being hyperbolic? They were staging their courtship like it was a lifetime award or something. Harry had not mentioned any of this—he had tried to downplay the seminar, saying they were only testing the waters.

Louis sighed. Still no text. He looked at his phone.

_Haz? You all right? Just checking. Let me know when you get in. Meeting with my mom at 3._

Louis waited for a few minutes. His phone stared dumbly back at him. No reply.

Doctors in dark suits, ties, and shoes craned unceremoniously around Louis, taking notes in their books and phones, on scrap pieces of paper. Occasionally someone would accidentally jostle Louis and mutter an apology.

_Is this what I'm here for?_ wondered Louis. He watched the crowds surge and ebb, their identical clothing indistinguishable from one another, their lives passing. Was he waiting, like them, to live a life of anticipating tropical holidays for a few weeks per year, of growing thicker, grayer, slower, of watching the world pass by while they worked one patient at a time, one blood vessel at a time, one gallbladder at a time? Was he here to hear the ticking of time and watch it flow away?

He walked out of the hotel and headed west, toward the walkways leading to the beach and in the opposite direction from the convention center. The cell reception here was crap, and he would miss any texts, but Louis needed some fresh air.

The air was humid and hot. Louis rolled up his sleeves. He turned left and headed toward the Mediterranean Sea. The sky was a grayish blue today, with patches of high flown, wispy clouds. There was almost no one else on the street, everyone else concentrated on the opposite end, toward the convention center. His dress shoes clacked along the cement sidewalk, kicking emulsified city debris—rocks, shells, sand, cardboard—everything a fine sift of dust under the feet.

He crossed the walkway and came to the beach. A few people jogged on the wide sidewalk along the ocean front, the afternoon sun grilling their heads and backs. A slight wind ruffled Louis’s hair, kicking up his fringe. A mom was trying to hoist her stroller over a low barrier on the ground onto the beach. A little girl in a cotton dress printed with flowers and ducks held on to her mother’s leg with one hand, her floppy hat with the other. Her mother spoke to her in soft, calming Catalan, and the girl let go of her, waited to the side. Finally the stroller was over the barrier. The mother looked back at her daughter, held out her hand, and the little girl stepped over the barrier. She wore lime green jelly sandals. Louis watched them make their slow progress to the middle of the beach.

A few seagulls flew low overhead. They landed on the sand in their awkward fashion, looking as if they were airplanes coming in for a crash landing, then suddenly thrusting their legs out and touching the ground.

There was nothing wrong with the domestic. Louis wanted—he wanted to shout to anyone who would listen. _I want the stroller, the duckling dress, the chubby cheeks. I want to be the one reassuring our kids to wait for me, hold my hand when we cross the street. To wipe the ice cream from their chins. To wrap their bodies in a warm towel, wet from the bath. To go to parent-teacher conferences and debate about the correct hand grip for a crayon. To have a small, living body, sleeping, between me and the person I love most on the world—the people I love most—to protect them fiercely with so much love, it would break every heart, it wouldn't be able to be contained by any algorithm. It would be true, real, touchable. To have an everlasting and ridiculously simple life, full of love._
He watched as two birds flew across the waves then circled back toward shore. One rose on the warm Mediterranean current, the other chased. He was in such a reverie that he barely felt his phone vibrate.

I'm here.

Harry. It was Harry at last.

What happened?

Got rerouted through Amsterdam. Horrible. Tell you later. You alright, babe?

More than alright now. Where are you?

Just got to the hotel room.

Be right there.

xx

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Louis ran down the hallway and rammed his key through the slot on the door. He came in and found Harry lying in bed, legs hanging off the end, a fedora thrown across the room on the chair. His feet were still in boots and his black ripped jeans were dusty, his white shirt splayed open. His sunglasses were still on his face, hands tossed above his head.

“Haz?” Louis called quietly. There was no answer. “Are you dead?”

Louis crept up to the body and looked into the sunglasses. The room was dark enough that he couldn't see Harry’s eyes. Perhaps he was so exhausted that he had fallen asleep? Perhaps he had died from a heart attack in the interim.

“Airway, breathing, circulation,” Louis said out loud. He gingerly took off Harry’s glasses and set them on the table. Harry’s eyes were closed, his breathing deep and even. Normally, Harry would have broken out giggling by now, but there was no movement at all, not even a deep, laughter-suppressing breath. Louis knew Harry was notoriously ticklish, especially in the ribs and armpits. Surely he couldn't be tempting Louis….

Louis hovered just above Harry. Harry’s body barely moved with his respirations.

“The ABC’s of trauma,” whispered Louis, within a centimeter of Harry’s face, his breath ghosting over Harry’s skin. “Always believe in curls.”
Harry did not bat an eyelash.

Louis jammed his hands into Harry’s armpits and tickled him as hard as possible. In a second, Harry had sprung to life, flipping them around so that Louis was beneath him, pressing his hip to Louis’s and forcing him into the bed.

“You’re a lousy trauma surgeon,” Harry laughed. He held Louis’s arms by his side. Louis squirmed and giggled, trapped. “Got your priorities all wrong. Airway,” he kissed Louis on the tip of his nose. “Breathing,” he kissed Louis lips, opening them, licking just inside. “Circulation,” his hand reached down to touch Louis’s groin, to palm him through his dress pants, a warm and inviting pressure.

“Harry, you overgrown puppy in heat,” said Louis. “There’s a time and a place.”

“Miss me, though?” Harry didn’t need to ask. He needed only to feel Louis under his hand.

“I’m meeting my mom in,” Louis breathed sharply, looked at his watch, “thirty minutes.”

“Hmm,” mused Harry. “What could we possibly do in thirty minutes?”

“Tea and scones?” Louis suggested.


“Shower, maybe,” Louis said.

“I am pretty dirty, come to think of it.”

“Dirty enough for two?”

“Lou, I don’t think I can handle this much dirt by myself.”

“Haz, you will be the death of me.”

“Come on, grandma.” Harry got off the bed and dragged Louis up by the waist of his pants. In ten seconds flat, he had unbuttoned Louis’s shirt and dropped his trousers. Louis marveled at Harry’s dextrous hands—they were a marvel of engineering, weren’t they? Harry’s own clothes, even the painted-on jeans, seemed to vanish from his body. He sprinted to the bathroom and turned on the hot water.

“I feel so grimy. Fourteen hours on planes and in airports. Disgusting.”

“All right, glamour girl. Let’s get you fluffy,” Louis cooed after him.

Louis folded his clothing carefully to save them for tonight. When he came into the bathroom, Harry was singing already, in his ridiculously melodramatic way.

> Thought that maybe we'd fall in love over the phone  
> Thought that maybe I'd really love being alone  
> Everybody but Heaven knows how I was wrong  

> Oh Lord, what have I done to myself?  
> What have I done to myself?
In this vicious world  
Such a vicious world  
There isn't anything you can do  
In this vicious world

“Rufus Wainwright?” Louis asked. “Really, Harry.”

“Come in here, my one and only,” Harry sang. “Protect me from the vicious world.”

Louis stepped into the warm heat of the shower. Harry had soaped himself completely, covered in bubbles from head to toe. He looked like a sparkling marshmallow. Louis took the shower head and rinsed him off. Harry took the soap and rubbed it all over Louis, his hands calloused and tough from the trip.

Louis relished the familiar lines and creases of Harry’s hands, powerful and rough on his smooth skin. Harry’s hand traveled down to Louis ass and palmed it, squeezed it lightly, then traveled forward to touch Louis’s cock with the back of his hand, tracing a line up his shaft. Louis hands were on Harry’s waist, and he tightened them involuntarily, never used to the sudden flush of desire Harry made him feel, the animal need he evoked.

Harry flipped Louis around so that one hand wrapped around his belly, then began stroking his cock in even strokes with the other hand, his lips on the back of Louis's neck.

“I missed you, Lou,” Harry said. “Missed everything about you.”

“Harry—“

“Come here.”

Harry bit Louis’s shoulder and ground himself into Louis’s ass, rubbing him with a comfortable tension. Louis, being stimulated from the front and back, moaned sultrily, with as much pleasure as flirtation, making Harry growl in laughter. Harry tightened his grip, as if to challenge Louis, and Louis, in response, clenched his buttocks and widened his stance, leaning back on Harry. Harry’s hand pulled Louis tightly to himself. The other hand sped up, flying lightly and tugging on Louis’s skin, the water warm and slippery. Louis began to moan in earnest, no longer playing, and in a minute, panting and crying, was shooting past Harry’s fingers, the creamy white liquid thick and warm, shooting toward the walls and swirling down the drain.

Louis groaned deeply in relief—here was his Haz, his boy. He was right here. He was okay. He wasn’t too good to be true—he was true. Harry let go of Louis’s belly and slowed his hand, feeling Louis’s contractions slow and fall. Louis leaned his head back and kissed Harry’s mouth lazily.

“Your turn,” Louis said. He could feel Harry’s erection pressing stiffly against his ass.

“Nope,” Harry said. “You’re going to be late. Professor Deakin doesn't wait for any man, not even her own son.”

“But Harry, you—“

“No, no, no,” said Harry. “Out you go.” He released Louis and pushed him out of the shower.
Louis reluctantly took a towel from the rack and dried himself. His hair was a lost cause. He quickly dressed and rubbed some gel into the hair, letting it air dry.

“Harry?” he called. Harry was still in the shower.

“I’ll see you at the talk,” Harry shouted back. “Nice and clean!”

“Six o’clock,” Louis said.

“I know! I’ll be there!”

Louis went down the elevator and ran to the bar. He was just on time, but his hair was damp, and his shirt was wet around the collar. Great. He had forgotten to put on socks.

“Louis!” Louis heard his mother’s voice behind him.

“Mom!” he turned around. “Hi. How are you?”

“The question is,” Johannah said, “how are you? How do you feel?”


“Ready for your talk?”

“I think so,” Louis said. “I’ve been through it a few times with my chief resident, and with my research advisor.”

They walked toward the back of the bar and sat down in a booth. The bar was dim and relatively quiet. Small groups of people in business suits, and families in summer clothing, sat here and there.

“Think I need to hear it?” Johannah asked.

“I—I don’t know. I think I’m okay?”

“Louis, don’t be too sure of yourself,” his mother said. “You can always use last minute touch-ups. Remember your Grand Rounds?”

Of course. She wouldn’t let me forget.

The waitress came and set down cocktail napkins and a plate of chips. They ordered sodas. She looked to each of them, wrote down the order, and left.

“Honestly, I’m going to be fine, mom. I’m fine now.”

Johannah raised her head. “Now? What do you mean, now?”


“So,” Johannah said, drawing out the vowel. “Your well-being now depends on Harry.”

“Mom, that’s not what I meant,” Louis said, defensively.

Johanna stared at Louis sternly. “I don’t understand how you can go through internship like this, Louis. Falling for a pretty stranger—and his dubious promises.”

“Harry isn’t a stranger,” Louis replied softly, defiantly.
“He left you once, Louis.”

“Mom, I can handle it myself. We’ve worked it out.”

Johanna looked at Louis as if appraising a patient.

“This is your career, Louis. Or at least, the beginning of it. What you choose to do right now is so important. Missteps are costly.”

“I’ve been **beginning** my career for the last twenty-six years, mom.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Johannah asked, clipping her words.

Louis bowed his head. “Nothing.”

The waitress came by and set down their drinks. They gazed at each other tensely until she left, murmuring their thanks.

“When are you going to realize, Lou? Your timing is poor.” Johannah said, sipping her soda.

“You’re acting like a lovestruck Romeo. Your career should be forefront in your concerns.”

“Please, mom. Our conversation has nothing to do with Harry. I'm capable of taking care of myself.”

“Do you think Harry depends on you for his happiness?” Johannah’s eyes blazed. “Or do you think he’s thinking about himself? Did you not see the announcements for his seminar?”

“Leave Harry out of this,” Louis said. “I’m ready to present. Will you be there?”

Johannah sighed in exasperation. “Louis, I know how to build a surgical career. Don't get hung up on trivialities.”

Louis bit his tongue. Harry was not a triviality. Harry wouldn't think that of him, either.

His mother stared at him. “Of course I will be there, Lou, but will you? Are you going to bring one hundred percent? Boo, I know you. I know your heart.”

“Thanks for the support, mom,” Louis said coldly. He started to stand. His mother’s voice caught him as he was halfway up.

“By the way, I talked to Joshua Fernbank,” said Johannah.

Louis snapped to attention. “What?”

“Your residency director,” Johannah said. “Remember him?”

“What did you talk to him about, mom?”

“The fellowship,” she said. “The cardiothoracic fellowship. He told me you were in the running.”

“Technically, we’re all in the running,” Louis said. “It's a competition for interns.”

Johannah pursed her lips sternly. “Look at me, Louis. Are you serious about this fellowship? Do you have any interest in cardiothoracic surgery? Do you want it? If so, I can—“

“No, absolutely not,” Louis cut her off. “I haven't decided what subspecialty I want to go into, and even if I did, **even if I did,** Louis emphasized, “there’s no way you could ever play a part in getting a
position for me. No way. I'm not going to get a job because of my mother. It has to be me.”

“Why? Why are you so stubborn?”

“It has to be on my own merit, mom. Don't you see? I could never feel that I was capable otherwise.”

“Louis,” Johannah said, “I know this is how you think. But it isn't how the world works.”

“Please, mom—“

“If you think people don't use their influence in real life—all the Ivy League graduates, the hot shots from every prestigious place—they’re all competing for a few slots. That's it. It's about how you can get a lucky break. Everyone could use a push.”

“Mom, it's dishonest.”

“Everyone, Louis. You wouldn't be here if—“ Johannah stopped sharply. Louis, whose head had been bowed, abruptly looked up.

“If what?” Louis, who had been arguing heatedly, suddenly stopped breathing, stopped every muscle. His eyes searched her face. “What do you mean?”

“Boo, you are capable of this fellowship. Joshua told me you were one of the top interns in the program. Obviously he didn't have to tell me that. He told me because it was true.”

“No, before,” said Louis. “What did you mean, I wouldn't be here?”

“Your internship,” his mother sighed, watching him cautiously. “I had a few words with Joshua before the residency match. But he assured me you were going to get in anyway.”

Louis was silent. He didn't know which feeling was greater, his anger or his shame. He considered this information for a moment. He hadn't arrived the same way as Harry, or Liam, or Niall, or Alice. Or anyone else. He had no right to be in the program, let alone here, at the conference. A deep sense of disgrace suffused his entire body.

“I'll see you at the talk,” Louis said. He turned to go.

“Louis?” Johannah watched him walk away without a second glance at her. Louis had squared his shoulders. He lifted his chin and walked straight out the door.

Louis went back to the room. Harry had left. It was still redolent of the smell of his soap and shampoo, lightly herbal with woody overtones. Louis took his shoes off and climbed into bed. He curled into the covers, knees on his chest. A few more hours, and then it would be over.
Louis stared at his first slide.

He had gone over this talk a thousand times. He had dreamed about it. He could give it blindfolded.

He looked down at his first index card and saw his handwriting, the spiky letters like a reflection in a mirror, dumbly staring back.

A sea of faces looked up at him expectantly. Among these faces were his mother, Harry, Dr. Enright, and Dr. Fernbank. Not to mention possibly Jess and other doctors from MSH, and surgeons from Tulane.

Louis took a breath and went into his mind, into the place where his talk lived, in the memory palace where the talk existed purely, of itself, outside of any environment. The words spooled out, one idea consecutive to the next. Louis spoke with warmth and animation, easily making jokes, eye contact. His body was relaxed. He used the pointer naturally and smoothly. The minutes passed by. The small signal station behind the podium lit with the yellow light, then the red. Louis wrapped up his points, satisfied. The audience clapped in its stultified, professional manner.

He opened the floor. A few people asked him some specific questions that he’d touched upon during the talk, and then a man in a navy checked suit came to the microphone.

“Dr. Tomlinson, I was actually interested in the interface,” he said. “The interface between the CT-based animation and procedural machines, like micro-robots. Do you know of any new developments in that area?”

“I’m sorry,” said Louis. “I didn’t catch your name?”

“Bret Eastlander,” he said. “Microtonics Biotechnology, Baltimore.”

Louis inhaled. “Microtonics? Oh yes, of course.” It was the company hosting Harry’s reception tomorrow night.

“You know our company?”

“It’s a small field, Mr. Eastlander. I am familiar with the company.”

“Nice talk, by the way.”

“It’s very nice to meet you. As you know, Mr. Eastlander, we work in a rapidly changing field. New developments happen every day.”

“I’m sorry to change the subject slightly,” Eastlander said. “In light of Dr. Styles’s presentation tomorrow, it seems a natural extension of your research, doesn’t it? Wouldn't it be useful, for example, to have real-time imaging intraoperatively? A shortcut?”

“Hmm, I hadn't thought that far ahead, honestly,” Louis said with a straight face. “I'm not completely familiar with Dr. Styles’s work. I can certainly see the application. Virtual medical animation, in real time, would be a useful adjunct to any robotic procedure.”

“It just seems like your work is aligned to his; they are two pieces of one puzzle. It would raise the functionality of your research a thousand fold. Besides, micro-robotics doesn’t have a viable real-time interface right now.”
“Is that right?” Louis said. “As I stated, I am not familiar with Dr. Styles’s research. I am looking forward to further investigations.”

“If you have thought it out,” Bret said, “it would certainly be intriguing for development. We would be open to ideas. Virtual medical imaging is an area that Microtonics is eager to engage in.”

“Thank you for your interest,” Louis said. “I will certainly keep that in mind.”

His talk concluded, Louis unclipped his lapel microphone and yielded it to the next speaker. He walked back to the projector to retrieve his USB drive.

Bret Eastlander approached him halfway down the walk. “Dr. Tomlinson.”

“Yes?” Louis slowed for him, watching the door.

“I’m sorry to take any more of your time. I just wanted to emphasize that we are very interested in your research. We have an in-house development team, but compared to what you’ve shown here, our work is in its infancy.”

“That’s kind of you to say,” Louis demurred.

“We were curious since you come from the same surgical program as Dr. Styles, and your research subjects are so closely integrated, that you had never even had a discussion of working together?”

“Oh, I see! We were hoping that Microtonics might make a marriage of sorts, scientifically speaking. We have been talking with Dr. Styles. Are you attending his seminar tomorrow?”

Louis was taken aback by this information.

“I’m sorry—can you repeat that?” Louis asked. “The part about having met with Dr. Styles?”

Bret Eastlander’s smile shifted into a slightly smug one.

“Our team flew to Boston last Thanksgiving,” he said. “We had a constructive meeting with his team. In fact, we are hosting a reception tomorrow night. We were hoping to reveal some final details about our partnership.”

“You met with Dr. Styles last Thanksgiving?” Louis asked. He hoped Eastlander couldn’t see the devastation in his face.

“We met with Dr. Nestor’s team to discuss a collaboration. I’d like to give you my card, in case you want to discuss anything further.” He handed Louis a crisp, white business card. “Contact me anytime. I will be at the seminar, and the reception afterward. Hope to see you there?”

“Has Dr. Styles agreed to a partnership?”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Tomlinson,” Eastlander said. “I’m afraid that is proprietary information. We’re pretty excited. That’s all I can say. We would love to have you onboard.”

Louis nodded his head. They shook hands and parted.

Dr. Enright and his mother were waiting at the door for him.

“Thanks, mom,” Louis said. “Thanks for being here.”

“You did a fine job, Louis,” Dr. Enright said. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you, Dr. Enright. Thank you for giving me this opportunity.” Louis leaned in to say, quietly, “Microtonics? Know anything about them?”

“As you know, Louis, it's the big Maryland biotechnology company,” Dr. Enright motioned Louis to exit the door. After the doors were closed, Dr. Enright continued, “They are bidding on Nestor’s micro-robotics, I’m almost certain of it. Definitely a major player.”

“Are they close to a deal? Have you heard?”

“I'm sure we wouldn't hear anything until the ink on the contract is dry,” Dr. Enright said. “These are huge biotech deals. Details don't leak.”

Louis contemplated this information with amplifying feelings of dread, disappointment, anger.

“So the real-time shortcut—they’ve already thought about it.”

“They’re quite thorough. Their chief medical officer was a colleague many years ago. He’s a sharp guy. If you think of something, chances are he’s already thought about it five minutes ago.”

“They can develop it in-house. Maybe even with Harry’s help.”

“If they go ahead with Nestor’s project, yes, I would imagine so.”

Louis ruminated on this, and turned toward his mother. “Mom, it's not a great time to talk. Maybe we can meet later?” Louis looked around. Harry was nowhere to be found. Louis had seen him in the room earlier. There was a good chance he was still here. He needed to find him. “I’m sorry. I have to go.”

Johannah called, “Later today?” But Louis hadn't heard her. His focus was already scattered. Louis walked out of the conference room and down the hall. He heard a familiar voice just around the corner, an American voice.

“… Praxa, in Boston. It's a small but respectable company. The team is very sharp. They are meticulous and do good science. You could continue your residency at MSH then. Microtonics, you know. It’s in Maryland, would obligate leaving MSH. It is a larger company, with more structural support. You know about their work on robotics, their history of development from academic research.”

Louis saw that Dr. Nestor was speaking to Harry, who had bent his head, listening. Harry looked up and saw Louis. Louis could not quite read the expression on his face—discomfort, perhaps, or guilt. Harry said something to Dr. Nestor that Louis couldn't hear, then crossed over.

“Great talk, Lou!” Harry broke into a smile. Louis thought, really?

“Did you even get to hear it?”

“Of course! I heard everything. Dr. Nestor asked me to come out for a few minutes. He’s just met with a few people.”
“Biotech people.”

“Yeah. We’ll probably have more detailed meetings tomorrow, but he was giving me his impressions.”

“How about you? What are your thoughts so far?” Louis’s face was impassive. Harry looked at him questioningly.

“Louis, I thought you did a great job. I’m so proud of you. You looked so confident up there—it was clear and informative. And you sounded brilliant.” Harry came to put his arm around Louis’s shoulder, set stiffly.

“It was alright,” Louis snapped. He was tired of charades and deceptions. “I meant your conversation with Nestor, Harry. What do you think about the options he was giving you, about the direction of your project?”

“Oh, all that? It’s a lot of information, but I thought I’d keep an open mind,” Harry said.

“Between Praxa and Microtonics.”

“Yeah, did you hear us talking? Those seem to be the two most likely companies. Dr. Nestor hasn’t given me all the details, so. I thought I’d listen to what they have to say.”

“I see.” Louis’s tone was dry and quiet.

“Lou?” Harry sensed his change in mood. “What’s up?”

“Do you have anything else to tell me? Anything more specific?” Louis was crestfallen.

“Lou? I’m not sure what you want me to say. I am meeting the reps on this trip. Nothing’s been decided. That’s the truth.” Harry looked at Louis’s face openly, searchingly.

Louis turned his face away. Eastlander had said that he’d met with Harry. The reception tomorrow night was to reveal final details. Final details. Why was Harry being so evasive?

Louis tried to think of the best case scenario. Harry didn't want him to worry. There really hadn't been any decisions made. Yet the facts were undeniable. Harry had met months ago, with biotech. He might drop out of surgery altogether. He could leave Boston tomorrow. When was he going to tell Louis, exactly? He felt it completely acceptable to keep Louis in the dark. He had no problems with that. It seemed so simple to Harry.

Louis thought he had prepared himself for this possibility. From the time they had come back together, as a couple, Louis had been steeling himself for this very moment. How many nights had he lain in bed, pushing away the desire for something great? How many times had he looked at Harry and thought, let him go. He doesn’t belong to you. Even after Harry had given him a ring—not an engagement ring, Louis thought. It was pointedly not an engagement ring. Harry’s promise was just like this—in flux, vague. Full of possibility, but open-ended. Not a lie. Just not everything Louis wanted.

Harry’s love was infinite, but it was not exclusive. It was a net, one with large, loose holes, a porous love with the ebb and flow of flotsam and jetsam, the beauty mixed in with the sludge, the oil slicks producing gorgeous rainbows. Louis thought he could withstand the pain of this love. He thought he could accept the looseness of it. It flowed along beneath consciousness most of the time, but now and then the waters roared, the balance was lost, the looseness became chaos that spread, tore, destroyed.
“What are you thinking, darling?” Harry asked.

“I'm—maybe—a bit tired, Harry.”

“Don't be like that, Louis. I know you,” Harry took Louis’s elbow and turned them away from Dr. Nestor, angled their conversation away from the crowd. “This doesn't have anything to do with us.”

“Maybe we should not be having this discussion right now,” Louis murmured.

“Lou, please,” Harry looked back at Dr. Nestor. “Come out to dinner with me? You can be there. Hear the presentation. We can talk.”

Louis looked at Harry, at his puzzled face, eyes wide and crystalline, lips able to reduce him to a blithering idiot in seconds, his expression tentative and scared.

“I'm still jet-lagged, I think. I'm going to take a nap; maybe I'll feel better.”

Harry studied him for a moment.

“All right, then,” Harry replied. “I'm feeling kind of beat myself. Not sure whether I'm up for two-hour meetings, you know? Maybe we should just get room service.”

“No, no. There's no need. You go ahead with Dr. Nestor—you probably have some catching up to do. I'm so tired that if I go to dinner, I'd probably just fall asleep. The information is confidential, anyway; I'm sure he won't want me there. Just—go on.”

“Be honest. Are you really okay?” Harry stared at Louis with worry, but also something else, a trace of impatience, annoyance perhaps. Why couldn't Louis just say what he felt? Harry thought. What was this bullshit?


Harry looked back at Dr. Nestor, who was still waiting for him, and then at Louis again. Louis smiled at Harry reassuringly. Harry leaned in to give Louis a kiss on the cheek, and then let go of his hand. He turned to walk back to Dr. Nestor.

“Harry,” Louis heard Dr. Nestor say, “dinner is at Montiel, at 8, and we have a lunch meeting with Microtonics at Acces, at noon.”

Louis saw Harry focus his attention wholly on Dr. Nestor, his head craned toward the older man, his body disappearing as people walked between them. “Can you please text me those appointments?” Harry answered, his voice fading away. “I'll look them up on Google maps later…”

Louis walked toward the main lobby of the convention center. He was surrounded by noise and chaos, a deafening roar of people greeting each other, representatives shouting to meeting participants over the noise, the clangor of carts and chairs scraping the ground. Everywhere he looked, people walked by with lanyards holding magnetized name tags. Inside the convention halls, he saw large displays from various pharmaceutical, medical instrument, and textbook companies peddling their wares, from simple tables with instruments displayed to large, elaborate set-ups with multiple video monitors going at once, multimillion-dollar machines sitting on the floor for demonstration. Technology was a promise and a curse. It beckoned and it repelled. It promised so much, and brought so much strife.

Louis did not go into the convention hall. Nor did he go back to his hotel.
Instead, he called for a taxi to take him to the old city, directly at the end of La Rambla, near the Mirador de Colón.

He got out of the taxi and walked down the wide boulevard, cooling at the end of the day. The road was deeply shaded, the walkway dark crimson and purple from the setting sun. Barcelonans and tourists strolled along, taking pictures, eating snacks, buying souvenirs. People in costumes posed for photos with tourists. The Statue of Liberty. Marilyn Monroe, leaning out of the second-story balcony of the wax museum, waving to passersby, her beauty mark visible from the sidewalk. Michelangelo’s David, hand curled in languid and beautiful violence. The Mad Hatter from Alice in Wonderland. Just like years ago.

Along La Rambla, a line of portrait artists sat quietly, waiting to draw portraits. A young boy, about three-years-old, sat patiently, without fidgeting, as his portrait was being done. His mother sat next to him, chatting with him and occasionally taking photos. The portrait artist, an older, balding man, picked up a rose-colored pastel crayon and shaded the apples of his cheeks, a glint of pink in his pale, peach face. He dotted a soft gray color where his dimples curved in, recalling another boy’s cheek, another dimple, from long ago. The boy squinted his eyes in the setting sun. A parasol shaded the top of their heads, softening and muting the light. The artist told the boy a joke, and he smiled, but looked bored, wanting the session to end. His mother cupped his cheek and said something softly. The boy looked up at Louis. Louis smiled at him, then glanced away, embarrassed to intrude.

He walked north, trying to recall the lay of the land from thirteen years ago. The shops had changed, and, despite being a human compass, Louis did not remember the other landmarks very well. He recalled there was a street on the right, between a McDonald’s and a KFC, which somehow led to a large open square. After walking for another ten minutes, he found the fast food restaurants. He turned right, onto the Carrer de Ferran, then right again, and came upon the wide open Plaça Reial. The plaza was ringed with fin de siècle buildings to form a large, enclosed square, the open corridors housing restaurant tables with table cloths and linens. A slight breeze cooled the night. Incandescent lights made the corridors shine with a painterly elegance.

What difference did it make? He was in a city where he did not speak the language. What good would a map do? What good was a map to someone who chose never to use it?

Trust me. I never get lost. Stick with me, Haz.

Be with me. Don’t go.


Louis chose a restaurant at random and sat at an outdoor table. The waitress brought him the goblet of sangria that he ordered, along with bread, olive oil, and a plate of olives.

Spanish Manzanilla olives. Once experienced, never forgotten.

Birds were hopping for crumbs under the tables. Louis stared at the iron legs of the tables peeking out from under the table cloths, at the birds which hopped in and out, were simultaneously seen and unseen, there and not there. The Sparrow Window flashed into his mind, and with it, the stained glass windows he’d designed into Harry’s birthday banner. The paired swallows had turned toward each other on the banner, as on Harry’s chest, their motions complementary, equal, balanced.

He thought about what young Harry had said so long ago.

Everywhere. Everywhere, and nowhere. What was the difference?
You're either here or not here, thought Louis. He looked at his platinum ring, with the mother-of-pearl inlay, the beautiful inscription that, at the moment, inadvertently mocked him. He took off his ring and studied it. On the inside, his fingers felt the elegant curls of the writing.

Everywhere was nowhere. Wasn’t it? You were either present or not.

Here. Not everywhere. Just here, in this place, with one person.

With me. Be with me. Promise me.

Louis suspected that was never going to be a possibility. How could you ask a ghost to stay?

Love was not an excuse to abandon someone. A song was not enough. A slow dance was not enough. A poem was not enough.

Life was not “art.” It was great for the artist to love that way. But what about the person he loved? What about his Pygmalion?

That person didn’t want to participate in a goddamn artistic manifesto. That person didn't want to be someone’s muse on a pedestal, some fucking cow on a fucking Grecian urn.

That person wanted to be the real thing, to have the real thing. That person wanted trust and faith. That person wanted the truth. That person wanted to be a human being, to enjoy eating and laughing and fucking. To touch. To taste. To bite. To have a family. To be in the moment, living and dying with the person he chose. To be there, always.

One couldn’t use art, or spirituality, as an excuse to run away from reality. Using art like that was just being a gigantic asshole.

You were either here or not here.

Live like you mean it.

Love like you mean it.

Louis finished his drink and paid his bill. He stood up to walk back to the hotel. It was 8:37. Harry would be out to dinner, and would probably get back to the hotel late.

When he arrived in his room, Louis called the airline. There was a flight leaving in the morning, just after 10 AM, going back to Boston. He reserved a seat. He took off his ring and placed it in a complimentary envelope with the hotel insignia. Unzipping Harry’s bag, he found the red leather journal. He tucked the envelope inside the journal, undressed, and went to sleep.
Chapter 7

The room was the largest at the convention center, easily seating a thousand. Even so, only a few chairs at the back were unoccupied. There were as many attendees from academia as from industry. Harry paced in front of the podium, his notes in his hands. Dr. Nestor sat in the front row with colleagues from Johns Hopkins. Harry could see a group from MSH as well: Jess, Dr. Fernbank, Finn, and others, sitting a few row back, near the center aisle. He picked up a bottle of water and sipped.

The lights dimmed. Harry’s podium displayed the green light, the signal for him to start talking. The first slide flashed onto the screen.

“Good evening,” Harry started. “My name is Harry Styles. I’ll be speaking to you today on the work that I have done with Dr. Ulysses Nestor, at Johns Hopkins University, on the application of micro-robotics technology to coronary artery stenosis.”

Harry continued through the slides, focusing on the development of the technology, the refinement of computer programming as the hardware became more sophisticated. He transitioned toward the initial in vitro studies and then, more recently, to animal trials. He proudly stated that none of the study animals had been sacrificed.

Throughout his talk, Harry was acutely aware of the one person who was not there.

That morning, Harry’s phone alarm had woken him up. He had been out too late last night, had returned to a dark hotel room and undressed as quietly as possible. He had slipped into bed and caressed Louis’s cheek, the loose tendrils of hair at his temple. Louis had not stirred. His deep breathing showed he had been asleep for a while. Harry lay on his back and closed his eyes, and within minutes, had also fallen asleep. He had had no dreams. Both mind and body had been equally exhausted.

When he awoke, Louis’s side of the bed was empty. Harry pivoted slowly on his back, stretching his legs.

“Lou? Are you still here?”

He must have gone down to breakfast, Harry concluded. Odd, he hadn’t mentioned a talk he wanted to hear and it was only—Harry rolled over to check the clock—7:30 AM. Harry thought he would have a shower, maybe go for a run, try to catch some of the courses this morning, and check out any micro-robotics related exhibition booths. Maybe try to reset his circadian clock. It was 2:30 AM East Coast time.

Fuck, his head was in a cloud. He had had too many drinks last night, after the dinner meeting, when he had gone to a bar by himself to chill out. He just needed a little time to gather his thoughts, to have a drama-free, quiet, private moment. One martini (dirty, with Spanish olives, naturally) had turned into two, then three. His plane delay had already made him drunk with jet lag. He felt as if the last 24 hours had been a dream sequence, all the edges of the events blurry.

Louis’s mood was not something he wanted to confront right now. Maybe after today, but certainly not right now. He remembered going to Louis’s talk, then meeting with Nestor, getting his slides in order, practicing his speech once or twice with his mentor, and then dinner. After that, events in the dark of night had passed unremembered.
Harry dipped his head back on the pillow. Let Louis do the morning rounds. Harry didn't have anything urgent to do, and he could use another hour or two of snoozing.

Three hours later, Harry woke up again, sweat-covered, panicked that he was late for his lunch meeting. Louis still hadn't come back to the room. Harry swung his legs out of bed and sat for a moment, letting his head catch up to the rest of his body.

As Harry looked around the room, he realized something was off. His bag was on the floor, in front of the mini fridge and television, and his fedora and coat were thrown on top of a dresser, but something was missing. The room was too spacious, too neat. Where was Louis’s bag? Where were the rest of Louis’s things?

He wouldn't have checked in to another room, would he?

Harry realized that Louis had not been happy last night—he probably should have come back earlier and talked to him. But damn, he had been so tired, and he had this seminar today, and the meetings. It was just not the best time to have a potential drag-out fight.

Harry got up quickly and went to the en suite. His suspicions were confirmed. Louis’s toiletries were all gone.

Harry sighed. It was a terrible time for this. Why was Louis was so immature? Was it jealousy? Did he really need attention all the time, like a toddler? Did he really want constant reassurances, even though Harry had given them hundreds of times in the past? Harry had promised that they would discuss all future decisions together. He had invited Louis to dinner. Louis could have listened in and given his opinion. What else did he want?

*Always try your best, Louis had said, on First Night, in Boston. Don't put yourself second. I'm happiest when I see you succeed.*

And it was just before that almost-traffic accident. Harry’s memory spooled back involuntarily, like scenes in a movie.

Louis had always protected Harry. He led, Harry followed. Harry had counted on his support, because it had always been there. Louis acted, Harry reacted. Harry’s psyche did a mental full twist to process the possibility that their roles had reversed.

Harry considered the situation and decided to wait before sending Louis a text. It was nearly 11 AM. He had to get ready for the luncheon. He went to his bag and began taking out clean underwear, socks.

Something was stuck in his journal. Harry hated things getting jammed in there, wrinkling the pages. He pulled the book out and saw an envelope, blank, with the hotel insignia, tucked between the pages. His heart dropped into his stomach.

There was no note inside the envelope. Harry swept his finger. Something small weighted it down.

The ring fell out. Harry’s mind felt blank for an instant. Then he felt a string of feelings: nausea, panic, confusion, annoyance, anger.

There was no time. Harry put the envelope in his bag, grabbed his clean clothes, and headed to the shower.

At lunch, Harry could only pay half-hearted attention to what was going on around him. He glanced at his phone every few minutes, to the point where Dr. Nestor and the biotech reps were aware of his
“Sorry,” he apologized. “Expecting a call from home.”

That wasn't a lie. Not really.

After lunch, he made a Skype call to Louis, only to get voicemail. Where was he? Harry knew, by then, that Louis hadn't merely been sulking. He was Tomlinson-mad, angry for the ages. His anger would brew like a poisonous potion and rupture as bitter as it was vehement. But Harry still had no idea what triggered it. One minute he had been fine, the next he was gone like smoke, untraceable.

The hours passed. Harry almost texted Niall or Liam, to see whether they could check on Louis. But they were at work, and it was too much to ask—too personal, too embarrassing.

The seminar finished, Harry waded through the crowd of people still waiting to talk to him, leaving them to Dr. Nestor. His jet lag was kicking in again. He picked up two bottles of water and left the conference room, ignoring the people calling his name. He stepped around the entrance to the reception. Fuck it. He couldn't go in.

He drank a bottle of water, and walked out into the crepuscular warmth of a Barcelona spring night. It was neither light nor dark, an in-between limbo of penumbra. Harry’s mind was alert, wary, irritated, yearning. Tomorrow he would fly home to Boston. It seemed like half his heart had already left.

He got a taxi and took it to Plaça Catalunya. He started to walk south on La Rambla.

The impressively preserved, enormous remnant of the Roman wall stood to the right. It had protected the old city for more than two thousand years. Perhaps long after Harry’s death, a boy will see the wall and imagine all the people who had stood under it, having conversations about the right price for oranges, the weather that week, the best shop for chocolates and churros.

Further south, the doors to La Boqueria were closed. Harry imagined large sheets covering the fresh figs and spices, Iberian hams hanging in the dark from hooks in the ceiling, seafood stored in large, stainless steel refrigerators. The hum of humanity walking through such a space during the daytime had ebbed outside, into outer space maybe, just useless, reverberating energy, sine waves fluctuating with time, peaking in the day, lulling at night.

Yeah, I think I’ve heard of White Eskimo.

What's your best song, then, Harry?

...Better Than Words...

...were wondering if you’d want hang out together...

...Harry is trying to be incognito on the tour... It's risky for him....

The ghosts of their younger selves seemed to hover and laugh in the darkness, their voices above the crowd, whispers in the wind. Harry felt as if he was being watched or pitied from above, by invisible angels.

How fucked-up am I? Fucking hallucinating.

Harry turned left into the Carrer de la Portaferrissa. After meandering down a few narrow streets, he stood in front of the gothic Catedral de Barcelona. It loomed in the sky, more a vision of the
underworld than of heaven, its gothic spires twisted, complex, the silhouettes of gargoyles like animal trophies frozen above. The exterior of the cathedral, intricate and beautiful in the daytime, held layers of shadows—mysteries buried in mysteries, the transformation of human misery into prayer.

There were no crowds at this time of night, just small groups of people chatting and hanging out in the square, in front of the wide steel fence and closed doors. Some teenagers were playing hacky sack and skateboarding.

Harry felt as if the buildings were pressing in, pinning him to the ground. The large cathedral seemed to shout at him, ask him incoherent questions. Strangely, he felt as if he were being watched. Again and again, he turned his head to look to his side, but saw nothing, no one. It was the oddest feeling, almost as if he were being followed.

*I'm too tired. There are too many layers here.*

*Just let me breathe. Free me.*

A choir sang in the background. Their voices rose and fell in interrogation. It was a lovely acapella chorus that sang in four-part harmony, modulating by chromatic steps in the late Romantic style. The rises and falls of the notes painted an imaginary mountain in the evening air.

*I don't know, Harry’s mind shouted back. I don't know where to go from here.*

*I don't know what you expect of me. I'm trying my best. Isn't that enough?*

*Help me.*

*Teach me how I should forget to think.*

Harry walked around desolately. Blue and green waves tumbled in his mind, crashed and escaped. They invaded the deepest part of him, inundated his core.

*Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,*

*Takes me to you, imprison me, for I,*

*Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,*

*Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.*

The lights of the square shined dimly, small halos of rainbows weakly surrounding each bulb. Harry looked up into the sky. The city was too bright. All the stars were muted. There were no constellations to see, only smudges of violet and gray, panels of dragon clouds, a shy moon. The moon shone as it had years ago, as it had in Roman times, as it had in the French Quarter, as it had on Christmas Eve, a silent witness to everything that had been and ever will be.
It was two days after Harry’s seminar. He had flown back to Boston the day after.

Louis had not answered any of his texts. Phone calls had gone straight to voice mail. Harry tried to find him in the hospital, but he was equally elusive. Harry knew Louis was doing his pediatric rotation. He should have been in the pediatric wing of the hospital, or, if in surgery, assisting the pediatric surgeons. In the mid-morning, Harry had casually strolled through the pediatric floors, but didn’t see Louis nor any of the other residents.

Frankie was the second-year resident on the pediatric rotation. Harry bumped into her in the cafeteria when he was grabbing a sandwich.

“Frankie, have you seen Louis today?”

“Yeah, he was at rounds,” she said. “Why?”

“I wanted—to talk to him,” Harry stammered.

“He should be scrubbed in to Miyamoto’s hernia this afternoon,” Frankie said. “I hope he’s awake. He looked like shit this morning.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like, his eyes were bloodshot and he almost fell asleep. Man goes to ISC one time and probably partied too hard. Hey, weren't you at ISC, Harry? Did you see him there?”

“Yeah, I did.” Harry said. “That’s what I wanted to talk to him about. Some stuff I learned at the conference.”

“Well, I’ll tell you what,” Frankie said. “I don't think Louis learned a thing. I asked him about it, and he almost bit my head off.”

Harry kept a cool demeanor. “Really? What did he say?”

“Told me to mind my own damn business. What the hell? I was only asking about surgery. That is my business, asshole. What happened in Barcelona, anyway?”

Harry grimaced. “Not sure, Frankie. Louis’s talk went really well. I was there. Then he just took off without telling anyone, came back here early.”

“Well, I can tell you for a fact, he didn’t come back to work early. He just started back today. I just assumed he had come straight from the airport because he looked so terrible. I almost asked if he was sick or something.”

“Where has he been then?”

“Hell if I know, Harry. I'm not asking him. I'm not touching that rabid dog with a ten-foot pole. Hey,” Frankie touched Harry’s arm. “How did your seminar go? Are you a millionaire yet? Are you the next Elon Musk?”

“It went well enough, I think,” Harry said. “Anyway, I better go, Frankie. Thanks for your help.”

“Yeah, no problem. Louis should be with Miyamoto this afternoon.”

“Do you know if he’s on call tonight?”
“He’s not,” Frankie sighed. “Unfortunately, I am.”

Harry thanked her again and took off.

Harry did not have a spare moment that day to run down to surgery. He was on the oncology rotation, and three patients had been admitted with bowel obstruction that day, all three needing surgery. He ran around admitting them and getting them ready, and then finished his work on all the other patients on service. By the time he was done, it was past 6 PM. After checking out with the resident on call, Harry changed out of his scrubs and went to the parking garage.

It was worth a try.

He sent out a text.

No answer. Harry got into his car.

***

After Louis came home from Barcelona, he did nothing. He did not unpack, did not return phone calls or texts, did not log on to the computer.

He had not slept at all on the airplane, though he wanted to. He wished he could take something to sleep for the next forty-eight hours. His body felt as if it had skipped beyond sleep into the next phase, near-death. Semi-coma. Mental paralysis.

He felt as if he had no agency and no will power. It was as if Harry’s decision not to tell him about Microtonics took away Louis’s capacity for self-determination. He was not due to go back to work for two days.

Screw it, he was going to have a mini-vacation.

He bought a bottle of vodka and a half gallon of orange juice, then filled a hydration bottle with ice, dumped vodka and juice into it. At the last minute, he threw in a maraschino cherry and a sprig of mint. It was a vacation, goddamn it. He sat in his apartment, watching comedies on television without absorbing much, drinking his celebratory screwdriver. After he had gotten comfortably, numbingly drunk, he realized it was after midnight, and he had a headache.

Louis sat in the semi-darkness, the apartment lit with only his reading light. His phone buzzed with voice mail and text messages. He shut it off and chucked it into a drawer. He shed his clothes and took two ibuprofen tablets, got into bed.

A few hours later, Louis woke up with severe stomach cramps. Alcohol and ibuprofen did not mix
well. A sick feeling hovered below his throat. He barely made it to the toilet in time to empty his stomach, retching wave after wave. He put his head on the side of the cool bathtub, suffering his hangover. After half an hour, he finally dragged himself back to bed.

He slept most of the next day. In the afternoon, Louis chugged a glass of water and went for a walk. Impulsively, he bought five new video games. It was a vacation, wasn't it? He stopped by a fast food burger joint and got dinner to go. At home, he took out his phone and flicked it on. There had been more than twenty text messages from Harry, and a voice mail message.

Louis, where are you? Are you all right?

Lou, talk to me. I miss you.

Lou, it's midnight. Seven your time, I think. Just about to turn in. You ok?

I'll be home soon. XOXO

This is silly. Come on, answer me.

I'm sorry. I'm not sure what I did. Call me, please?

He clicked on the speaker for the voice mail message.

“Hi, Lou. It's Harry. Not sure where you are. I'm at the airport, just waiting to board. I'll—uh—I'll see you when I get home, okay? Love you. Miss you.”

The next day, Louis showered, brushed his teeth half-heartedly, and went to work. He was in pediatric surgery, and Harry, he knew, was in oncology. They were in different wings of the hospital. It was easy for Louis to avoid bumping into Harry. After he signed out with Frankie, Louis took the T home.

Louis was playing his fifth game of FIFA for the night when he heard a knock on the door. He had had three beers and no dinner, and at first was unsure whether the knocking was real. He hadn't buzzed anyone in—it must be someone with a key, or someone who had come in when the common door was opened downstairs. It wasn't hard to guess who.

Louis opened the door in his sweats and wool socks. Two days unshaven, sclera rimmed with burst blood vessels. Louis left the door wide opened and walked back in, not waiting for it to close.

Harry followed him in, looking not much better. He had come right after work, without stopping for dinner. He tried to catch Louis's eyes, but Louis was being deliberately cagey, avoiding eye contact, offering no greeting.

“Louis—“

Harry cleared his throat. Louis turned around.

“Would you like a beer, Harry? I have some orange juice, I think. Vodka. Cereal. Sorry, but I haven't gone grocery shopping.”

Harry’s eyes were a turbulent green. “Can we talk?”

Louis sat down on the sofa. “Sure, I’m listening.”

Harry stood close to the entrance of the door. They were far apart—so far apart that they had to raise their voices.

“I'm sorry, Harry. For not answering your texts. I just thought—it would be better to do this in person.”

“I see,” Harry said. He stepped inside, closing the door. “I was worried about you, Lou. You took off, and I don't even know where you went. No note. No explanation.”

“Harry,” Louis sighed, “do you remember the first night we spent together, in New Orleans?”

“The oyster tour.”

“Yeah.” Louis couldn't help feeling warmth at the memory. “I started to talk to you, and then I didn't. I held back. I think I should have, a long time ago. It would have—maybe—saved a lot of heartache.”

“Why? What do you mean?”

“I think we're—we're like two stars that collided into each other. There was an explosion, and we stuck together. It was such a forceful attraction, we didn't even think it through—whether we were right for each other. We just enjoyed it so much.”

“That's why I don't get it, Lou. We got along so well, right away. Why would you even question…and why do you question it now?”

“Infatuation is a powerful feeling, Harry,” Louis said. “It keeps you going for a long time.”

“But it's not infatuation. Not for me.”

Harry's face was pale. His expression was one of confusion.


“What is this?” Harry asked. “Why are you acting this way?”

“Describe me,” Louis said.

“What? Are you kidding me?”

Louis shook his head. “Describe me as if you're talking to a stranger. Describe how you feel about me.”

Harry paced distractedly. Louis was completely off his rockers. Harry didn't want to play this stupid game. He wasn't here for debate. He just wanted his man back.

“Come on, Louis. For God’s sakes.”

“Alright, I'll describe you,” Louis said. His face was cold and firm.

Despite his hesitation, despite his feeling that such a task was not only impossible but would irrevocably affect their relationship, Harry was masochistically curious to hear Louis’s words about him.

“You're a star. A super nova. You're so bright, everything in your vicinity is reduced to ashes.”
Louis paused. “Everybody wants you. You’re hot and smart and charming. It's hard for you to see it, but when I get one step closer to you, you go two steps further away. You don't even see it. You can't.”

“But you are close. I keep you next to me, always.” Harry paced and then walked into the room. “Is this about the biotech companies? I was going to tell you as soon as there was any news. I didn't know anything until I had talked to Nestor, until I actually got to Barcelona. I was just as much in the dark as you were.”

“And before that? When you were asked to present your seminar? Thanksgiving?” Louis narrowed his eyes. Harry read his silent anger, and flinched at his implication.

“I told you about the seminar,” Harry said with quiet anger.

“Not until I asked,” Louis said. They stared at each other challengingly.

“Louis, let me ask you something. Do you remember what you said on First Night? You wanted me to do my best. Not to put myself second.” Harry snarled, “Did you mean any of that, at all?”

“Don't you dare use my words against me, Harry,” Louis retorted. “Not when you’re being so blatantly dishonest.”

“Are you insane? I’ve told you everything, as much as I could. Are you—jealous?”

“Ah, no, Harry, not jealous. Maybe I should be, but I’m not. I know my own worth—I know I have value. Don't you worry about me.”

“Then what is it?”

“Harry, don’t you see? We can't go on like this—one person being the center of everything and not able to see why that's a problem, and the other person like star dust—or like an unlucky asteroid belt or something—smashing everything that comes close, trying to protect the star, but getting hurt in the process. Shit, I'm not explaining this well at all.”

“That’s right, Louis. I don't get you at all. It sounds like bullshit,” Harry said. “Your metaphors just got sucked into a black hole.” Harry gazed at Louis.

Louis had to look down. He was furious. Harry loved his damn puns so much, even during the most intense heartbreak, he had to go there, make that joke. It was an endearing trait, but it was also maddening, the fact that Harry stuck to his habits. It just showed Louis how Harry wasn't capable of change.

“Harry, listen,” Louis said. “What I said before, about being in love with you.”

Harry's head jerked up. “Yeah?”

“I meant it. I am in love with you. Always. So much, so deeply. I love everything about you—even the pain.” Louis’s voice wavered.

Harry took steps toward Louis. He wanted to comfort Louis, and himself. Why was it so hard to save you? Why the drama? What the hell was happening?

Louis composed himself. “But I can't be on the outside, Harry. I can't be the one sticking my face to the glass window, always trying to figure out what’s going on, two steps behind you. It's not fair.”
“Lou! I want you there with me!” Harry clawed his hair in exasperation. “I do. I’m not trying to keep you away. I’ve tried so hard to let you in. Oh, God! How did we even get here?”

Louis pressed his lips together. His emotions overwhelmed his capacity for words.

“Lou, I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Everywhere, every day. I want that. Don’t you?”

“Do you? Haz, I hear you, but I don't think you hear yourself. Are you in love with me? Or are you in love with the notion of being in love? You're a romantic, Harry. People who love each other keep nothing from each other—not life-altering decisions. Maybe you just like the feeling of being in love? Am I just a character in your love life? Will you take off when it's convenient for you?”

Harry paced back and forth in Louis’s living room. He couldn’t believe this asinine argument. Where had it come from? Why was he being like this? Was it just the talk of going to Baltimore? But there was a way to work it out, surely. Why was Louis speaking in hypotheticals? He was being such a prick. Harry felt more and more angry. Selfish, selfish prick.

“What fucking difference does it make?” Harry shouted. “You’re the one taking off. Running away. You're the one being unreasonable. I'm being as honest as I can. I don't know what else to say. What do you expect—some sort of perfect relationship, where nothing ever goes wrong?”

“No!” Louis shouted back. “Did you even hear me?”

Harry looked at Louis for several seconds. It seemed they crossed a line, somehow, broke a wire. It lay with frayed, live ends.

“Do I have to chase you every time?” Harry said, angrily. “Why am I not enough for you? Why do I have to justify every fucking thing? My career? My work choices? Isn't it enough to have the chance for love? Most people never get that.”

“It's not,” Louis answered, just as angrily, but also resigned. “You talk about the chance for love. It's not enough. I want the real thing. Real love, Harry. Honesty. I want us to both be there, to meet in the middle. I wonder if you even know the difference. The chance for love, Harry?” Louis emphasized his bitterness at this phrase. “Love that's on some sort of pedestal? No. Take it down and taste it, punch it. Touch it. Live it. Love isn't hypothetical. It's real and it's dirty, and you live with it, you work with it. The chance for love can go fuck itself.”

“What? You're—” Harry was incredulous. He could see something in the distance. The end. “You're kidding me. You’re just playing with words. Goddamn it, Louis. What’s the matter with you? You make me sound like some kind of monster. I'm not. I know what real love is. I love you just as much. I can't believe—we even have to compare. Fucking ridiculous!”

Louis’s silence was all the answer Harry dreaded.

“You're wrong, Louis. I see you. I see you more clearly than you see yourself. Why do you do this—put boundaries on what we can be?”

“The boundaries were always there, Harry,” Louis said. “We just tried to ignore them. I did, anyhow.”

“You're impossible! You’re throwing away our chance to be together—because of some idiotic line you’ve set, that isn't even there!”

“I know the difference between real love and imaginary love, Harry. It's not idiotic. I didn't make it
up. I still love you. So much, you can't even imagine it,” Louis paused. “I would die for you. I wish I didn't. It would make my life, and yours, so much easier. It would make this so much easier. “

“What?”

Louis looked at Harry somberly.

“Louis, you can't.” Harry looked up. His eyes welled. “You've argued us into a corner. Get us out of the fucking corner. That's not you, not me. That's not us.” Harry breathed in deeply. “I won't let you run away again.”

“Harry,” Louis said steadily, “I can't do this anymore.”

“Then don't. Please, Louis.” Harry’s eyes fixed on Louis’s, imploring him. “Let it rest. Let’s both calm down.”

Louis shook his head.

“I can't, Harry. I tried, so hard.” Louis looked down. “I loved you. I loved you so completely. I always did. I can't stop. And I’m being destroyed by it.”

Harry crossed the room and took Louis’s hands in his own.

“Louis. Don't do this,” Harry said. “Don’t say things you’ll regret. If you want us to break up, it’ll be for good. I can’t—I don't think I can do this again.”

Louis looked up at Harry’s face. His eyes glistened, but his lips were firmly set in a tight line. The tears dampened and entangled his eyelashes. Louis dropped Harry’s hands. He walked to the front door and opened it.

Harry glared at Louis, hoping it was all a nightmare, waiting for him to say something. Louis stared back silently.

After a long moment, Harry Styles walked out of Louis Tomlinson’s life.

***

Dr. Fernbank wheeled around to face Harry.

“A few questions, Styles. How’s internship treating you?”

They were meeting after-hours, in Dr. Fernbank’s office. Harry had received a text to come by after his work was done. In a way, it was a funny question for Dr. Fernbank to ask, since there were only six weeks of internship left. The spring had gone by in a blink—the interns were almost ready to
graduate to their second year. They would no longer be the greenest doctors in the hospital. They were between the chartreuse sprouts of medical school and the dark evergreens of the chief residents. There was no such green for them.

“I've enjoyed internship, Dr. Fernbank. And learned so much. MSH was the best place I could have come to. I'm certain of it.”

“Well, that's good to hear. You're wondering why you're here.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Harry, you're the last of three interns I wanted to chat with. The other two interns have made their wishes known to me. So I want to hear what you have to say.”

“Sir?”

“Let's not beat around the bush. What are you doing next year?”

His question stopped Harry in his tracks. Dr. Fernbank knew that Harry was supposed to continue in the general surgery residency. The fact that he asked the question meant he was aware Harry might not stay.

“I am planning to continue my residency, Dr. Fernbank. I don't have any plans to the contrary.”

“No?” Dr. Fernbank raised an eyebrow. “You sure?”

Harry's eyes fell away from his gaze. “I will be honest, Dr. Fernbank. I have been offered other opportunities.”

“Uly Nestor? Or biotech?”

Harry bit his lip. Dr. Fernbank was nothing if not direct.

“Both,” Harry said.

“And?”

“I'm considering the offers,” Harry said. “Actually, no paperwork has come through from biotech. It's all hand-waving at the moment.”

“And Hopkins?”

“If not for research,” Harry said, “there's no reason for me to change course.”

“Contract negotiations can be slow,” Dr. Fernbank said. “Do you have legal help?”

“Not yet,” said Harry. “Dr. Nestor has been handling everything up to this point. I suppose if actual contracts are printed, I will have to ask someone to take a look. I would appreciate advice then.”

“Harry, this is a treacherous area,” said Dr. Fernbank. “You should get a lawyer, and early, even if it costs you some money. Biotech companies can be very malignant. I'm just telling you standard advice.”

“Thank you for that.”

“Take it from someone with more than enough experience,” Dr. Fernbank said wryly.
“Earlier, you mentioned two other interns,” Harry asked. “What do they have to do with me?”

“I need to know your intentions,” Dr. Fernbank continued, “because you are one of three interns to whom the cardiothoracic fellowship might be offered. The medical staff like you. They think highly of your skills, Styles. You’d be an asset to the department. But not if you’re planning to leave.”

“I see,” Harry contemplated. “I feel honored, sir.”

“You should. But then, you are a rare one.”

“May I ask, sir?”

“Harry?”

“Who are they,” Harry said, “the other two interns? If you’re allowed to tell me.”

Dr. Fernbank laughed. “Nice try, Styles. You’ll find out eventually. They don’t know about you, either—though anyone familiar with the department could probably guess.”

Harry was silent for a moment. “Is one of them Louis Tomlinson?”

Dr. Fernbank’s startled face told him everything he needed to know.

“It is, isn’t it?” Harry pressed.

“I can't confirm that,” Dr. Fernbank said. “Tell me why you are interested.”

Harry pressed his lips together. He cleared his throat, swallowed, and breathed deeply. It was still so hard to talk about him. Everything was a raw wound.

“He will be your best candidate,” Harry finally said, “in my opinion.”

“Oh?” Dr. Fernbank could not suppress his delight or surprise. “Not that he is one of the three, but why would you say that?”

“Louis is clearly superior,” Harry quietly stated. “Have you seen him operate? He’s steady, calm, smooth. He doesn't operate like an intern.”

“As you know, Harry, technical talent, while important, is but one attribute we consider. Technique is something that can be trained—it's our wheelhouse.”

Harry, gathering courage, spoke with his hands. “Louis is ethical. And he is a leader. Other interns look up to him and trust him. Patients like him. I know that doesn't count for much in academics,” Harry’s hand raised to stop Dr. Fernbank's objection. “It doesn't. I know that. But Louis takes good care of his patients.”

“You seem very invested in your point of view.”

“Well,” said Harry, “let’s talk about what does matter in academics. Research, right? Being a leader in the field. Louis’s research is top notch. In fact, I know it is promising enough to attract tech interest. You must know that, too. It's going to become a big part of surgical advancement. It's transformative.”

“Harry, thank you for your input,” said Dr. Fernbank. “Coming from someone who works with him, it is invaluable to the committee. I do appreciate your candor, you know. However.”
“However?”

“You don’t get to decide, Harry. That’s a job for us, for the committee. Not for you.”

“Yes, sir,” said Harry, embarrassed. “It’s not my place. I know what I say doesn’t matter, but—I had to say it. It’s important to me. I’m deeply grateful that I’m under consideration, sir. It’s just—”

“You’re telling me you don’t want it.”

Harry hesitated. “No, that’s not it, sir.”

“You do want it?”

“I think Louis is a better candidate, that’s all,” Harry struggled. “I believe that.”

Dr. Fernbank watched Harry’s face, watched as Harry broke eye contact, gazed to the side, unwilling to engage, watched as emotions rose to Harry’s face and were quickly clamped down.

“Harry,” Dr. Fernbank said, in his forthright manner. “I don’t ever interfere in private affairs, you know that.”

Harry looked at him, his lips parted in slight surprise at the turn of conversation.

“I'm not going to interfere. Just to say that the committee gets to decide about the fellowship. That's our job. We do our job, and nothing else.” Dr. Fernbank folded his hands on his lap. “Everything else is up to you.”

Harry did not answer.

“In academics, we have a saying, Harry. Defend your belief. When you have the data to support your beliefs, defend them vigorously. Stand your ground. Defend something that you believe in, especially something you’ve worked hard for. It seems pretty clear to me what your beliefs are.”

Harry’s cheeks glowed. Was it that obvious?

“That advice works in real life, too,” Dr. Fernbank said. “I don't like to butt in. I see interns come, and interns go. It's rare to find two people with this much talent, who are so at loggerheads with each other when they should, theoretically, be best friends. I'm selfishly saving the department, Harry, in a way.”

Harry let out a miserable laugh.

Dr. Fernbank continued. “You are a persistent person, Harry. I don't think you’d be surprised to learn that I trust you. I trust you to do the right thing. Think what you would want to have decided ten years from now—and what you would regret. Then the important things will fall in place for you. All right. Let me know if you have any other questions, okay?”

“Yes, sir.” Harry paused before he stood up. “Dr. Fernbank?”

“Yes, Harry?”

“Thank you,” he said.

“You’re welcome. Stay safe out there. Have a good night.”
It was one of those spring Saturdays that was too warm, as if winter had skipped right into summer. Louis walked along, bored, with Liam, Alice, and Niall, hanging out at the least authentic, least historic place in Boston.

Faneuil Hall swarmed with tourists. It would be even worse in a few weeks, as summer vacation started in earnest. The sprained ankles, Louis thought. The cuts and bruises. The bar fights. It was all going to start soon.

They walked past shops selling chowder and seafood on the raw bar, pretzels, candy, sandwiches and beer, candles and memorabilia.

“You guys hungry?” Alice asked. They had to shout to be heard over the noise.

“Kinda sleepy,” Liam said. “Call was not fun last night. Could use a coffee.”

“Me too,” said Niall, “with, like, six shots of espresso.”

“Can't believe it,” Alice said. “Four more weeks. Then we’re done.”

“What a year,” Liam said. “I feel like we made history. You know, like, we’re part of the lore of MSH.”

They shuffled their way to Starbucks, in the North building, and placed their orders. Despite her carbohydrate-phobic misgivings, Alice ordered a orange-cranberry scone. Internship did that; it made one crave comfort wherever possible.

It was a contradiction. The challenges one encountered built up one’s confidence immeasurably, yet the compensations one made to accommodate them were relentless—the bad diets, the constant blows to self-esteem, the sleep deprivation, the reliance on adrenaline to function, the chemical stimulation with caffeine—and other things, like alcohol, amongst others.

Most interns made it through medical school because of their intelligence and their relentless drive, but intelligence did not always carry through to their emotional lives. What an irony it was, that they were so thoroughly, compulsively educated in the human body, yet no one had taught them the basic foundations of finding and keeping companionship. There was really no textbook for that shit.

And, years, sometimes decades, later, this deficiency would show up on the many divorces, unhappy breakups, fights and disappointments. They were most confused about love when most in the prime to experience it.

Niall nudged Louis. “Hey, cheer up, man.”

Louis sipped his Earl Grey with a half-inch of milk. “Me? I'm all right. Don't worry about me. But Ni, I do have to tell you something.”
“What is it?”

“It’s about you,” Louis said. “I never get to say it, Niall James, but I’m really thankful for you.”

“What brings this on, then?” Niall said skeptically.

“Nothing,” Louis turned his face away. “I just realized—you guys are the best part of internship. We, as a group. I’ll never forget us. I mean it. Fuck everything else.”

Niall watched Louis, his fringe obscuring one eye, the lashes hiding the rest. His face was thinner, more gaunt than at the start of internship. Louis seemed to have lost weight in the last few months. He held his cup with thin hands and slim fingers.

“Louis,” Niall said slowly, carefully. “He’s going to come around. You know that?”

Louis bit his lips and looked down.

“Have you talked to him recently?” Niall asked. “Jesus Christ, I sound like a broken record, like my mother. Bring her around, Niall. Why don’t I get to meet her, Niall.”

“Don’t, Niall. I’m being sincere. I never would have met you guys if it weren’t for general surgery. I know we’ll be friends for a long time. You never forget this—all of this. It’s more precious than anything.”

“I know. This shit we’re complaining about?” Niall said loudly, above all the noise. “It’s part of me. Part of us, I should say. I know we’ll go our own ways but—like you said, we’ll always share this.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Liam joined them with his coffee.

“A little mutual admiration society over here,” Niall said. “Just saying how much we appreciate each other, this,” Niall gestured, spreading his arms out, “internship, our friendships, the whole thing.”

“I have to agree,” said Liam. “The worst of times, the best of times. We’ve seen it all, been there for each other.”

Alice set down her mocha chip frappuccino and opened the bag with the scone inside. “Yeah, but there’s one person missing,” she said.

Niall looked at her.

“What? Someone has to say it,” she said. “Isn’t it true, though? Harry should be here and you know it.”

“Alice,” Niall said. Louis glanced at them with a frown.

“I’m sorry if I’ve kept Harry out of your friendships—“ Louis started.

“Louis, don’t,” Liam said. “You know that’s not true. We love you. And we love Harry. It’s not a war. We don’t have to choose sides. Do we?”

Louis looked down again, playing with his hands. “Course not.”

Niall coughed obviously, trying to deflect tension. “So, what do you all think? Lunch at the Trestle?”

Alice said, “This is silly, Louis. What the hell happened between you? I mean, okay, it’s none of my business. But you guys are the closest thing to family for me, and I have nothing and no one else in
this city, so, yeah, it kind of is my business. You’re like my brother, Louis. And when something makes you dead inside, I think we need to discuss.”

“Alice has a point,” Liam said. “We’re here, Lou, if you want to talk about it.”

“We’re not forcing you though,” Niall added.

They focused their attention on Louis, everyone waiting for him.

Louis looked at them appreciatively. “Group intervention, huh?”

“Whatever you want to call it,” Niall said. “We’re here for you.”

Louis groaned. “All right, then. I’ll talk about it someday, okay? You guys are really nice, but you drive me around the bend. This,” he gestured between them, “is forced therapy. Not that I don’t appreciate it; I do. But I just can’t talk about it yet. Thanks, though.”

“Lou,” Niall prompted, “it’s killing him, too.”

“You don’t know that,” Louis muttered softly, too soft for anyone to hear.

“Think about it from his perspective,” Niall said. “Harry is generally a very positive person. He’s been different recently.”

“It’s been hard working with him,” Liam said. “I mean, watching him. He’s always professional, you know that. But Harry’s walking around with some chains around him—he’s dragging. He’s not in the best form.” Louis pinched his lips, not looking at any of them.

“Talk to him, Louis,” Alice said. “He wants you to. I can tell.”

“He said never,” Louis said. “Never again. It was so bad—you weren’t there.”

The friends nodded sympathetically. As usual, everyone looked to Louis for a solution, only this times, Louis was both the commanding general and his own worst enemy.

They moved sluggishly through Faneuil Hall, the crowds forcing them to travel in sort of a humanized Brownian motion. Dust motes danced in the light from above. People shouted their orders for roast beef sandwiches, Italian subs, pepperoni pizza.

Heartbreak and food and coffee, the holy trinity.

In his best imitation-Sean Connery voice, Niall said to Louis, “Hey Lou,” he arched an eyebrow. “Never say never again.”

***
Louis had walked past the shop every time he went down the street to the convenience store. He had never paid much attention to it. It was a street-level shop, wedged between a dry cleaner and a UPS store, and there was a whiff of something illicit and dangerous about it, as if people were in the back smoking weed or doing drugs or something. *Come on, Louis,* he thought to himself. *Don't assume.*

Then the surgeon in him thought, *Probably a fair assumption. Just make sure the equipment's sterile.*

He paused at the sidewalk and looked through the darkened windows. He could dimly see a receptionist at the front, her hair pitch black, in a Betty Boop cut, wearing a burgundy skirt, black leggings, and Doc Marten boots. The long sleeves of her shirt were pushed up both arms. She wore a graphic T-shirt over a long-sleeved T. Louis couldn't make out the design. She walked to the back of the store, her back turned toward the window, talking to someone. Then she returned to the front again.

Louis screwed up his nerve and took a deep breath. He had never done this before. He looked at the picture on the paper in his hand. He had stood here twice before, and each time changed his mind and left, thinking, *I can always do it later. But once done, I can't ever take it back.*

A person came out of the shop. It was a man with a black biker jacket, lean and ruddy, in his late forties, Louis thought. He saw Louis standing in front of the doorway. He held the door for Louis, “You coming in, bud?”

Louis jumped, “Yeah, thanks.” The man left, and Louis was left holding the door open. *Now or never,* he thought. The receptionist looked up from her jet-black bangs, curious. She had a silver ring pierced through her right nostril, and another ring through the right side of her lower lip.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

Louis stammered, “I—I guess. Um—I’m uh—“

The receptionist waited. She chewed gum silently, watching Louis.

“I’d like to talk to someone,” Louis said, “about a tattoo.”

“First time?” the receptionist chewed.

“Yes,” he said.

“Okay,” she said. “Can you come up here?”

Louis came to the counter. He marveled at the small shop. A radio played 1970’s and 1980’s rock. U2 was on, *With or Without You.* The walls were covered with designs, some as small as a thumb print, others large enough to cover a person from head to toe. They varied from black and white to rainbows of color. For a moment, he was tempted to walk around and browse, as if he were shopping for new clothes.

“Can you fill this out?” the receptionist gave him a multi-page form on a clipboard. “Name and address up here. Your contact info. Any medical conditions, medicines you’re taking, allergies. Your doctor’s name, if you have one. Next of kin, here, or whoever you want us to contact in an emergency.”

“What sort of emergency could there be?” Louis asked.
“You’d be surprised,” she looked at him blankly.

“Do people ever pass out?”

“You’d be surprised.”

Louis waited a beat, but she had no more to add.

“Is it—I mean, I know it hurts but—is it very painful?”

“Nah,” she said, rolling up her T-shirt to show Louis a whole sleeve of tattoos. “It’s like a tiny sting. Like getting poked with a thumb tack, a few thousand times over. It’s not that bad.” Her arm showed an intricate and, Louis thought, quite beautiful design of a tall tree, with blacks, greens, blues, and reds, leaves spreading out to encompass all sides of her upper arms, and vines down below. Around the trunk, there was a halo of floating letters, scripture. There was an inscription citing the biblical book and verse. His fruit was sweet to my taste. Song of Solomon 2:3.

“That’s lovely,” he said.

“Four sessions,” she said. “Six hours. Was lucky I got a discount from the boss—he was trying out new equipment, so. Would have been a couple of thousand bucks otherwise. No way could I pay for that.”

“I brought my own design. Do they ever work from that?”

“Depends,” she says. “He’ll look at it. Let’s see it.”

Louis gave her the paper he had been holding. She stared at it for while, then handed it back him.

“Probably not gonna be a problem,” she said. “I’ve seen him do designs like that before.”

“Ok, thanks.” Louis took the clipboard and sat down in a chair, filling the information out. There was long list of medical conditions to check yes or no, and then a waiver to absolve the shop of any liability from complications and dissatisfaction. Finally, Louis turned it in and sat down to wait.

A man with a goatee walked out from the back of the shop, his forearms thick with muscles, in a Motley Crüe concert shirt and jeans. He picked up the clipboard and looked at it.

“Louis?”

“Yeah, that’s me.” Louis jumped up, slightly unsteady.

The man extended his hand. “Mark Meehan.” He smelled heavily of cigarette smoke. “This your first time?”

“Yeah, it is.”

“No one here with with you?”

“No. Just me.”

“All right, then. Come with me.”

They went through a short open corridor with partitions between rooms. Louis saw that there was a client getting a tattoo on her back, on the shoulder. The needle buzzed with a steady, low frequency hum. The client made squeaking noises in her throat, and the artist had a small towelette he was
using to wipe her skin. Louis felt light-headed.

Mark led him to a small room with a cart on one side, stocked with equipment. There were dozens of drawings tacked on a bulletin board on the wall. The fluorescent lighting was bright white.

“Have a seat, Louis,” Mark gestured. “So. What are you looking for today?”

Louis sat down on the reclining chair. He handed Mark the paper in his hand.

Mark studied the drawing for a few minutes. His face was expressionless, drinking in the design.

“It’s a menu,” he said finally, looking askance at Louis.

“Yeah,” Louis said. “It was a special dinner.”

“Nice graphic,” Mark said. “You want the whole thing? Where were you thinking? How big?”

“I was thinking, actually,” Louis said, “just the—um—just the dagger. And the words.”

“No problem, Louis,” Mark replied.

“And here? On my forearm?”

“Okay. But can I ask you something first?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Do you want to know why people get this kind of tattoo?”

Louis tilted his head, a question mark in his face.

“Are you a person who just, you know, likes the design, or do you like the symbolism? Some tattoos are just beautiful, like, aesthetically. But most people get their first one because it has some personal meaning. I mean, it's going to be there for the rest of your life. Maybe you should be sure.”

“A friend told me the meaning once. But I'd like to hear it from you.”

“What d’your friend say?”

Louis coughed in embarrassment and cleared his throat. “He said—that the rose was life, love, beauty. And the dagger was the opposite—death, mortality. A memento mori, like. A reminder that we all die.”

“And you want it because—?”

“I guess—I’m not sure about life or love anymore. I am sure about the death, though. I like that it will remind me every day.”

“Oh, I see,” Mark said. “You like death. Fair enough. You want to hear my thoughts on it, though? Maybe you won't want the tattoo then. After I tell you.”

“Why? What do you mean?”

“Well,” Mark said. “You're right. When the tattoo is just the dagger, it can have various meanings. Heartbreak. Cunning. Defiance. Courage. It’s a small weapon—assassins use it. It’s quick and deadly, and it’s used by the fastest killers.”
“Hmm,” said Louis. “Dangerous. I kind of like that.”

“So there’s that,” said Mark. “But when it’s paired—“

“Yeah?”

“The classic pairing is a heart and a dagger, you know—for a broken heart, betrayal. But a rose, now. A rose is more complicated. Your friend is right. They show both sides: the fleeting beauty of life, the certainty of death. But that’s not exactly all. It’s not so simple.”

“It’s not?”

“No. You see how the stem of the rose is entwined around the dagger? How the dagger goes through its center? How the dagger is hard, and the rose soft, but both share a little of the hardness and the softness of the other when paired?”

Louis leaned in to see the picture again.

“They’re inseparable,” said Mark. “The rose relies on the dagger for protection. It depends on the dagger—see how the rose has lost any thorns of its own? The dagger isn’t just a weapon. It loves the rose. It protects the most beautiful thing. It’s ready to fight. It defends the rose. When paired, the two become more meaningful.”

“Beauty is worth the fight,” said Louis.

Mark nodded. “Not just beauty. Life. It's a lover’s tattoo. I guess that's why the words are there, right? That's what I thought when I first saw it.”

Louis looked down. The meaning was clear, and it moved him deeply. He remembered the day that he had talked about the rose tattoo with Harry, after their lovemaking, when they had talked about metaphysics. Later, he had kept the menu from the First Night dinner that Harry had planned.

*Who was protecting whom?* Harry had been unflinching in his declaration.

*I love you, too. And I always will.*

“So my question is, are you sure you want just the dagger and the words?” Mark asked.

“The other person,” Louis whispered. “He already has the rose. He said he wasn't ready for the dagger.”


*You can never erase it,* thought Louis. *The dagger protects the rose. They’re inseparable. The hardness of one blends into the softness of the other. A lover’s tattoo, marking the skin. Everybody in the world would see it.* There was never a question, really.

“I want the dagger,” said Louis. “And the words.”

“*Given a chance,*” said Mark.

“Yes,” said Louis.

“Okay,” said Mark. “Where's the rose tattoo on your guy?”
Louis pointed to the place on the arm where Harry had his tattoo of the rose in bloom. The dagger would intersect the rose if their arms were side by side. He was surprised that the tattoo artist accepted the same-sex relationship so easily, nonchalantly. It made him feel more comfortable on this table.

“So, how big?”

Louis showed Mark.

“Ink color?”

“What would you recommend?”

“Black is classic,” said Mark. “Clear and direct.”

“Okay, then. Black please.”

“Words?”

“Black as well—can you please stretch it out to the length of the dagger?”

“Sure,” says Mark. “Size of the dagger?”

Louis indicated how long he thought he wanted the dagger to be.

Mark quoted Louis a price, which he agreed to.

Mark asked Louis to lie down on the table. He took Louis’s rose and dagger picture and picked a black pen to transfer the dagger onto his skin. He brought a mirror so that Louis could see it from all angles. Mark had added shading to the dagger. The ink was sharp and dark. Louis looked at the design with some detachment, as if it were a costume, not really a part of him. It was gorgeous, he thought. Mark was really good at drawing. He was actually going to do this.

Mark prepped the arm with rubbing alcohol, then with a wash of antiseptic solution. He put a towel under Louis’s arm.

“Let me know if you need a break,” Mark put on a pair of gloves. “It’s probably going to be an hour or so. If you need a drink of water or something, give a shout.”

Louis emptied his mind when he heard the low buzz of the needle.

As Mark worked, Louis played over the fight with Harry in his mind. Was he foolish in assuming the worst about Harry? It was a moot point. Harry had said a break was final. He couldn't do it again; it was forever. Just like this tattoo, Louis thought. Forever.

The buzz and sting of the needle made him wince, but he held still, willing his arm not to move.

“Louis?” Mark called.

“Yeah?”

“Don’t hold your breath. You’ll pass out.”

“Right, yeah. Sorry.”

“It’s okay. You're doing great.”
Louis felt the sting of the needle as it tore microscopic epidermal cells apart, as the ink became embedded in the dermis, became part of him. He imagined how Harry felt each time the needle touched his skin, how the tattoos were a declaration to the world which someone introverted or shy could never say. Instead, his skin said it, shouted it out constantly and loudly. He thought about how a tattoo might change one’s outlook toward the world, the way one dressed, talk, stood, breathed.

He understood, then, how Harry came to tolerate all the ink. It was his life, writ large. It was his way of expressing something inexpressible.

And now, their lives were entwined, in a way Louis could never acknowledge before. He could never let Harry go, not in his heart. Harry would always be in his heart, always.

***

**Dr. Nestor called last night.**

We got a contract from Microtonics. It's a starting point; according to Nestor, there is room for negotiation. They are offering $11 million for the patent, to be split 50% Hopkins, 40% Nestor’s lab and 10% to me. The contract obliges a research commitment from Nestor and me for three years, full time. I would have to leave MSH.

We have three weeks to decide. Nestor is flying up next week to talk about it. I am to show the contract to a lawyer and see if I agree.

I would have to give up residency, among other things. It is beyond my expectations, and honestly, I’m not sure how to feel about it.

I asked about Praxa, but Nestor said that ever since he started talking in earnest with Microtonics, it's been crickets from Praxa. They are small—they can't compete with that kind of money.

I wish I had been there from the beginning—when Nestor met with Microtonics at Thanksgiving. If only I had known—would I still have gone to lunch with Louis, and missed the meeting? Life has ironic turns like that—you never know. There are a million ways to fuck up.

It’s a great opportunity. It is. Almost too much money to pass up. When I think about what it would mean to mum, and to Louis and our life together—it’s a Catch-22. But I know what I want, above all. Some things are worth more than money. That can come later.

I already miss him immeasurably.
you brought beignets one Sunday
  broke them up in pieces, said
  
  this is for you, sugar,
  see how good they taste?
  
  love in the moment is not wasted
  Love in the caramel hue.

you stuffed an olive in my mouth
  I smelled orange blossoms
     Catalan was the language all around
  
  the sun was an unsifted rainbow
  
  we wrestled over drinking chocolate
  Love in the espresso hue.

you pushed a needle into skin
  a drunken patient proposed to me
     blood smelled like metal and vice versa
  
  I got puked on. It was gross
  
  our kisses tasted like shampoo
  Love in the pure white hue.

you walked with me one evening
  when the old year was turning new
     snow drifted down and you sparkled
  
  I hid a ring inside my jacket
  
  I thought we were okay
  Love in the forgiven hue.

we lay in bed, entangled
you turned to ask whether I knew
  that our eyes were like the Earth
  
  I said no, and I didn't care
  I was your little spoon
     the green spot in your ocean
  my love, my blue, my you.

—Harry

Shreve, Crump & Low sounded like a law firm, perhaps because it was an aged Boston institution with more gravitas and history than most law books. It was the oldest jewelry store in the United States, the first store having opened in Boston in 1796, directly across the street from Paul Revere’s silver smith shop.
Having such a hallowed reputation meant that there was an inevitable link to historical events, including in medicine.

Silver goods had always been made at Shreve’s, and in 1848, a silver box was presented to William Morton, the discoverer of anesthetic ether. Without it, soldiers and civilians would continue to have surgery while fully awake and aware, taking only whiskey and laudanum for their pain. The use of ether for surgery had first been demonstrated in Boston. It was the first general anesthetic. Liam, a student of history, had told Harry this fact when Harry had mentioned the store. Liam knew well that Harry was not going to Shreve’s for a history lesson, however.

Harry doubted that ether could anesthetize his kind of pain. Although it wasn't a bodily pain, what Harry felt was just as tenacious and insidious as a war wound, simmering deeply inside. But he wouldn’t be here if he had only the pain. He was here because of hopelessness—his hopeless certainty that he loved one person, that this person was his destiny.

Whether this person was running from him, either literally or in dreams, Harry didn't care. He had a persistent madness that his way would win.

He knew he was going against all logic, maybe even against the fate of the universe, but he had thought about it over and over. Dr. Fernbank’s words had seethed in him until they had become concentrated sounds. Defend. Believe.

Screw the odds. Screw the alternatives. Screw even the unimpeachable fact that Louis hated his guts, had said so, in so many words. There was no alternative. He had to win—or else life wasn't worth any of its beauty, and his heart was good only for sloshing oxygen around. And it wasn't just his heart, Harry knew. It was Louis’s, too. Theirs was a love that happened once in a lifetime. He had to do this, even if it's just for his own peace of mind.

Today, no one was going to buy a silver box to commemorate anything. Shreve Crump & Low was also the store where generations of Bostonians—rich, poor, in-between—saved up for that special something. One could spend $20 or $20,000. The service staff behind the counter was always courteous and helpful. They understood that the importance of the purchase was not always in the monetary value of the object, but in the sentiment.

There was a surcharge for engraving. But sometimes the words were priceless.

Harry stepped through the store. The store’s current location was on Newbury Street, just a block down from the Church of the Covenant, the church with the Tiffany windows. The store was in a renovated town house, six stories, with the intimate feeling of such a space. Warm wood paneling enclosed brightly displayed goods, the cases shiny with polished glass. What Harry was searching for was on the first floor.

“Good afternoon, sir. May I be of assistance?” A salesman said as Harry approached the jewelry cases. His name tag said Claiborne Cabot.

“Yes,” Harry said. “I’m looking for something special, please—a set of rings.”

“Yes, of course.” Claiborne Cabot, a man with thin, dark brown hair and a navy suit, opened his hands. “A gift?”

“Wedding bands,” Harry said. He smiled weakly.

“Ah! Congratulations, sir! When is the happy day, if I might ask?”

“I’m not sure, at this point,” Harry said. “Right now we’re not even on speaking terms.”
The salesman was taken aback by this answer, but professionalism quickly took over as he regained his placid demeanor.

“I see,” he nodded. He waited for Harry. Harry was dressed in a white linen shirt, cascading down his torso, open to his xiphoid with inked birds and butterfly antennae displayed, and dark blue skinny pants and black suede boots. The salesperson took him his heavily inked left arm, his lush curls pushed back from his face, his luminous green eyes flecked with sky and gold. True, Harry was not the usual Bostonian wedding band shopper at Shreve’s. But he also didn't seem like someone unserious, wasting the staff’s time. His face was engaged and slightly anxious. Cabot had seen this expression—earnest, ardent to do the right thing, nervous—on many preceding grooms.

“I admit it's a small hitch,” said Harry. “I’d like to be prepared, just in case. For some distant future, maybe.”

“Yes, sir. We do have a beautiful selection of rings, over here. We can order rings as well, to size, from our affiliate jewelers.” Cabot walked over to a case in the middle of the store, the most prominent area.

“Do you know what the bride’s taste might be?” he continued. “Classic, ornate? Gemstones? Diamonds? A simple band or something with a more elaborate design?”

“He's a finicky son of a bitch,” Harry said. “He hates the jewelry I've gotten him so far. Returned it to me, actually, in a most cold-hearted fashion. Impossible, contradictory person.”

Cabot paused, uncertain.

“So,” he asked, “maybe a plain men’s band, then?”

Harry said, “I suppose it would be better if he were here to choose with me, right?”

Cabot tightened his smile. “That is the more traditional route, Mr.—“


“Nice to meet you, Mr. Styles.” They shook hands. “Yes, most couples choose their wedding bands together. The engagement ring is the one that a lot of men choose alone—because of the surprise factor, you understand.”

“He'll be surprised, all right,” Harry said. “Louis hates them, I think. Surprises. He doesn't like what he can't control.”

“I see.”

“But that’s part of our argument,” Harry said. “Louis is scared, because he feels out of control. He feels like love should be this manageable thing that we put in a box and feed a little bit every day, that we can see from every direction, can monitor it and raise it like a dog or something.”

“Does he?”

“No, not really,” Harry sighed. “I'm exaggerating. I mean, the part about being scared. Yeah, he is, scared. He wants to dominate love. But he can't. He has to accept it, allow love to dominate him. He just can't, right now.”

“And you, sir?”
“Oh, me,” Harry allowed a curt and short laugh. He flipped his long fringe out of his face, tucked a curl behind his ear. “I’m a fool.”

“I’m sure that’s not true, Mr. Styles. You wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

Harry was silent for half a minute. “In the scheme of things,” he said, “I was a fool, at least for a time, for arguing with him, for not seeing his point of view, and maybe for making things worse. But here’s the thing. The reason I’m here.”

“Yes?”

“He never said he didn't love me. In fact, he said the opposite. He said he loved me. That he couldn’t stop.”

“He sounds like a passionate person, your Louis.”

Harry looked down, his eyes unfocused. “He is, yeah.”

The salesman asked gently, “And you? Obviously you love him?”

“I think I always have,” Harry said, “since we were kids. I can’t remember a time when I haven't. I love him beyond reason.”

The salesman waited.

“Mr. Styles?”

Harry asked, “How long do you think it would take?”

“Well,” Cabot said, uncertainly. “Every couple is different. Sometimes arguments between bride and groom can resolve fairly quickly, if channels of communications are open. I think you have room for hope.”

“No, I’m sorry, God,” Harry said. “I was thinking in my head. I didn’t mean to burden you with the whole,” he waved his hands, “Styles-Tomlinson saga. I meant to ask—how long does it take, to order a pair of rings, and to engrave them?”

“Ah,” the salesman replied, relieved. “It really depends on the selection. May I show you some pieces?”

Harry pointed to one in the display case. “Is that one white gold?”

“It is indeed,” Cabot said. “18 karat white gold, with an etched band, six millimeter thickness. It’s elegant yet masculine, a beautiful choice. Would you like to see it?”

“He’ll be so surprised,” Harry said. “Louis hates surprises.”

“I think he would make an exception in this case,” the salesman said.

“I really hope so,” Harry said. “Let’s take this baby for a test drive.”
Louis walked in the fog. He could only see inches in front of him.

He felt like there was a house behind him, one of those semi-creepy places that sat in the middle of farm fields. But it was just a feeling. The fog was so thick, he couldn't check. In fact, as soon as he took a step, the ground behind him seemed to vanish, swallowed by the air.

He reached his hand out. Long, thin, rough fronds branched out from a center stalk. He was feeling a stalk of corn. He was in a corn field.

What the fuck? He had never even been to an actual corn field.

The bluish light colored the fog all around Louis. There were no sounds. Everything was muffled, as if underwater.

The blue is oppressive, Louis thought. I don't like it. Get me out of here.

Both of his hands out to his side, feeling the leaves, Louis walked between tall stalks of corn. He saw an opening up ahead, a clearing. There were three paths at acute angles to each other. None of them were well lit. Sounds of creatures scampering in the darkness came from the ground around him.

I’m actually trapped in a nightmare about a maze, Louis thought with a smirk, still dreaming. What a fucking cliche. What is this supposed to be, like, my superego telling me how to solve a problem? It’s a joke. I've been watching too many horror movies. My subconscious is a second-rate screenwriter.

He chose one of the paths and followed it an unknown distance. He was listening and looking, but his senses were scrambled. He seemed to hear the darkness and taste the blue light. He smelled his own footsteps. It was a cold and sour smell, like overripe apples fermenting.

Then he smelled another set of footsteps, very faintly. The smell of celery or asparagus—a vegetal smell.

He moved toward the footsteps. He could hear them properly now. It was someone walking fast, hesitating, then continuing to walk fast.

He could hear their breathing, light puffs, with an occasional grunt. Hard to tell what they were doing—running in a foggy maze, maybe.

Louis moved toward the footsteps. The maze turned, and turned, and turned again. Every few turns, Louis would hear the person closer to him, but he couldn't reach or see them.

“Hello!” he called. “I’m here.”

There was no rhyme or reason to this dream.

Then, as the corn began to thin out, Louis could glimpse a person running in the spaces in between. It was a tall man, thin hips, hair to the shoulders.
“Hey!” Louis cried out. “It’s me! Wait for me!”

He began to run along the path, cursing the fog and the damn dream itself. He was in a state of semi-consciousness, so that he felt he could almost control his dream even if he really couldn't.

“Slow down! I can't see!”

Without warning, something ripped into Louis’s middle and he crashed. He had hit something thin and hard. His stomach was curled with pain. He put his hand there. No blood—he was okay. He looked up. In the corn field, strung up inexplicably, were wires running horizontally, making a nearly invisible maze. The actual visual guides of corn stalks were gone. The maze was bounded by invisibly thin, painfully sharp wires.

*Louis William Tomlinson,* he chided himself, *you have a pretty fucked-up mind to think up places like this. I mean, you like a challenge, but fuck.*

He heard the sound again. Sprinting footprints, just to his side. A shadow flitted in his peripheral vision, tall and lanky, shirt opened, arms held at an acute angle. The person didn't see him or acknowledge him.

Louis forced himself to stand up. His hands reached around to search for the wire.

He found the wire and decided to run in the same direction. Every once in a while, he pulled away when there were sharp ties in the wire, or at a turn. He felt slick liquid in his hands. Blood. The wires cut into his hands. There was no pain but his hands were slippery with blood.

He saw the figure running just in front of him.

As his hand scrolled along the wires, he crashed into another barrier, a full-on mesh of wires in front of him, stretching left and right, as far as the eye could see. His hand reached out, dry now, unhurt—the barrier was real, tense, as fine as a spiderweb, a huge wall of invisible, fine wire, stretching into the sky and on both sides. It was an impossible wall, moored by nothing, separating Louis from everything he wanted to get to.

From his left, the figure running came closer and then turned, running away.

Louis recognized the figure—in fact, he had known all along who it was, who it always was, who it ever will be, in his dreams. “Harry! I'm right there! Turn around!”

Louis could feel his real, sleeping body become agitated, his throat burning, his body twitching.

The figure did not turn, but kept running into the horizon,

“Harry! Stop! Wait for me!” Louis yelled in his dream. He could feel his sleeping throat muscles tense and ache, as if yelling for real. There was something uncannily uncomfortable about real pain feeding back into the dream pain, the two worlds colliding, reinforcing the mortality of the body, the fact that the physical world could inflict real, physiologic consequences.

In his dream, Louis’s mind was turning, clicking. *Through the wire, through the wire.* He pushed his hand against the wire mesh. It was as tense as a solid metal board.

Louis took a few steps back, closed his eyes, and walked straight ahead.

Sometimes a mind game was just a mind game.
His body pushed through the wires like sand through a sieve. There had never been a wire maze that could stop him. There had never been a wall. His path was what he made it.

Only his mind limited him. There had never been an obstacle too great.

“Harry! Wait for me! Wait!”

The figure ahead, however, kept running without turning around.

They entered the woods. Louis cursed dream-Harry for picking such a treacherous place. *Can't you run somewhere flatter?* He wanted to yell at dream-Harry. *These goddamn roots and shit are going to tear up my ankles, and I'm not wearing socks.*

Louis pushed aside low branches, hopped over large roots, all the while keeping an eye on Harry’s head, bobbing ahead. They came to a clearing, a path along the side of a mountain, the dirt dry and packed, a dusty clementine color.

Louis picked up speed. The good thing about running in a dream was that speed was really a psychic construct. Anyone could walk, run—fly, for that matter—as fast or slow as the dreamer wanted him to.

He had almost caught up to Harry. Harry was running along the side of the mountain, the edge falling off steeply.

“Harry, why are you running so fast? You got me scared, you idiot.”

Harry turned around and looked at Louis without reply. His face was an unreadable blank slate. His green eyes stared at Louis’s face as though he were looking at an inanimate object.

Louis paused to catch his breath. He bent over, panting.

“Back there, didn't you hear me?” Louis’s breath puffed in and out. “I was yelling at you.”

“Were you?” Again, an enigmatic tone.

“Yeah—the corn maze. And then the wire mesh. Damn. You're a hard one to catch.”

“Maybe I don't want to be caught,” said dream-Harry.

“Why not?” Louis looked at Harry’s expressionless face. Louis was genuinely puzzled—not angry, not sad, just puzzled. What had changed? Why was he running away from Louis? What did he mean?

Wordlessly, Harry turned around and sprinted, as fast as he could go.

Louis, taken by surprise, yelled, “Harry!” His mind raced incoherently.

He watched the next sequence in silence and slow motion. Harry’s body ran toward the cliff, and with an elegant motion, he propelled himself forward, into thin air. Harry disappeared from the air; he fell. There was no sound.

Louis awoke with a startled cry. “Harry!”
Lady licked Harry’s face in bed. She was used to her 4:30 AM run. At this time of year, the sunrise was catching up to Harry’s run. At the end, Harry could usually see the sliver of orange seep across the horizon, as if underlining the night. But it was still pretty damn early, and at this time, there were virtually no people out, no sunlight, and no birdsong.

Harry lay in bed for another few minutes, enjoying the softness and the free time.

Shreve’s had said three weeks, and it was almost that time. In another week, internship would be finished, and they would be second-years. It was hard to imagine everything that had happened this year, everything Harry had learned. He was much humbled by the experience, and so appreciative of the patients who had placed their trust in him, Harry Styles, know-nothing surgeon. He no longer was that know-nothing child.

Tonight was the graduation dinner for the chief residents and senior residents. Most of them were leaving to work or do fellowships elsewhere. Jess Rabenweiler was one of the few who would stay. Not foremost in the program tonight, but important to Harry, was the announcement of the cardiothoracic fellowship candidate. He wondered who would get it, between him, Louis, and a mysterious third candidate.

He had told Nestor no to Microtonics. He couldn't take the patent buy-out as it was structured.

He was not leaving Boston. He would be compensated for his work in the micro-robotics project, and the patent, which would be a measly fraction of the buy-out price, but that was okay. He knew the field. He could start over in another direction—maybe with Louis. He hadn't discussed it with Louis, but there would be time enough.

A man had time. Once he understood where he stood to love, a man had a lot of time—love was a foundation from which all else would flow.

Harry grinned with the satisfaction of this decision. He felt intensely at peace.

Harry got out his yoga mat and did his stretches. He picked out a playlist to stretch to, early morning sounds to gradually wake him up.

Thus morning, as he thought about Louis, he picked out his “morning love songs” list. He was that person who had multiple love song lists, organized by time of day, mood, decades, genres, and of course, memories. That last one was a Proustian monster that made Harry weep buckets: he had to save it for private times and private spaces, lest someone see him crying in the middle of public transportation and check him into a mental hospital.

And I want to walk with you
On a cloudy day
In fields where the yellow grass grows knee-high
So won’t you try to come
Come away with me and we'll kiss
On a mountaintop
Come away with me
And I'll never stop loving you

For meditation and for runs, especially this early in the morning, he did use his headphones. His neighbors would kill him for playing his records at this hour, especially if he wanted a realistic hifi experience and turned on the subwoofer.

He did his Warrior I pose, concentrating on his body alignment, stretching his hip flexors. Harry then transitioned to a Warrior III pose. He breathed deeply, inhaling and exhaling. He had not felt so calm and peaceful in a long time. His head was clear and light, full of bliss. He straightened his legs and then bent in a hand-to-big-toe, uttitha hasta padangustasana pose. His body was comfortably loose.

He picked out a T-shirt and shorts for running, socks, an armband for his phone and headphones. A hair tie and a head band. Keys.

He put on Lady's collar and picked up her leash.

“So, where to, today, Lady? Should we go to the Commons? Hmm. It's a little too dark for the Commons, I think. Maybe down Charles Street?” Harry thought about the uneven brick surfaces that were hard to see in the darkness. “Probably shouldn't.”

Harry scrolled through his phone to look at the last few runs. “I know. Let’s hit the Esplanade. The trees are in bloom there—it’ll get light soon, and the wide walkways are amazing. C’mon, girl.”

They left the apartment and ran into the sidewalk. Harry thought he would run on the Boston side of the Charles River, down to the Boston University Bridge, and then back. He should be home by 5:20 or so, perfect for a shower and then to the hospital by 6 AM. Rounds started at 6:30. He would just have enough time, if he hustled.

They walked toward the river side of Charles Street toward the T station. No matter what time of day, the traffic on Storrow Drive churned like a typhoon. Harry took Lady up the stairs of the Charles River Footbridge across the busy rotary. He laughed at how Louis hated rotaries: the Hydra of traffic intersections.

“"You never know whose right-of-way it is,” Louis always said. “The car in the rotary? Or the one going straight ahead to join it? There’s always this moment of ‘chicken’ where you don’t really know who’s going to hesitate, you know?”

Harry imagined a rejoinder from Niall, which would go along the lines of “relying on his Irish Spidey senses” to know how to negotiate this passive-aggressive traffic that behaved like a drunken frat boy. No wonder Niall was perfect at driving in a Boston. He was just totally unafraid, uninhibited. He plowed on like a horseman of the apocalypse.

They crossed the rotary into the Esplanade. Harry could see the looming shadow of the Hatch Shell in the distance, a dark shadow against the darker horizon, illuminated only by weak street lights. He took off Lady’s leash as they started their run.

Along Storrow Drive, cars zoomed by hugging the tight curves of the road. The beautiful glass façade of the John Hancock building gleamed like a huge mirror to the sky, reflecting the last shards of moonlight.
Harry concentrated on breathing during his run. His thoughts took him to dinner tonight.

He and Louis had stayed out of each other’s ways since their fight. Harry knew Louis. He needed time to process his thoughts. He also trusted the real Louis to come around and do the right thing. Harry always remembered Louis’s last words to him. I still love you. So much, you can’t even imagine it. I would die for you.

How could he believe Louis?

He could go by Louis’s words, he supposed.

But sometimes words were contradictory, said in the heat of the moment, said in hopeless despair, said when one wanted to hate oneself the most, to hit bottom so that there was nowhere lower to go. Hurtful words were a form of insurance, self-protection. Harry knew that Louis would rather push things down and deny the pain. He was good at acting like he didn't care.

He had to judge Louis by everything he knew about him. His past. His actions.

Louis protected people who couldn't protect themselves. He was kind without taking credit. In fact, he deflected from compliments.

He was selfless and caring to his friends and family.

He was generous and humble.

He was brilliant but let other people shine.

He loved with all his heart, truly, intelligently, maturely. Even when he felt that he couldn’t continue the relationship, he did not cease to love. He told the truth.

Louis was beautiful. His body fitted into Harry like two pieces of a puzzle. He grew more beautiful because Harry loved him. He could be sixty-five-years-old, Harry decided, and still be as beautiful as the first day Harry met him.

Harry had to believe in him, no matter what his words said. Louis’s mouth might be loud loud loud!!, but his actions were louder louder louder.

He wasn't only ruggedly handsome or charming. He was Louis, and he was everything.

Harry was thinking about the gold wedding bands. They were engraved for Louis and him. There was no turning back.

Harry smiled, considering a creative way to propose to Louis.

In sickness and in health. He couldn't wait to say these words.

Of course, the first step toward marriage might be to reconcile—actually to be in a relationship. Pfft, logistics, thought Harry. Why couldn't we skip to the truths we already held to be self-evident? Louis belongs to me. I belong to him. How long should he have to wait?

And how would the cardiothoracic fellowship affect it?

Just as Harry predicted, the dawn slowly permeated through the aquamarine darkness of the late spring leaves. Spring sunrises were spectacular, thought Harry. They were a proof of survival, if nothing else.
Harry was concentrating enough that he didn’t hear the alert of a text on his phone.

_Haz. Call me._ Louis had just woken from his dream. He had anxiously typed these three words, trying to stay calm.

Harry continued running, now headed back to the Charles River Footbridge. At the bottom of the bridge, he stopped to clip Lady’s leash to her collar.

*Words are flowing out like*  
_Endless rain into a paper cup_  
_They slither wildly as they slip away across the universe._

*Pools of sorrow waves of joy*  
_Are drifting through my opened mind_  
_Possessing and caressing me._

 Limitless undying love, which  
_Shines around me like a million suns,_  
_It calls me on and on across the universe_  

Harry looked at the time. 5:27. Damn. He was going to be late. Maybe all that thinking slowed him down. He looked down at Lady—maybe she was getting a little bit slower, too, with age. She was panting.

Harry knew he shouldn’t. But he was already late, and the ortho list was huge. Even with the bare minimum, it would take fifteen minutes to run everybody’s numbers. Liam was on call for their service last night. He probably ran the list twice already. But Harry always checked himself, to be sure. It was great to have Liam on service with him. Liam was reliable. The chief resident probably wouldn’t care but, at the least, he would be annoyed.

_C’mon_, Harry thought. _One week to go. Last push. Don’t get lazy._

_Just this one time._

Harry stood at the curb and watched the cars go around the rotary. A minute passed by. Harry hopped on his feet impatiently. Maybe it would have been faster to take the footbridge after all.

He watched for cars coming on his right from Storrow. They were coming around the curve and were hard to anticipate. Finally, the cars began to thin out and were five or six seconds in between. Harry looked up the road to check for the silhouettes of cars coming. There were none.

“C’mon, girl, heel,” Harry tugged on Lady’s leash as he sprinted across the roadway. Lady barked and ran after Harry.

Her ears perked, Lady hesitated and tugged back just a fraction. Harry instinctively pulled her along, but he glanced back at Lady, seeing the confusion in her eyes.

Harry heard the car before he saw it. It was a loud motor to the right, roaring like a dragon, the Doppler effect increasing the volume and frequency as it got closer. There were no headlights. Harry saw the nebulous shape as it emerged around the curve, a beast in the dark.
For a fraction of a second, Harry thought he had time, either to move forward or back.

Then he heard a tremendous noise, the car swerving and braking. His fear spiked for a millisecond. He felt as if his body were imploding from the inside, as the car smashed into his side, his feet left the ground and the leash was torn from his hands. His last thought was of Anne—some kind person should tell Anne.
Chapter 8

Louis sent his text and waited. He was being paranoid, he knew. He dreaded these moments of panic when, against all rational thinking, he was certain something horrible had happened to a family member and he just had to make sure they were okay. He would call home merely to hear his mother or his sisters’ voices, to convince himself that dreams weren't omens.

He wondered whether Harry would even text him back. Normally, he wouldn't even consider texting Harry to tell him about a bad dream—especially not these days. But this dream had been so vivid, and he was so, so scared. It had felt so real.

Louis could not remember the last time he woke up actually screaming from a dream. His heart was still racing from it.

He went to the kitchen and got a glass of water. He stood for a few minutes, sipping water, to have something to do. Then he went to shower and get ready for work. *This is silly*, he thought. *Go find Harry at work and talk to him. You're just stressed out.*

***

“Alice, you want your eggs over easy or sunny side up?” Niall yelled.

Alice was just getting out of the shower, toweling off and putting on her clothes. As usual, she could hear Niall yelling through the door. No matter how many times they discussed it, he still tried to talk to her with the bathroom door closed and the ventilation on. The man was stubborn. Good thing he was also adorable.

She opened a crack, “Niall? What did you say?”

“Over easy or sunny side up?”

She loved how domestic he was—he genuinely loved making breakfast for her. Normally she wasn't a huge breakfast eater, but she always ate breakfast with Niall, because he made it for her.

“Over, and not too runny, please! Can you make me some toast?” Alice was a sucker for fried eggs and toast. Niall was a sucker for Alice.

“Two pieces of toast, got it.”

Alice came out in scrubs, with wet hair, and no make-up. She rubbed a towel through her damp hair. Some interns got up even earlier to do hair and make-up, but Alice had learned long ago that she valued snuggling an extra ten minutes with Niall Horan more than “putting her face on,” as her
mother would say.

“I love it when you’re dressed all sexy for work,” Niall said.

“Yeah, I’m a real Miss Omaha Ag Fair,” said Alice, drying her hair. “Doesn’t get more glamorous than this. Unless I’m grooming a horse. Or mucking out a cow stall. Or making fried dough with pineapple rings and cottage cheese.”

“There you go with your sexy talk. You're making me hot.”

“You can take the girl out of Nebraska,” she said, leaning over to give him a kiss. Niall didn't even lift his eyes. He was flipping over the eggs.

“I got two coffees ready to go. Yours, milk and sweetener, right?”

“Yeah, thanks, babe.”

“Half-inch of skim milk, one packet sweetener.”

“Honestly, Niall, you're the best. What time is it?” Alice checked her phone. It was 5:30 AM. “Shit, we have to hustle. Sorry. I didn't know. I shouldn't have asked for toast. Is it—?”

“Don't worry, Al. It's just ready now—butter or jam?” Niall took the toast out of the toaster, tossing the hot bread from hand to hand and letting them fall to a plate.

“Oh, Ni, we don't have time.” Niall scooted her plate toward her. Alice wolfed down her eggs, etiquette be damned. She could be a lady when she was chairman of the department. “All right, butter please.” Alice looked at Niall slathering toast with butter, his blue eyes focused on task. This one was a keeper. Damn it, he really was wonderful.

“I'm kind of excited for tonight,” Alice said.

Niall looked up. “Yeah, the senior dinner. Gonna be sorry to see some of them go.”

“The operative word, Ni, is some of them,” Alice said. She took a bite of toast and washed it down with coffee. “Some I'd be happy never to see again.”

“Now, now, sweetness. Sportsmanship.”

Alice rolled her eyes. “Really, Niall. I don't need to show respect to people who don’t show it back. It's just—I’m kind of excited to find out who wins the fellowship.”

“The cardiothoracic fellowship, you mean. Why?” Niall cocked an eyebrow. “Do you know something I don’t?”

“Nah,” Alice said, waving one hand. “I'm sure it'll be Harry. Just excited for him.”

“Yeah,” Niall said. “I wonder how Louis will feel about that?”

“They will get back together, don’t you think?”

“Are you kidding me? They’re like some written-in-the-stars soulmate shit. Truthfully, I wish I could hate them. They make it so hard for other people. Like, when I buy chocolates for you? I think about Louis and Harry’s sickening level of love, and chocolates just feels so lame. Chocolates,” Niall spat the word out with disgust. “What am I, a Hallmark card?”
Alice wrapped her arms around him and kissed him. “You’re my Irish-American grizzly bear, and they’re not.”

“Thanks, Al. I like you too.”

Alice shoved the rest of her toast into a paper towel, and they both grabbed their travel mugs of coffee. They piled dishes into the sink and got out the door. As soon as they got into the car, Niall’s phone went off. A text lit up in the dark.

“Trauma level 1, ER.”

Niall frowned. _What the hell?_ He wasn’t on the trauma service. Niall was on the pediatric surgery service. Unless it was a pediatric patient, the paging operators had no business calling him. Niall felt mildly annoyed that the operators would make a mistake, this far into the year. Occasionally he got pages for services he had just left. He was already two rotations down from trauma, though. It was a weird mistake. _Leave me the fuck alone_, he thought.

“Alice, look at this,” he said. “Getting a page for trauma. I’m not even on service.” She peered over and saw his phone. Something snagged in her mind. Alice’s lips twisted slightly to one side.

“That’s odd,” she replied. They drove out of the garage and onto Commonwealth Ave. “Just ignore it. It’s probably a mistake.”

“You think? Maybe I should call to check.” Niall’s eyes stayed on the road. Even at this time of day, there were always errant or drunk drivers weaving in and out of city streets. Niall was as good a driver as any, but interns trained to anticipate and react to the most unpredictable shit. Niall’s sixth sense was sharp as a pin.

Before she could reply, Alice’s phone showed a text message.

“Trauma level 1, ER.”

Alice stared at it for several seconds, hypnotized. Interns were paged all day long. They usually had an intuition about each page. Alice felt puzzled and uneasy. She couldn’t place this feeling. Her deductive senses were trying to tell her something.

“Niall, look at this.”

They stared at each other. Alice was on the oncology service. Oncology was never paged to trauma.

“What the fuck?” Niall asked.

“Well, we can only get there as fast as we can get there.” Alice reasoned. “Trauma team’s there already. They can handle any emergencies, I should think.”

“But Al,” Niall said, “this has never happened before. Both of us getting paged to trauma. Neither of us are on trauma. One mistake, I can buy. Two? Seems a bit too weird to be coincidental, don’t you think?”

They shared a pregnant pause. Alice turned over the restless feeling in her brain and, as the well-trained intern she was, automatically pulled up a list of differential diagnoses in her mind. Surgical diagnosis was, in a way, a process of elimination. So as not to miss anything, interns learned to run through a thorough list. This process eliminated errors of omission, because the list of categories never changed: congenital, hereditary, inflammatory, immunologic, neoplastic, infectious, traumatic, idiopathic. The algorithm took out the paralyzing vastness of uncertainty when faced with the
unknown. Lists were the key to thinking about problems. Fixed boundaries kept interns focused and safe.

“Is there a city-wide disaster or something? Turn on the radio,” she said.

They turned on the local radio stations, flipping through the channels. There was no news of any city-wide disasters or emergencies. Pop music played on, an inappropriate, always upbeat soundtrack regardless of world events: happy party songs, syrupy love songs, sleepy, giggly requests to too-loud DJ’s, all too early.

Morning traffic report briefly mentioned a slow-down on Storrow, but it happened so frequently that it was considered normal.

“Why would two interns on two different services, not related to trauma, get paged to trauma? When there’s already a team there?” Niall mused.

Alice, who was superb at running through the list of differential diagnoses at lightening speed, uneasily muttered, “The only reason I can think of, where both of us would get paged is—“

They arrived at the hospital and pulled in to the garage.

“What?”

“—if it’s someone we know.” Alice and Niall looked at each other. Their Spidey senses clicked into place. That’s why they were a great team.

The odds were unlikely. Still.

As they were getting out of the car, both phones went off simultaneously. Niall and Alice looked at each other, too nervous to look down. Then, instinctually, they flicked their phones to open the page, like they did hundreds of times every day. They showed the same message.

“Trauma bay 1. Urgent. Finn.”

They ran.

***

Liam had been rounding on the orthopedics patients since 5:00 AM. He had been on call, so getting up was no trouble. He went to the nursing station and got a large cup of coffee to start the day, and by 5:30, the cup was empty. He sat down at a computer to run through the patients’ labs. Harry would be here in thirty minutes to review the last bits of detail, and then rounds at 6:30.

His phone lit up with a page.
“Trauma bay 1, MVA victim, male, ETA 2 min.”

Liam took note. Motor vehicle accident victim, estimated time of arrival, two minutes. There were usually orthopedic injuries involved in the MVA patients who showed up in trauma—who showed up alive, that is. The trauma team assessed the patient, but ortho was often called for consultation and treatment. Reluctantly, Liam got up to walk to the elevator.

*Man, this was going to put a wrench into rounds. Well, it doesn't matter. Can't be helped. Hopefully Harry will get here soon and can take over presenting at rounds. At least one of us will be there. The ortho chief was not going to be happy about this.*

***

Louis glanced down at his phone at his page. He was coming up the sidewalk to the hospital. The sky was turning into shades of bruises and peaches. Louis hated starting the day like this—with an emergency. There was no time to prepare his mind; he felt pushed and rushed.

“Trauma level 1, ER.”

He was on the trauma service. Finn and Trevor were on call from last night, and technically they hadn't yet switched over. Louis walked quickly but did not run.

*Always walk into trauma, Louis remembered Dr. Fernbank saying, from the first week of internship. Everyone else is running around, panicking. Sometimes you're the only one walking and thinking. You have to be the head of the surgical beast.*

It seemed so long ago, those words. In his mind, Louis pictured Harry sitting just across the table, his head bent over his notebook, scribbling notes. How much he had tried to steer clear of Harry! How he had been torn over Harry’s presence, had been unkind to him. He had been such an asshole, and it was all to protect himself. Louis realized how futile it had all been. From the first time he saw Harry here, he knew his heart was gone. Harry’s love was a force that conquered everyone, everything. Louis had loved him—still did love him—so single-mindedly. Nothing in the world could replace it.

As soon as Louis walked into the front doors, he sensed that something was wrong. Something was off; Louis couldn't quite place it. The hospital lobby was confused and noisy. The staff, who normally went on working as usual during any emergency, were restless, louder than normal. They seemed almost rude to people asking them questions, tense.

Louis walked steadily, quickly toward the emergency room.

Then he felt the whoosh of people rushing from behind him. Niall and Alice ran past him, without saying a word. They hadn't even noticed him.

Louis was puzzled and disturbed. He picked up his pace and entered the emergency room, walking
toward trauma bay 1.

There was a massive crowd around the table. An EMS man was talking. They were about to transfer a patient from the EMS stretcher to the trauma table. It was hard to see through the throng of people, and harder to hear. There were more than a few residents around, a lot of them not on trauma or emergency medicine. For a second, Louis almost wondered whether this was a disaster drill. There were too many people here.

“…found down, on right side, pedestrian in hit-and-run. Storrow Drive. No I.D.”

Louis heard Dr. Fernbank’s voice rise above everyone. “None needed. We know him. Let’s quiet down, people!”

Louis stopped in his tracks. His head whirled and he had a moment where everything turned a bit dark. *Harry had not answered his text. The dream. Where was Harry? Was he here in the crowd?* He scanned all around for the familiar tall shoulders, the mane of curls. He was panicking a little. Harry was not here. He checked again. No Harry.

The EMS guy continued. “Appears to be in his twenties. Delirious at scene—couldn't tell us his name or birth date. Airway was initially stable. Pressure’s been trending down pretty fast. Likely rib fractures, internal injuries. Scalp lac, right occiput—bleeding stopped with pressure, but he’ll need repair. We couldn't rule out intracranial bleeding. Concussion likely. If he needs a crani, keep the cut in mind. His pelvis and hip may be fractured—hard to tell. He was moving hands—couldn’t tell about the legs. After his sats dropped, we sedated and intubated him.”

Louis saw Dr. Fernbank, in his wheelchair, near the head of the table.

Dr. Fernbank shouted, “Glasgow?” Louis thought he heard Dr. Fernbank’s voice quiver. Was he imagining it?

“Initially 12, 10 just before he was intubated,” the EMS said. “Eyes opened to pain. Was saying some inappropriate things—about God, Anne or Anne’s lace, something like that, random words. Bizarre. Delirious. Not making any sense. Hands moved to painful stimuli but, like I said, legs didn't move and we couldn't tell about them.”

“Airway?” Dr. Fernbank questioned.

“Decreased breath sounds at right base. Looks like he hit the right side hard. Rib fractures probable. Might be blood, might be atelectasis. Hard to know why sats dropped, but that's why we tubed him.”

Louis saw Finn’s tall, broad figure at the head of the bed.

“Finn?” Dr. Fernbank asked. “You got this?”

“Got it, sir,” Fern nodded. “On three, let's move him. One, two, three. Trevor, you here?” Finn sounded fine. He was as commanding, calm, and collected as at any other time—he was going to be a great attending.

“Here, Finn.”


Louis saw Alice exchange a look with someone. Alice’s face was drained of blood. She looked stricken and shell-shocked. Louis followed her gaze. The person she was communicating with was Niall, and Niall had an expression Louis had never seen before. He was absolutely terrified.
The nurse Miriam called out, “92%, doctor.”

“We need an art line, Trev, when you're done.”

“On it, Finn.” The EMS crew rapidly cleaned up and cleared out. Louis still couldn't see anything because of the number of people surrounding the bay. There seemed to be a large crowd just observing. The air was tense with anticipation. Some of the interns present glanced nervously at Louis and looked away quickly. Louis didn't know what to make of it, but the number of times this happened was unnerving him.

Louis moved closer with a feeling of dread. Niall and Alice weren't on emergency or trauma duty. Why were they here? He still couldn't see who the patient was. Fernbank had said—someone he knew. Harry’s not here.

Louis saw Miriam move in to help the doctors. She used her trauma shears to cut off the patient’s clothes, to have better access to his body. That's when he saw the shorts fall to the ground. Blue Nike shorts with the swish on the bottom corner, soaked with blood. Surely thousands of guys had shorts like those. It didn't mean anything. Don't panic, Louis.

Then he saw the bottoms of the patient’s feet. The shoes and socks had been removed. His heart dropped into his stomach.

“Excuse me,” he said quietly to a medical student in front of him. “I'm on the trauma service.” The student moved aside to let Louis pass.

At Louis’s voice, Alice turned and saw him. Her expression was one of startled panic. She stopped what she was doing and rushed to him, hands out to push him away. Two hands came up to Louis’s chest. He shrank from her.

“Get out of here, Louis.” Alice said in a low voice.

“Fuck off, Alice.” Louis glowered. He could not manage to talk above a whisper. “I'm telling you for the last time. Don't touch me.”

“Get out of here! You can't help.” Alice blocked Louis’s view. He tried to glance over her shoulder.

“Alice, I have to see him.”

“You know it's not right! You can't work objectively. You can't do anything for him.” Alice looked to the side and paused. “I'm not sure you want to see him, Lou.”

“Alice, please!” Louis raised his voice. Several people turned to look at them. “I have to. It might be the last time. Get out of my way.” Louis’s voice broke. “Please. I need to.”

Alice assessed the situation and then pulled Louis’s hand. Louis was ready to resist her, but she parted the crowd around the table. Both of them came to Harry’s side. Louis saw Harry for the first time. Alice resumed putting in a large caliber intravenous catheter in Harry’s arm. Needles, plastic lines, tubes, medications were flying all around them.

Harry was unconscious. The right side of his body was caked in blood—some dried, some fresh. The right side of his scalp had a thick layer of blood, too—possibly had large lacerations in the skin. Blood pooled around the right side of his head, his right ear. His face was scraped by road burn. His clothing cut away, Harry’s tattoos were exposed, thin and powerless against the injuries. His extremities lay pale and unmoving. His boxers were cut away, too. A large purple bruise spread over his groin. His whole pubis was a dark splotch, his penis a limp, anatomic object. He had an
endotracheal tube taped to the side of his mouth, hooked to a ventilator, breathing for him. His right eye was swollen shut.

“Vitals?” Finn shouted.

“Pressure 70 over 40, pulse 140, sats 100% on pure oxygen,” said Trevor.

“Breath sounds?”

Airway, breathing, circulation.

Niall was bent over, listening to Harry’s lungs. “Clear on left,” he said. “Diminished at the right base. Some crackles. But overall diminished.”

Finn shouted, “Abdomen?”

Alice felt Harry’s belly just below the butterfly tattoo. “Distended. Somewhat tense. Might be free blood in there.”

Always believe in curls.

“Miriam, set up two bags of O negative. ASAP. Type and cross him for two more units.” Finn checked Harry’s pupils with a light. “Reactive. All right, let's get him to CT. Blood can go with him, okay? Let's get it in him stat.”

“I’ll go with him,” said Louis.

Finn looked over and saw Louis for the first time. His face was expressionless for a moment, still in command mode. Then he reacted.

“You sure, Louis? Trevor can—“

“No,” Louis said. “It's my turn to work. Trevor's off. Please, let me. I need to do this.”

Finn nodded. Louis stayed next to the stretcher as they switched Harry from the ventilator to portable oxygen. Louis bagged Harry with the ambu bag. A propofol drip was set up for continuous sedation. Harry’s monitor leads were switched over to portable ones. The orderlies came to push the stretcher to CT.

In the CT scanner, Louis sat with Harry, giving him oxygen, wearing a lead apron to protect himself from the radiation. Spine, head, chest, abdomen and pelvis. Then plain films of extremities. Because of his experience in trauma, Louis was very familiar with the series. It didn't take more than 35 minutes.

Louis asked the technician as she came into the room. “So? What's it look like?”

“Louis, I’m not supposed to say before the radiologist has read the films.”

“Come on. What's the damage? Tell me.”

The technician gave Louis an admonishing look. Louis pursed his lips, not giving a shit. He was going to get this information one way or another.

“I think there's blood in the brain,” the technician said, reluctant to give more information. “A hematoma.”
“Subdural or epidural?” Louis asked.

“I don't know, Louis. I'm really sorry.”

“And?”


“Harry has tib-fib fractures?” Louis observed Harry’s swollen right leg. The right foot was more swollen and tense than the left foot. The skin in the lower leg bulged with tension and the color was reddish purple, with clotted blood over the knee and much of the lower leg.

“Maybe. Louis,” she said, uncomfortable, “you have to wait for the radiologist.”

“Can you,” Louis motioned the technician close. “Can you bag him for a minute? Please. I just need to check the films myself.”

The technician started to protest.

“One breath every three seconds. Be right back, I promise.”

Louis ran around to the control desk. He quickly flipped through the digital films on the computer station from head to toe. The films took time loading. *I could write code to make this go faster,* Louis thought. *It's like watching grass grow, this fucking antiquated system.* Finally the images popped up one by one.


The orderly came to get them. Harry was stable. He would go back to trauma, and then likely have surgery on his right leg.

Louis sat next to him in the trauma bay. The crowd in the emergency room had thinned to its normal bustle. Eventually he would have to leave. Other people would take care of Harry. He had to get back to work, go round on his patients. People were watching him, Louis knew. He could feel their curious, uncomfortable glances.

He didn't care. The world could go to hell, just as his world had. What difference did it make?

Louis stared ahead at nothing, a surreal feeling in his mind, as if trapped in a ridiculously bad movie. *It's not real,* he thought. *Tomorrow I'll wake up and it'll be a bad dream. Everything would return to normal. I can find Harry and we can talk like normal people and I can apologize. It'll be all right.*

No, it wouldn't.

He curled his hand around Harry’s and held it tight.

“I’m sorry, Haz,” Louis said. “I’m so sorry I wasn't there. I told you the traffic was treacherous and you—you told me it was too slow. Pedestrians don't get hurt, you said.” Louis blinked a tear away. Harry’s hand felt slight and unreal. Louis traced a line in Harry’s palm, from the base, near the wrist, to the warm center. He stopped where the line met with the crease of the palm. A lifeline. “If it's any consolation, I really wish it was me lying here. I'm so, so sorry. It shouldn't have been you. You
don’t deserve this. How many idiots are walking around, existing, and you—here—of all the people in the world,” Louis sniffed quietly. “You know we’ll be laughing about this soon, right?”

Louis felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Lou.”

He turned around. “Liam.” Louis blinked.

Liam bent down so that their eyes were level. Louis put his forehead on Liam’s shoulder, his eyes closed against Liam’s solidness. Liam gave him a hug as Louis started sniffling, his chest heaving in shallow, quiet spasms. Liam’s arms encircled Louis and held him tightly. Louis felt like a small and fine-boned creature, an animal trapped in a corner, inconsolable. Liam let him soak his shoulder. They stayed silent. Liam patted Louis’s back comfortingly.

“Louis, he’s going to surgery,” Liam said. “We’re putting pins in his leg. He’ll be out in two hours. It’ll be okay. You know that, right?”

Louis heard the words in a dissociated way, as if listening to a lecture, only understanding Liam’s words linguistically, not emotionally. Liam stood next to him while nurses moved Harry’s stretcher out of trauma and toward the operating room elevators.

“Liam,” Louis sniffed back his tears and said, “he has a small subdural hematoma. Right frontal. He’s had a concussion. You have to let anesthesia know.”

“I know. Anesthesia already saw the films. They talked to neurosurgery, Lou.”

“It’s just—you know, you have to watch the intracranial pressure.”

“Yeah.”

“Did they see the rib fractures? No pneumothorax right now, but spontaneous pneumos can happen after trauma.”

“They did, Louis.” Liam’s face was sad, indulging Louis.

“He has a liver laceration, too. There’s a bruise. He might not be able to metabolize certain medications. Make sure they’re not giving him too much gas—and watch that his blood pressure doesn’t bottom out. You know orthopods. They think the heart’s only good for pumping antibiotics.”

“I will personally keep an eye on him, Louis. You know he's at MSH, right? With the best doctors in the world?”

“No, Liam. He's at MSH, being taken care of by idiots like us. That's what I'm worried about.”

Liam laughed lightly. “Lou, everyone knows it’s Harry.”

“Text me when he's out, please? I want to see him.”

“Yeah, okay. I will.”

Louis watched Harry go into the elevator. His chest moved up and down with the pumping of a plastic balloon, his face as blank as burlap, his hands and feet completely still. His clothing was piled at the foot of the bed—cut up, bloodied, destroyed. A thin hospital gown covered him, but all of his tattoos showed through. The laurel leaves were completely stilled. The butterfly and swallows moved only with the respiration of the bag, a slow, inhuman, involuntary swelling and deflation.
The rose stayed surprisingly unmarked on Harry’s left arm.

Life, beauty, hope.

Louis touched the fresh dagger tattoo on his own left arm.

Oh Haz, come back safely to me.

My butterfly. My rose.

***

Harry sat at a table set for four. The silverware was real silver, polished to a gleam, heavy, and weighed down the linens—white linen napkins. The edges of the napkins fluttered in the breeze. White porcelain plates rested on silver chargers. A long, heavy, white linen table cloth draped to the floor around a large round table. The table settings included glasses for wine, and, at two settings, plastic children’s drinking cups, half filled with colored liquid—juice. An Old Fashioned glass containing a milky drink, with sprinkles of spices on top, was on the place setting next to his. Harry reached over and picked up the drink, sniffed it—rum milk punch, dusted with cinnamon. Where Harry was sitting, the glassware was empty—no water, no juice, no alcohol.

He looked around then, and knew exactly where he was.

This room, this light. He was in the dream house by the lake. He’d been here a thousand times before.

He knew so well the pale, painted walls, the Victorian grandeur of the high ceilings, the luminous green and blue light filtering through. Windows were open. It was late spring. Harry could smell the fragrance of wet earth and sweet flowers outside—lilacs, freesias, roses.

Harry was once again suffused with the feeling that the house was abandoned in media res, that in the middle of a life they were fully living, a family had disappeared. The plastic juice cups were particularly touching—a sign that there were children.

The house was different in other ways. He walked through to the living room, and saw that there was an empty stroller in the corner—not really empty. It had a navy plaid blanket on the seat, and a sippy cup in the cup holder. There was a chain of plastic play keys on the tray of the stroller.

A doll dressed in a ruffled Victorian dress was on the floor next to the stroller. Against the wall, there was a children’s play kitchen—a stove, a cooktop, a refrigerator. Plastic and wooden pots, pans, plates were scattered. Plastic ice cream, burgers, fries were strewn around the floor.

I thought I told them to clean up, Harry thought. And then he realized how incongruous that thought was—he had no family, no children. In fact, he was utterly alone. He realized he had no one, in
dreams or in real life. Maybe it was meant to be. He would be alone, always. There was no one else.

Something in the house was proof that he was wrong. The glass of rum milk punch—that was not his drink. And something else, too. He looked around the room. Something else here was not quite right.

He realized that the house had never seemed so detailed before. His mind was adding details that flew in and out; what is going on with my mind? Something was making him spin out the story, elaborating and adding. He knew all of this was nonsense that his brain was weaving together, but it was as if he floated into the heavens and could not come down. He was flying.

Harry knew that his mind, in sleep, operated on several levels. The state he was in was almost like ten states of consciousness stacked one on top of the other, so that he could slide from one to the other, like electrons bouncing between orbits. The states were on a gradient from peace and restfulness, to phantasmic, nightmarish delirium, with everything in between. His mind created and inserted irrational things sometimes—people, conversations, imaginary places and things. In a sense, Harry knew they were imaginary, yet they felt vivid and alive in the dream.

For example, on the wall was a hook which held a dog leash and collar. There had never been any dogs in the dream house. The collar shined with a supernatural clarity.

A poster-sized embroidery hung on the wall in the living room. It was a design of swirling, rainbow letters.

The summertime, and butterflies
All belong to your creation

Underneath was an embroidered meadow with wild flowers, and a small child, a girl, sitting in one corner, with a crown of flowers, blowing a puff of a dandelion flower. The child had light blond hair, and, Harry noticed with some tenderness, a face like Harry’s as a young child. It was a young female Harry. The scant threads of embroidery were bewitching; they implied so much.

All the toys belonged to her, and her younger sibling, presumably. Where were they? Harry was alone—he felt more abandoned than ever.

Harry walked outside. The sun was shining, and he expected the expansive view of the lake in front of him—the peaked waves from a western wind, the green lawn sloping down to the walk.

Instead, he walked around the side of the house, to the back. An English garden was seen though a small gate. Harry had never come to this part of the house before. He had always followed the walk to the lake, and then to the city. It was as if a secret garden had been back here, all the time, without his knowing.

Where am I? Harry thought. What's happening to me? Why is the dream changing?

He opened the gate. Tall lilac bushes surrounded the winding path, so that he couldn't see beyond a few feet. The path was stone, with moss and grass between the cracks. Something was very familiar about the garden. The lilacs bloomed wildly, filling the world with their sweet, sensual fragrance. Along the ground were shoots of grape hyacinths, heads of flowers like fat purple bottle brushes smelling of wine.
Further along the path, Harry saw a rose garden—white roses, old vines, climbing to the sky. A figure sat on a cast iron bench. Harry recognized the figure, and the bench. It was the same kind of bench, painted in that smooth shiny Hunter green, that he had sat on many times before in New Orleans, at the park in Congo Square.

He walked up to the figure. She had her back turned him, wearing a cotton shirt with a faded, pink paisley print. But there was no mistaking who she was.

“Hello, Gran Beryl.”

“Harry! My dear. Come sit with me,” Gran said in her thin, soft Manchester inflection.

Harry sat down next to her. Gran Beryl took his hand in hers.

“Granddad’s roses.”

“Aren't they beautiful?” Harry’s grandmother said. “I've always loved them in full bloom. The blooms only last for a few weeks each year, but they are the best weeks. The garden comes alive.”

Harry soaked in the heavy sweetness of roses. The blooms were angels floating on the tops of stalks. His grandmother herself, with her halo of white hair, resembled a rose, her bloom fresh and lively, her touch spirited.

“Gran Beryl?”

“Yes, my dear?”

“I've missed you so.” Harry leaned his head on her shoulder. It seemed that the Harry of every age was there, leaning on the Gran Beryl throughout their lives together. The baby Harry whom Gran had held in her arms, whose diaper she had changed, and whose bottle she had filled with milk. The toddler Harry with a scraped knee. The school-aged Harry giving her a dandelion head to blow apart together. The teen Harry sharing a lemon drop with her. And then the grown-up Harry, who was simultaneously in the world of the living and the dead.

“And I've missed you, love.” She squeezed his hand, and then turned to give him a hug. She had the familiar Gran Beryl smell of roses and cinnamon. The breeze mixed the fragrance of flowers with a suggestion of the lake, loamy and metallic. Harry experienced the feeling of being underwater, or underground, cool and earthy

“What's happening to me? Am I imagining you?”

“Harry, your love isn't imagined. It's real. That's what counts, isn't it?”

Her hand felt warm and alive in his hands. She was the same as always, her voice tinged with laughter, her eyes kind to him, her body small and soft.

“I didn't expect you.”

“But I’m here. I will always return to you, Harry. Maybe not like this. But I promise.” Gran said comfortingly. She patted his hand. “I will never be too far away.”

“What’s going to happen to me, Gran? Why am I here?”

“Harry, the mind seeks refuge for a reason. You've been badly hurt.”

“I have?”
“You’re here to figure it out.”

Harry felt perplexed and scared—it was as if he was watching himself slide between a state of rational, real things and one that had supernatural occurrences. Nothing seemed reliable.

“How?” Harry asked.

“Poor Harry. Sit with me and enjoy the sun a while.”

Harry felt the order and warmth of his surroundings, the tall oak trees around the periphery, their spreading, bright branches shading a part of the rose garden. The roses were palely glamorous, their fragrance matching the perfection of each corona. The scene was like a surreal illustration. The garden was small and contained, devoid of the noise of the outside world.

“Gran,” Harry said. “Everything’s strange.”

“Oh, love,” Harry’s Gran turned to look at him. She squeezed Harry’s hand again. “Come with me. Let’s take a walk.”

They retraced the way into the garden, out of the small gate and toward the front of the house, toward the lake. At the edge of the lawn, they paused near the sidewalk. As usual, people jogged past, and a few bikers. The sun was shining. In the dream it was never night.

Gran Beryl walked toward the lake, past the sidewalk, into the grass on the other side and down to the water’s edge. Her gray hair ruffled gently in the wind. Pulled out of the water was a small skiff with oars. It was in the dirt, just out of reach of the lapping, dark water. In the lake were other boats like it, with people rowing singly and in pairs. The waves lulled and calmed Harry’s mind. A few sailboats hovered on the horizon, their sails wavering with the wind.

“You’re not giving yourself enough credit, Harry. You’re a bright lad, aren’t you?” Her kind, rosy face smiled at him.

“This house,” Harry ventured. “I keep dreaming about it. What does it mean? Everyone’s always gone. I always feel sad when I’m here.”

“Harry, what did you notice about the house, this time?”

Harry considered the question. “There are drinks on the table. There are toys and photos. People were here. But they left in the middle of eating—no one’s here now. They’ve abandoned it.”

“This is someone’s home, isn’t it?” Gran asked.

“A home,” Harry repeated.

“A house is just a box of things. A home belongs to the heart.” Gran looked at Harry expectantly. Her look implied a deeper meaning.

“Is it my home? With my family?”

Gran laughed softly. “It’s your dream, Harry. You know why it changed. You have the answer.”

Harry looked at his Gran, who was solid and real, but almost not present at the same time. He almost didn’t have the courage to face his dream.

“Gran Beryl—the reason you’re here.” She met his eyes steadily. “Is it because I’m dying?”
“Harry,” Gran Beryl said. “You can make some choices in life. You can't choose your birth. Sometimes you can't choose your death.”

“Is this one of those times?” Harry asked, “When I can't choose?”

Gran Beryl walked over and took his hands. Her smile was reassuring yet enigmatic.

“Don't be afraid, Harry. You can only choose what’s in-between, between life and death. And you have done a marvelous job, haven't you?

“All of this is a part of you, Harry. The house, the horizon. The boats and the people in them. The waves, the sun, the birds. They all come from your mind. They are all part of you. Someday they will take you to a different place.”

“How will I know?”

“When it's time, you'll know,” Gran said. “Harry, sometimes we don't recognize our maps and compasses, but they're there. They’ve always been there. They guide you through the most difficult things. You recognize them in retrospect. Sometimes they are people. When someone loves you enough, he or she never leaves you. You feel them when you most need to. Do you know anyone like that?”


“You are not alone,” Gran said. “You understand?”

Harry said nothing. He gazed down with a feeling of incompleteness. His whole world was a map where routes and people criss-crossed, and there were guide points at every turn. Maps were only as complete as discoveries could fulfill them. Some things did not belong on maps, could not be mapped.

“You're thinking of someone else, love?” Gran asked.

Harry thought of Louis and his words. I'll be your compass. The rum milk punch. The children’s toys. He realized he had been dreaming about his home with Louis, a wishful dream, now that his body was broken, and his mind was floating in a drugged haze.

“My Louis,” Harry said.

Gran Beryl smiled at Harry. The sun reflected from her hair. Her skin was pellucid. A pale light like the moon shone from within her.

“Your true blue,” she said. The lake flashed, reflecting the sun, blue and green glinting off the water. “Remember, Harry, live the in-between.”

Harry blinked his eyes. He slowly drifted through the grayness, his feet shifting and weightless. The horizon darkened, the boats disappeared. Harry faded.

***
“Lou.”

Louis turned around. He had been sitting with Harry for the last hour. He was supposed to be in surgery, but had asked to be excused for a couple of hours.

Harry was in the surgical intensive care unit, his right leg in a cast, in pins. He was sedated and on mechanical ventilation. Surgery had gone well. He had fresh sutures in his scalp, and the right side of his head had been shaved. His right eye was swollen shut. His right cheek was a violet dahlia. So far there did not seem any changes in his neurological status.

“Liam.” Liam was in his scrubs. He had his bag and was ready to head out.

“I don't suppose you're going to dinner tonight?”

Louis sighed. “No. I'm going to stay here. Maybe Harry will wake up.”

“You could just have the nurse page you, you know? It's the last dinner of the year. Last chance to say goodbye to the seniors.”

“Give my apologies, will you, Liam? I just—want to be here,” Louis said, “in case anything happens.”

Liam pulled up a chair and sat down next to Louis.

“Lou, it’s not your fault.” He touched Louis’s knee lightly.

“I know,” Louis turned away. “I just wish I'd been there.”

“Louis,” Liam scratched his hair, “we all wish this hadn't happened. We all love Harry. But Lou, look on the bright side. He’s doing well, so far.”

“He hasn't woken up, Liam. How do you know what's happened to his mind?” Louis looked at Liam. Dark splotches ringed his pale blue eyes. His eyelids draped down heavily. His face had steep lines around the mouth.

“That's why he's in an induced coma. Jeesh, what am I telling you for. You know this as well as I do. He’ll wake up when he’s more stable. It'll be hours, maybe days from now.” Liam patted Louis’s hands. “You should go home. Or, come to dinner.”

Louis knew this was the reasonable thing to do. His knowledge and experience taught him that patients like Harry, with a subdural hematoma and a serious concussion, were always kept sedated to allow for the brain to recover, especially those who had more internal injuries and had surgery. He knew Harry was unconscious to everything around him. He has no contact with the outside world.

“Liam, can I tell you something?”

“Sure. What is it?”

Louis shifted in his seat. He chewed his lips and twisted his hands in his lap.
“I don't know if Harry ever told you—“

Liam waited for Louis to continue. Louis took a breath, held it, let it out.

“—our argument—right after the ISC—Harry and I haven't spoken since then. And it's—I'm—I've been feeling lost, to tell the truth.”

“You have?” Liam seemed surprised, one eyebrow raised. His face showed concern. The room was quiet but for the beeping from Harry’s monitors, and the baffles of the ventilator pumping up and down.

“I started the stupid argument. No, it—it's a long story. But Liam, I feel responsible. This is something I did. It's like I was the driver and I tried to kill him.”

“Louis, of course you’re not!” Liam said. “How can you even think you had anything to do with it?”

Louis looked up. He had been so deep in his pain that he felt he’d broadcast it to the entire planet. Either he was a good actor, or Liam was totally oblivious.

“Of course I didn't physically push him into the path of the car. But I feel like I did it, somehow. Pushed him. I left him in Barcelona, Liam. I wanted to—there was no reason to hurt him like that, but I did it. I can't even take it back now. It's too late.”

“Lou, you know I'm not the gossiping type of person,” Liam said, his two hands open in front of him. “I try not to interfere.”

“That is true. You stay out of other people’s business.” Louis sighed.

“Exactly. So I don't know what happened between you, and I don't really want to know. But I'm one hundred percent sure that Harry’s accident has nothing to do with Barcelona. Absolutely nothing. You hear me?”

“What happened was I reacted emotionally,” Louis said. “Rashly. Like I always do. I can't help it. I couldn’t zip it—even with Harry telling me everything was okay. I was just tired of not knowing—what was going to happen to Harry, to us.”

“Lou,” Liam said, “listen to me. You didn't do anything to cause this. If you argued, it was both of your fault. It takes two to tango, and all that. Your blaming yourself doesn't help anything, and anyway it’s not true. Harry was okay. Trust me on it.”

Something dawned on Louis, a terrible question. He was afraid even to voice it, but he felt he had to entrust it with someone.

“Li, you don't think Harry—that he—did this? On purpose?” Louis’s face was as worried as Liam had ever seen him, anxious and wracked with guilt.

“Was Harry trying to kill himself?” Liam pulled back, horrified. “God, I'm sure he wasn't. He’s a dramatic person, but he wouldn't do that. Not when he has so much to live for. Not when he had so much planned.” Liam looked at Louis abruptly, stopping himself too late. Louis recognized the look on his face and narrowed his eyes.

“Oh, shit. I probably shouldn't have said that,” Liam muttered.

“Li?”
“It’s none of my business,” Liam said. “I’ve said too much already.”

“Lee-yum. What are you talking about?”

“I shouldn't.”

“Liam Payne, if you don't say what's on your mind right now, I’m going to strangle you with my bare hands and pull it out of your throat.”

Liam waffled between reluctance and fear. “All right. It's probably nothing. But Harry asked me—a few weeks ago—“ He stopped.

“What? What did he ask you?”

“He said, Liam, since you know the most about history of anyone I know,” Liam said. “I do have a good sense of history, you have to admit. I would argue that I know more about MSH than the president of the hospital. I'm just saying.”

Louis rolled his eyes and threw up his hands. “Ugh!! Can you please get on with it!”

“All right! Harry asked me what was the most historic jewelry store in Boston.”

“Oh,” Louis’s expectations fell a bit. “I see.”

“For your information, it's not only the most historic in Boston, but the most in all of the United States. Shreve Crump & Low, the oldest continuously operational jewelry store in the USA. Did you know they make the trophy for the Davis Cup?”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Did you hear what I said, Louis? Jewelry store,” Liam said. “Maybe he was going to buy something special, if you know what I mean. I don't want to get your hopes up. I know it's probably unfair to say it right now. But you forced me—I had to.”

“Yeah,” Louis said. “It's all right, Li. I don't think that’s anything to do with me. Maybe he wanted to get something for his family. Unfortunately, we’ve already had a not-so-great history with jewelry exchange. I highly doubt Harry was asking about it for me.”

“Really? What happened?”

Louis waved his hand. “Another time, Liam. It's a long story.”

“Interpret what I said however you want, Lou. I'm just the messenger. I just think it was weird for him to ask that question.” Liam got up to go. “People go to Shreve Crump & Low for one reason, and it’s not to get your ears pierced. I'm just saying. Take it for what it’s worth. When he wakes up, you can ask him.”

Louis gazed at Liam morosely.

“He's gonna wake up, Louis.” Louis was skeptical, yet deep down he wanted to have hope, and Liam gave him hope. He was grateful for it. “He will! Come on. Think positive,” Liam paused. “Hey, you know what? I just thought of something.”

“What?”

“What about Lady? You know, Harry’s dog.”
Louis’s eyes widened. “Oh my God.”

“She must have been running with him, right?”

Louis stood up. “You’re right, Li. I’m such an idiot. I didn’t even think about her.” Louis thought about the small creature, how confused she must have been to see Harry bleeding and unconscious, to witness the clamorous ambulance lights, the police sirens. If she was still alive.

Liam said, “Should we call the dog pound? Is there anything I can do?”

Louis shook his head. “I can’t even imagine what happened. No one’s looking for her. She could be anywhere. I guess I’ll check the ASPCA, the pound. I mean—I don’t know. I don’t know where to start.”

“Do you want me to help?”

Louis looked gratefully at Liam. He was a good friend.

“Nah. Go to your dinner party. I’ll take care of it.” Louis watch Liam turn to go. “Hey, Liam?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.” Liam flicked his chin and nodded. With a weak smile, he left.

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The first thing Louis did was to go to Storrow Drive. He did not know the Esplanade well—the park was huge. Louis knew only the approximate location. Lady could be anywhere. But at least he could start with the scene of the accident. He had to see it for himself, anyway, to witness it.

He knew where Charles Street crossed Storrow to get to the Esplanade. This must have been the place. The traffic was back to normal, of course. The wide rotary was crawling with an afternoon traffic jam. Louis climbed the footbridge to the other side. He couldn’t see much from the sidewalk. Storrow was paved in dark asphalt. There was a scattering of broken glass along the curb. Otherwise there were no signs of accident—no blood, no fur, and, thankfully, no carcass of a small dog. He knew it didn’t mean anything. Everything had been cleaned since this morning. For everyone else here, it was just another afternoon traffic headache.

Louis still had Harry’s key. He crossed the footbridge again and walked along the uneven, cobbled sidewalks of Charles Street. How many times had he walked along this way? He would go to Harry’s apartment and make a few phone calls. He planned to bring a pillow to the hospital for Harry, so he could wake up with a familiar smell, a familiar comfort.

He would call the pound first, then maybe some animal rescue societies. Lady could be wandering
the streets of Boston. Hopefully she still had her collar and tag.

As he got closer to the apartment building, Louis saw a shadow near the bushes, a rustling noise. He stopped and looked, and the noise stopped. After a few moments, Louis continued up the walk to the front door.

Louis approached the door. He put his key into the door, only to have a small, dark shadow dart out from the bushes to his right.

It was Lady. A leash trailed from her collar. Her fur was a mess. Her right side was scraped and bloodied, and she walked with a limp. She whimpered as she rubbed her nose into Louis’s leg.

“Lady, my sweet girl,” said Louis, gently picking her up. She whimpered and growled anxiously, her tail down. “Come here, darling.”

He carried her into the building, then up the flights to Harry’s apartment. Man, she was heavy. He opened the door and entered the apartment for the first time in many weeks.

Louis switched on the lights. It was the same place. It smelled like Harry. The bed, unmade, in the corner. A mug on the kitchen table. The paintings, the framed photo. The wall of records and the huge audiophile system. Records leaning against the wall. The bookshelf full of poetry and RBB leaning drunkenly on the nightstand. The drawing of Louis and Harry on top of the shelf, propped against the wall. Even the little “x” of masking tape on the floor.

Louis took Lady to the bathroom. He detached the leash and the collar. I belong to Harry Styles.

“You and me both,” Louis said out loud. He ran the water until it was warm, then gently set her inside. He used Harry’s shampoo to clean the blood from Lady’s fur. He got a small face cloth to wipe her down. Lady whimpered painfully, trembled and shivered in his arms. She gazed balefully at Louis. Louis felt sorry for how scared she looked. He was careful to find any open wounds in her fur.

“You're all right now, my dear. Let's get you clean, and then we’ll get you some dinner, okay?”

He rubbed his fingers around her belly, feeling her old scars. He felt so much for everything she had endured in her short life, for Harry’s love for her, for what Harry had done for her. But then, Lady had loved him back, unconditionally. She was his number one fan.

It took a long time to untangle her fur from all the blood and dirt. Louis noticed a superficial cut along her right side, about five centimeters—same as Harry, Louis thought. It wasn't deep enough to need sutures, but it bled after the old blood was washed away, and Louis had to press on it to get it to stop. Lady growled unhappily. By the time they were done, the water had turned cold.

Louis lifted Lady from the tub and dried her with a towel. He used Harry’s blow dryer to get her fur dried a bit more. Then he carried her to the living room, setting her on the couch. Louis got a dish each of food and water and set them on the floor.

He felt each one of her legs. The small muscles tensed around her delicate bones. Nothing felt fractured. When Louis touched her right front paw, Lady growled in a low tone and withdrew it. Perhaps she had a tiny bone fracture or soft tissue injury. He would have to call the vet in the morning. All in all, Lady seemed remarkably intact.

“Shhh, it's okay, baby. All right, let's have some dinner.” Louis set her on the floor. Lady made no move to eat her dinner. After some minutes, Louis picked her back up, and then gave her dinner from his palms, one nibble at a time. He rubbed her neck while she ate, in small, comforting strokes.
Some twenty minutes later, the dinner was gone. He set her down to drink her water.

Louis washed his hands in the kitchen sink. He opened the fridge to see what Harry had to eat.

Well, this was pathetic. Three high protein yogurts. A kale salad mix. Mineral water. Leftover something—some kind of protein in sauce—in a glass container.

Louis wasn't hungry anyway. He took out a yogurt and ate it, more out of duty to his body than hunger.

He walked over to the vinyl records and looked through the selection. Louis walked to the records leaning against the wall. Some of these still had the clear shrink wrap from the factory. Harry had not changed. He still kept buying his vinyls. He was probably single-handedly keeping the industry alive.

Louis pulled out a record that Harry must have bought not too long ago. The band photo was on the cover—four handsome men, sitting on a couch, with amused expressions. Louis thought they looked familiar, though he’d never heard of the band—One Direction. The album was titled Made in the AM. Louis set it on the turntable.

I want to write you a song
One that's beautiful as you are sweet
With just a hint of pain
For the feeling that I get when you are gone
I want to write you a song

I want to build you a boat
One that's strong as you are free
So any time you think that your heart is gonna sink
You know it won't
I want to build you a boat

Everything I need I get from you
Giving back is all I wanna do

The telephone rang. One, two, three, four times. The machine picked up with Harry’s scratchy baritone voice. On the machine, he sounded like he had a cold. “Hi! You’ve reached Harry’s landline. Please leave your number. I'll give you a ring as soon as I can. [Beep]”

“Dr. Styles. Yes, this is Claiborne Cabot from Shreve Crump & Low. I was calling to let you know that—“

Louis sprinted to pick up the phone.

“Hello?” he said breathlessly into the phone.

“Yes? Dr. Styles?”

“No, no,” Louis said. “I'm his friend, Louis. Harry’s not here at the moment. Can I take a message for him?”
“Yes, please. Dr. Styles wanted to be notified as soon as possible when his order arrived. Can you please let him know it’s just come in?”

“The order?” Louis remembered Liam’s words with elation and dread. *What had Liam said was the name of the store? Wasn’t it Shreve Crump something?*

“Yes. He had ordered a set of wedding bands. The engraving is done and I must say, they are exceptionally beautiful. I think he’ll be very pleased.”

So. There it was. Louis’s blood pressure dropped to the basement. His heart swam through an ice-cold sea. His hand shook as he held the phone. He chewed his bottom lip just to be able to feel something.

“Did—did you say wedding bands? Plural?”

“Yes, sir. Two men’s wedding bands. I hope that was the correct order.”

Louis paused so long that Claiborne Cabot said, on the other end, “Hello? Sir? Are you still there?”

“No, yeah, I’m here.” Louis started.

“They may need to be adjusted for size. We are open every day from 10 AM to 6 PM, Thursdays until 7 PM,” Cabot said in his helpful, salesperson voice.

“I see.” Louis’s mind was a blank, as if struck by lightning.

“Might you have any idea when Dr. Styles might be coming in?”

Louis churned the question in his mind. “It might be a while, honestly. I’ll try to give him the message.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You’re welcome. And thanks.”

Just before Louis hung up the phone, he heard Claiborne Cabot say, on the other end, “Louis?”

Louis rushed the phone back to his ear. “Yeah?”

“I’m sorry, I just wanted to add. You are Harry’s Louis?”

“I—I guess so. Yes.”

“Then I want to give you my congratulations, sir,” Claiborne said.

“I’m sorry. What did you say?” Louis’s heart was hammering a thousand miles an hour.

“I hope it isn’t presumptuous of me. Harry did talk about you to some extent. I hope this means good news? Congratulations to you both. He seems like a wonderful person.”

Louis could not find the words to express himself. There was too much information to process. The volume of his emotions seem to fill the room and spill out through the windows, through the ceilings, filter down drain pipes and ventilation ducts. It was too much to contain in a studio apartment, even one filled with every reminder of Harry.

Louis cleared his throat. And cleared it again. “He is a wonderful person, Mr. –“
“Cabot. Claiborne Cabot, sir.”

“Harry is a wonderful person, Mr. Cabot. He's the best person.” Louis swallowed. He hoped his voice wouldn't crack.

“I suppose you wouldn't be marrying him if he weren’t,” Mr. Cabot joked.

Louis swallowed with emotion. “Yeah, I suppose not.” He paused again, and then asked, “Mr. Cabot? You said Harry talked about me. Can you tell me what he said? I’m just curious.”

“He said, if I remember correctly, that you were a passionate person. Someone who was generous with love. A person of—distinctive tastes.”

“Oh?”

Describe me, Harry. Talk to me as if you're describing me to a stranger. Louis felt faint at the sound of Harry’s words, unprompted, honest. They stung Louis to the bone. He could picture Harry standing in the jewelry store, talking about him with exasperation and love, trying to describe him to a stranger so he could pick out the perfect wedding bands.

“He also said that he loved you ‘beyond reason.’ I think those were his exact words.”


“I’m sorry? Did you say something, sir?”

“Never mind,” Louis said. “One more question, Mr. Cabot, if you don't mind.”

“Of course.”

“How long did it take for the rings to be ordered?”

“Including the engraving?” Cabot asked.

“I mean from the first time Harry came in to the store,” Louis explained. “Including everything. Do you remember?”

“Oh, it's on the receipt right here. If you’ll be patient with me.” Louis heard the crackles and rustles of the phone being set down on the other end, and then being switched to speaker. “It was in April. Mid-April, sir.”

“I see,” Louis replied.

Three or four weeks after the ISC. The bastard. The fucking bastard. Why was he so—loyal. Damn it. Why.

He knew why. It was because Harry could not give up on things when they most looked hopeless, on the thing that was most worthwhile saving. Harry believed in the grandest beliefs. Harry loved him. Harry had been planning and waiting.

Real love.

Real.

In his heart, Louis knew he had been waiting too.
“Mr. Cabot, thank you for the call. You can't know what it means to me.”

“You’re welcome, sir. We’ll hold the rings here. If you give a call before coming, I will have them ready for you. I’m here every day except Sunday. And again, my sincere congratulations.”

Louis hung up the phone. For the first time in ages, Louis didn't know what to say or how to react. And worse, he had no one to not react to. He was alone with Lady, who looked tired.

He picked her up and tucked her in his lap.

“Well, Lady, what do you think of that?” Lady looked at Louis with disinterest. She whined and put her head down. “Harry is a tricky one, isn’t he? I wish I could kill him, but it looks like I’ve missed my chance again. Bad timing. It’s the story of my life.” Louis petted Lady’s head and back, stroked her caramel fur.

“You're coming home with me for a while,” Louis said. “Let's get some things together.”

Louis cuddled Lady until she looked comfortable. Then he put her on the couch. He got her food, dish, collar, and leash, and put them all into a bag.

Louis took all of Lady’s things and Harry’s pillow downstairs to put them in his car. If he hated driving before, he was completely abhorrent of it now.

He came back up to get Lady. Just before he turned to leave, Louis glanced back at Harry’s nightstand.

He shouldn't. No, it was private property. He had never touched it when he was here before. To read it meant crossing a line. He really, really should not.

Finally, Louis opened the nightstand table and did what he knew he would do all along. He took out the red leather journal. The last time he’d seen it was in Barcelona, when he’d tucked his birthday ring inside.

*Maybe I won't read it. I'll just keep it safe for Harry,* he thought. But he knew that it was probably untrue.

Louis carried the journal and Lady downstairs, got in his car, and drove home.

***

Harry counted: there were thirteen white geese. He was flying high above, looking down at a limestone cloister. In the middle was an elevated pond. Tall, gothic columns soared around the cloister, surrounded by spikes, iron fences. The geese cackled and flew. Their white feathers contrasted with the darkened, aged limestone.
“Why thirteen?” Harry asked.

“How old are you?” she asked.

“Thirteen.”

“Me too,” she said. “That's how old I was when I died. There are thirteen geese because of me. One for each year.”

Harry looked next to him. A young girl, her body nude but coated in snow, hovered next to him, her flaxen hair cascading down, her pale eyelashes like flecks of dust around her topaz eyes. Around her thin neck, she wore a necklace with the cross of the crucified Christ.

“Where are we?” Harry said.

“Barcelona Cathedral,” she said. “My home.”

She took Harry's hand and they flew inside the cathedral. The limestone was centuries old, and the interior dark.

The hushed murmuring of voices and shuffling steps ascended toward the ceiling, as crowds wound through the vast interior of the basilica. Somewhere below, Harry heard a choir practicing.

Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen,  
Wohl denen, die in deinem Hause wohnen,  
die loben dich immerdar

“What are they singing?”

She laughed. “Do you like it?”

It was beautiful. The voices were like waves that tumbled over each other, each section a higher wave, until they receded, and were built again by the tugging of violins. The song was like a circle that was never broken, and comforted Harry. It seemed familiar, but oddly, Harry had no recollection of ever hearing it before.

“What does it mean?” Harry asked.

“How lovely are thy dwelling places/ Blessed are they that dwell in thy house.”

“It's nice.”

“Yes, it is.”

Harry glanced over. The girl was now clothed in a cotton tunic that covered her entire body, with a rope around the waist. She did not look like she lived in modern times, but did not look old either. She was like an illustration from a medieval book, but her face was smooth and vivacious, like any normal girl. She was timeless.

Harry hovered high above the floor of the cathedral, where he could see the tops of tourists’ heads milling about. It all seemed familiar, the gold leaf in the statues, the patiently suffering face of the crucified Christ, the heavy limestone and wood paneling on the walls. The earthly angels defied
gravity and flew up in their heavy marble bodies, eyes fixed on heaven. It was familiar, although he had never been here before.

“I'm sorry,” Harry said finally. “Who are you?”

She smiled. “I’m Eulalia. And you’re Harry Styles.”

Harry said with surprise, “How do you know who I am?”

Eulalia beamed. “I’ve been waiting for you for a long time.”

“Were you watching me? I felt that, the last time I was here. In the spring.”

“I might have been, Harry.”

Harry was too intrigued to be scared. The girl spoke so quietly, it appeared as if she didn't even open her mouth. Her voice merely manifested in his head.

“Do you remember everyone who comes here?”

“Memory is a construct of the living, Harry. For me, all days exist together. Memory is a matter of choosing.”

Harry didn’t understand exactly what she was saying, and she was very strange for a girl of thirteen.

She continued, “Some people are more alive than others, even as they breathe. Time is also a construct. As you know, Harry, merely existing and passing time isn't really living.”

“No offense, Eulalia, but you're a really weird kid.”

“You are also unusual, Harry Styles. You trust in the spirituality of kids. Children are the most purely spiritual people in the world.” Eulalia stopped and stood upright in mid-air, facing Harry. “I think you knew that.”

Harry stood upright also. “No, you're right.”

“Come on.” She flew toward the middle of the cathedral, hovering over the pews. People milled about. A few kids ran around playing tag.

“Eulalia?” Harry’s curiosity overtook him. “If you don't mind my asking—how did you die?”

“Legend has it there were thirteen ways,” she said. “One for each year. There was one where Roman soldiers put me in a barrel, stuck knives in it, and rolled me down the street. It has a name, the Baixada de Santa Eulalia.”

“Oh,” Harry was speechless.

“I didn't suffer.” Saint Eulalia looked toward the statue of Christ. “Like you, I believed that God was everywhere. And He was.”

Harry looked up at her in surprise.

“Oh, I know all about that,” she said, smiling. “This is your dream, remember? I know everything you know, and some things you don’t.”

“Were you scared to die, though?” Harry asked. “You were so young. Didn’t you want to live
“Life’s fullness is in the passion of its living,” Eulalia said. “By that criterion, I lived an immense life. I lived my passion, Harry. I don’t wish for more. It was enough.”

She took his hand and they hovered over the tourists dressed in shorts and tank tops, wearing scarves around their shoulders. They left the church and flew outside to the square. The ascended so that they were on level with the gargoyles on the cathedral spires.

Then Harry instinctively looked down on the square. Hundreds of people were gathered in small groups, here and there. A line snaked from the cathedral of people waiting to go in.

Harry noticed right away. Two boys with their arms around each other’s waists, one with a long fringe, the other with hair curling at the ends. From here, they looked very small, but their clothes were unmistakable. One was in a navy and white striped shirt. Beanie. Persimmon colored pants. Toms shoes, no socks. The other one, Harry knew intimately, of course. Aqua polo, khaki shorts. They were deep in discussion.

“We were so young,” Harry said, staring at himself and Louis.

“You were thirteen,” Eulalia said. “Same as I am.”

“If only we knew,” Harry said.

“Kids know more than you give them credit for, Harry. They feel their spiritual selves. They trust their emotions. They believe in the great capabilities of the heart.”

Harry looked at the pale girl who had lived a fuller life at thirteen than most people ever would.

“I don’t think we can compare, Eulalia. You and I.”

The saint turned to Harry, her eyes clear as water. “Not everyone has to be a saint, Harry,” she said. “To live a full life is difficult enough.”

“I guess. I just have ordinary human problems—just messiness,” Harry said. “What if we hadn’t met, Louis and I? Maybe things would have been simpler.”

“Whole lifetimes are wasted on what-if’s, Harry. There are very few epiphanies in life. Very few people meet the person who is meant for them. You should appreciate what you have.”

Harry stared at Eulalia, whose body seemed to wave in and out of visibility. He questioned her with his eyes.

“Try to take the long view, Harry. Sometimes pleasure feels fleeting, and pain seems to last forever. Remember? Time is a construct.”

Harry had the feeling of a presence around him, going through him, allowing him to see the transparency of the world.

“Eulalia, can I ask something? Do you feel?—do you have any pain?” Harry asked. “How can you give advice about pain if you don’t have it? How do you know?”

Eulalia looked steadily at Harry, challenging his perceptions. “Oh, Harry. I know. When you’re inside the pain, it’s hard to understand anything else, let alone question why. Suffering feels very real, pain hurts so much. But pain is a also miracle for the living.”
“A miracle? Why? What do you mean?”

“Pain is a gift in life, Harry.”

She looked at him sympathetically. Harry looked into her wide, hazel eyes. There lay entire other worlds, universes. But her eyes were also pigments, nerves, rods, cones, vessels, the retina, the cornea, the vitreous humor, the conjunctiva, the sclera, the iris. Her eyes were metaphoric and elemental, the conduit and the message.

“Pain gives you the key to the right questions. It gives focus to life’s purpose,” Saint Eulalia said with her eyes.

Harry waited in silence for Eulalia to continue. But she was silent as well, and her statement hovered in the air.

They came to stand in the square, next to young Harry and Louis. Their faces were shining with happiness—and with love. It had taken all of one day for them to fall in love. They were rapt in each other’s worlds and noticed no one and nothing else.

“Be strong,” said Saint Eulalia. “Good-bye, Harry Styles.”

The square faded away.

***

The senior awards had been given. The waiters cleared away the plates with the main entrees—steak or salmon. They began setting up for the dessert course and coffee. All around were the noises of clinking silverware, plates, conversation. The younger residents had presented their roast video, and the large ballroom was awash in both tears and laughter.

Niall and Alice sat with other interns in one of the tables furthest from the stage. They were dressed in black tie—for the first time since they started dating. Niall was wearing his tortoise-shell glasses, and a black tuxedo with a black cummerbund, a fuchsia-colored silk pocket square tucked next to his satin lapel. To break up the seriousness, he wore pink and aqua harlequin socks in his expensive leather loafers. He tugged at his collar, unaccustomed to the constraint.

Alice was in a daffodil-colored gown with thin straps, cut close to the body with a satin a-line skirt. For once, her hair was not in a bun or ponytail, but cascaded around her face loosely in waves. She wore an open-toe sandal in heels, with a sparkling sequin appliqué in a satin band across her toes, which were painted a pale gold. She was unrecognizable as a former junior rodeo champ.

Liam sat with them, in his black tuxedo with silver cummerbund and handkerchief. On his wrists were silver cufflinks and a Swiss watch.

They sat with fellow interns with the conspicuous absence of Louis and Harry. The mood in the
room was jovial despite what had happened. Most of the residents were ready to move on with the next chapter of their lives.

“I wish they could be here,” Alice said, “the biggest party of the year.”

“Me too,” said Niall. “It’s kind of a celebration of our friendships, too, you know?”

The friends nodded to each other. Wine flowed freely, and conversations were loud and happy all around them.

“At the expense of the department!” Liam said. “That’s the best part.”

Alice said, “And the worst thing is, we’ve been waiting for this fellowship announcement forever. They're missing it.”

A waitress took away their plates. Another waiter carried six or seven dessert plates on a tray, and began setting them down: cheesecake. Yet another waiter filled their cups with regular or decaffeinated coffee. Flutes of half-drunk champagne were scattered across the tables, as well as half-empty baskets of dinner rolls, red and white wine-filled glasses.

They all looked toward Dr. Fernbank, sitting with the faculty near the front of the stage. He seemed a bit more frail than he did at the beginning of the year. Every day, his disease took its toll, but they were too busy and it happened too slowly for them to see it. He was a surgeon afflicted, ironically, by a disease that surgery could do nothing for.

“Do you think Dr. Fernbank will teach the interns next year?” Alice asked.

“Fernbank will teach until he can't move anymore,” Niall said. “The man’s dedicated. His mind is like a steel trap.”

“I think I learned more in the last year than I did in all of med school,” Liam said. “No joke.”

Alice and Niall agreed. Then the hall started to quiet down again, as Dr. Fernbank made his way to the podium. A microphone was brought to him.

“Welcome, everyone, and congratulations,” Dr. Fernbank said. “I’m so pleased to be here right now, and so proud. Most of you have been interns with me. And as you can see, you not only survived, but are thriving. The ones that didn't pass internship are buried and gone. Don't worry about them. You won't find their bodies.” The room laughed.

He continued, “Surgery is something that I’m passionate about. Even though I no longer perform surgery, it is in every aspect of my life today—in my teaching, in my thinking about the diagnosis of disease and the best way to manage a problem. As you know, surgeons are a peculiar breed of stubborn, tenacious, smart, and cantankerous people”—another round of laughter—“whom I happen to love. Surgeons, we get the job done. Right?” He received a round of applause.

“So it is with great pleasure that I’m going to announce the winner of the first ever MSH cardiothoracic fellowship tract to an intern.

“As you know, in evaluating a candidate, we look at many factors: not only dexterity, intelligence, and fund of knowledge, but also creativity, innovation, leadership, camaraderie. Not everyone wants to be a cardiothoracic surgeon, and not everyone is suited to be one. We’re training not only a cardiothoracic surgeon. We are training a future teacher, and, hopefully, a future colleague.

“The person being awarded tonight has impressed not only me, but every attending physician they
have interacted with. From the very beginning, we noticed the dedication, the meticulous attention to
details, the scholarship. Not only did this candidate do a good job with their own work, but they
went above and beyond to contribute to the team.

“Their calm and collected reaction to stressful situations and their clear leadership were equally
impressive. Many times, this person has been the calm center of complicated situations, and has
managed them with poise and intelligence.

“It is therefore my pleasure to present the fellowship to someone whom we believe will excel in the
training, and who will take every advantage to make us proud.”

The room waited for the announcement quietly. Glasses clinked as waiters stood to the side.

“Dr. Alice Miller, please come up.”

***

Lady was asleep on Louis’s bed. He had made a pile of blankets for her to sleep on. He rubbed her
back and the top of her head until she was finally comfortable enough to sleep. The poor creature
was exhausted. It was after 10 PM.

The apartment was eerie in its darkness and quietness. Louis switched on a few more lights in the
bedroom. He hadn't heard from Niall or Liam after the senior dinner. Odd. He was sure Harry had
been the favorite to win the fellowship, but perhaps they didn't want to disturb him.

Louis went to the kitchen and got a glass of water. He then went back to bed, snuggling under a
down comforter and a quilt. He could hear Harry’s voice laughing at him in his mind.

Little kitten, you're going to be smothered to death under all those covers. It's two hundred degrees
under there.

I have cold feet, Haz. Get in here so I can warm them up.

Your cold feet are the absolute worst. They're like icicles from Antarctica and you plaster them
against my shins as soon as I'm in bed. You're mean.

I can't help it. You're a human furnace. It's your job as a good boyfriend, isn't it?

Louis smiled. He hated being cold. Harry would mutter in his sleep and kick all the covers off, and
Louis would elbow him and furiously pull the covers back on. Their eternal struggle. The burning
angel and the frozen little devil.

Louis looked down at the red leather journal. If he opened it, the transgression would be done. He
could never go back.
But Louis had unanswered questions—so many, now. There was so much he wanted to ask Harry. So much was unknown.

He opened it to the first page.

*Moved everything in finally. I called mum as soon as the last box was in the door. She sounded relieved. Should have called her the minute I got here....*

***

Louis fed Lady first thing in the morning and examined her leg. Her ankle was puffy and she winced when he touched it. He would have to take her to the vet today—later in the afternoon, when he had a half-day off.

He went to work an hour early, so that he could get done with pre-rounds and check on Harry. He’d asked the night-shift nurse to be paged if anything changed, but no one had called him overnight.

Harry’s pillow tucked under his arm, Louis tried not to run into the intensive care unit. He was astonished to see that overnight, Harry had been extubated. There was no longer an endotracheal tube in his mouth. His right leg was still in a cast, and he had IV tubing and other lines connecting him to machines. He had a clean gown on over his body. The right side of his hair had been shaved. Black sutures ran jaggedly down the scalp. His right eye was bruised and swollen completely shut. It looked like he had a latex horror mask on the right side of his face, but they were real scabs and scars.

Louis sat down next to Harry. He put the pillow at the foot of his bed, not wanting to wake him. His hand reached over and he held Harry’s hand, closed his thumb over the tape and plastic of the lines. Harry’s hand felt warm and dry, somewhat swollen. Louis traced the sinews and tendons in his hand, over the small tattooed cross, even the absurd bends in his knuckles that Louis knew like a topographic map.

Harry lay inert. His chest barely stirred with his respirations.

A nurse wandered over. “Good morning, Louis.” She checked the monitors, the intravenous lines. She charted into the computer next to the monitors.

“Good morning,” Louis said. “Harry was extubated overnight?”

“The intensivist thought he was doing really well. He actually responded to voice last night—opened his eyes. He’s expected to be awake sometime today. He wasn’t conscious most of the night.”

“Does he—know?” Louis watched her face.

“He wasn’t really conscious, Louis,” she looked at him sympathetically. “He was asked to squeeze
the intensivist’s hand before extubation, and he did that. But he’s not really aware. He’s still too out of it. They turned off his sedative meds only last night.”

“Okay.” Louis knew that concussions had a variable response time, especially when there was blood in the brain.

“It might be hours or days, Lou. That is, if he doesn't take a turn for the worse.” She gave a resigned smile and walked away.

Louis sat quietly watching Harry, and then decided he might have to go to work. It was almost 6 AM. The trauma team would be waiting for rounds downstairs. He was on call today and had to get ready.

“Haz, I’ll come check on you later, yeah? Rest well.”

Louis gave Harry’s hand a squeeze. He turned to stand up, paused, and then sat back down, clearing his throat to talk. Louis felt compelled to say something, but even with Harry unconscious, he couldn't bear to look him in the eye. Literally one eye, his left, since the right was totally swollen shut.

“By the way, and this is so fucked up. I mean, not you; no, you didn't fuck up, but—it's so ill-timed, you know. I don't even—anyhow, your rings…” Louis looked away, his voice wavering. “This guy named Claiborne Cabot called, from Shreve. He said to tell you—that the wedding rings were in. So—and—the engraving—he said they were beautiful.” Louis blinked a tear away. Stupid. “Haz, why didn't you say anything? I mean, I know why. But why?!”

Louis took Harry’s limp left hand in both of his own.

“You're such an idiot. I hate you sometimes. You know that, I guess.”

Louis thought he felt Harry’s hand stir in his, but he wasn't sure. It might have been his emotional state, or his imagination. It might have been Louis’s stubborn belief that he could make anything happen by sheer willpower. *Wake up, Harry!* *Stop playing. My fucking fault.* Louis’s whole mind concentrated on waking Harry, almost like a prayer. He gave Harry’s hand a tentative squeeze and waited.

Nothing.

Louis looked down at Harry’s fingers, slightly splayed apart, wrapped with tape and bandages. His nails still had some dirt and blood underneath, where they could not be scrubbed out.

“I hate you so much, you're imprinted on me,” Louis said, softly. “I hate your obstinace. I hate your logic. I hate your smile and your dimple, the way you pet dogs and the way you laugh. I hate your kindness and your strength. I hate your heart, your poetry, your never giving up. I hate your need to save everything that's vulnerable and needs saving, including me. I hate that you saved me.”

Louis looked away. “I'm going now, but I'll be back to hate you some more later. Don't do anything while I'm gone, okay?”

As he turned his head away, Louis thought he saw Harry move his head a fraction, a shadow of a movement. Louis raised himself from his chair and leaned closer to look at Harry.

Harry’s pupils moved under his eyelids.

And then, unexpectedly, Harry’s fingers flickered against Louis’s hands—very lightly, but
unmistakably. Louis jumped in shock. There was no question Harry had moved on his own.

“Haz? Are you there?”

Pause.

Again, a twitch in the fingers.

“Can you open your eyes? Look at me.”

For a few seconds, nothing happened. Then one eye slowly opened, his left, the one that was not swollen shut. The eye was focused on nothing, staring into the distance. As if following the source of Louis’s voice, Harry trained his eye on Louis’s face, staring past him, his face expressionless.

Louis said nothing. He waited for Harry, not knowing whether Harry was engaging reality, whether Harry was actually there, or whether his brain was merely responding to random verbal prompts. He didn't know whether Harry could even see him or recognize him.

Harry tilted his head. He shifted his head and looked down at his hand, at Louis’s hands. Then Harry squeezed his hand again.

“Haz? What are you trying to say?” Louis came close to Harry’s face. He smelled like hospital soap and blood and greasy hair and sweat, like chemicals and ICU, dank and sour.

For a long time, there was only silence. Louis waited and waited, and finally decided to give up. Harry’s brain was too injured. It was too much to hope for. Maybe they hadn't been gestures of intention, only delirious movements. Louis sighed. He put Harry’s hand back on the bed and turned to go.

Just as Louis was leaving, he heard a human noise, an exhalation, a whisper. He swung around quickly to watch Harry. Harry had both eyes closed. But there was a sound from his lips, louder than a breath.

“What did you say, Harry?” Louis asked.

After waiting for what seemed like an hour, Louis heard Harry whisper, “You.”

At first Louis thought he said Lou. But he didn't. He had said You.

Harry took another breath, and the words eased out, like an oil slick, one slurred after the other. “You—got—“

“Harry? What do you mean? What have I got?”

Louis watched Harry take painfully slow breaths in and out, his chest rising and falling as though dragging through water. The EKG leads slowed when he took a breath in, his heart compressed by the lungs. His pulse slowed, too. His physiology was a conversation in beeps, with highs and lows, acceleration and deceleration, pauses and hesitations. It was a broken song.

Harry took a breath in and held it, preparing to talk. When he did, the words slurred out, tumbling one after another. “Dagger,” Harry said, softly, with a harsh rasp. He turned his tattooed left arm, pronating his hand. “Rose.” He moved two fingers.

Louis touched his own arm. He was acutely aware that Harry hadn't been delusional. Harry had seen his tattoo, next to Harry’s rose, and had acknowledged it. Harry had understood.
“Yeah,” Louis said. “I did. I got the dagger.”

After a long pause, Harry said nothing more. He seemed to have fallen back to sleep, or delirium, his breathing becoming deep and regular. Louis held his hand, watching him breathe.

Shackles had broken inside Louis; he felt free.

Harry’s mind was still there. He was intact. He had broken through the wire mesh, and gone through, but this time, he was running away from the cliff, toward Louis. Louis was there to catch him.

Louis heard a commotion behind him, several people coming in. He assumed it was other interns here to visit Harry. But they weren’t interns.

Anne put her arm around his shoulder. Louis looked up to see her and Gemma standing behind her. He stood aside so that Anne could come closer to her son.

“Thank you, Louis,” Anne said. “You take such good care of him.” But she wasn’t looking at Louis. Her entire being was concentrated on Harry. Tears fell from her eyes, and she sniffed back a sob. One side of Harry’s body was bruised and bloodied, with a cast on one leg. She caressed his face and leaned down to hug him a long time, her body shaking. Gemma’s hand was on her back. She felt the pain of all mothers whose children were suffering, the indescribable regret that she could not protect her child from everything, the anger and the sadness. Finally she looked up at Louis and asked, “How is he?”

“Anne, I’m so, so sorry,” Louis said. “Harry has a few injuries. Some of them are serious. It’ll take quite a while to recover from them. But he’s just—he was just awake, just now. For a few seconds. And for the first time, I think he’s going to be okay.”

“How is he?”

“Yes! He said some words, and it wasn't nonsense. Harry’s actually conscious, Anne. He will need some time to recover—maybe a few weeks in the cast for his leg to heal, and then rehab. But I think he’s okay. His mind is there.”

“What did he say, Louis?” Gemma asked excitedly.

Louis paused. “He recognized me. He made a connection that I didn’t expect. Harry’s had a concussion, and he had some bleeding in the brain. I don’t know what he’s been through, but he’s here now.”

They were collectively silent, letting Louis’s words sink in. Anne hesitated, wanting to believe him, and yet trying hard not to get her hopes up unrealistically.

“Thank you, Louis. He has such high regard for you. Now I know why,” Anne said. She put her hand out and softly clasped Louis’s.

Louis got another chair from near the wall, and set it down so both of them could sit with Harry. He stood up to go. He knew that Harry would have to leave MSH eventually, be transferred elsewhere, and it was unlikely that he could follow.

He looked at Harry with the deepest feeling, because he knew this feeling was mutual. Like the tug and pull of metaphysical poetry, only after realizing all of the dimensions of love—the passion of physical attraction, the appreciation of their friendship, the prickly spikes of disagreement and argument, the ugliness of jealousy and distrust, the pain of separation, the chance for forgiveness, the
realization that they would forever be linked—was he able to feel its depth and complexity. He could not have imagined this kind of love. To be able to share it with Harry was the greatest gift.

How ironic it was, that Harry had bought wedding bands, only to have this happen. Louis felt the moral injustice of it. Harry’s surprise was no longer a surprise. Did Anne know about it? Louis had a feeling that no one else knew; Harry was private in his most intimate decisions. He would have told no one.

Louis made his departure. He had to take Lady to the vet this afternoon. He made a mental note to call first.

He had time. When a man was certain in his love, he had time.

He had read that just last night.

Louis had all the time in the world.
Chapter 9

Louis sat nervously in the waiting room. He had taken one and a half days off, and had to be back at the airport at 6 PM, so he could catch the flight out. Tomorrow night, he was expected to fly back to Boston, so he could take over vascular surgery call. Niall had agreed to cover him for an extra 12 hours so he could do this. All of his plans depended on the airlines being on time, planes taking off as they were supposed to, Louis not getting bumped from the flights. He was tempting fate. But it was important. He had to do this.

“Dr. Tomlinson?” the receptionist called out to him. “Come on in. She’s ready for you.”

Louis stood up. He was wearing a crisp white dress shirt, gray wool pants, leather loafers. He supposed he was dressed well enough. Anyway, it was too late. He wasn't here to discuss his wardrobe.

He came through the open door. His mother was on the phone, still talking. She looked up at him and smiled, made a gesture for him to sit down.

Louis remained standing by her desk. Her office overlooked a corner of the street, from the third floor. It was spacious, the walls lined with bookshelves of surgical textbooks, journals, research papers, reviews, book chapters being written and some in the process of being edited. Framed awards and plaques covered the walls.

It was a space where Louis had been visiting since he was young. He remembered coming here to do homework in elementary school, while she was giving a lecture or doing surgery. It had always been an intimidating space with invisible signs everywhere shouting Don't touch!

Now that he himself was a physician, the various books and papers had taken on meaning. He understood each book title, had read many of them. Still, habits were hard to break, and entrenched gut reactions even harder.

Finally Johannah finished her conversation and put the phone back on the receiver. She smiled at Louis, got up and came around the desk. They hugged and kissed on the cheeks.

“Louis! You’re here. It's so nice to see you. What was so urgent, then, that you had to make a special trip?”

“Hello, mom.”

It was already the end of July, and Louis was starting his second year of general surgery training. He was no longer the ingenue intern. He felt at home in the hallways of MSH, ready to delve into more complicated surgeries and to teach the young interns.

“Should we talk here? Or do you want to go for a walk? Would you like some water? Anything?”

“Here’s fine,” Louis said, sitting down. He looked down at his hands, preparing himself, steadying his nerves.

“Well, then, Dr. Tomlinson. You're looking very well,” Johanna pronounced his name with a lilt of pride. “Did you just come from the airport, love?”

“I did, yeah. Just took a cab here.”
“I hope you’re staying tonight,” Johannah smiled at him warmly. She missed Louis. He was her oldest child, her closest friend, her confidant.

“I’m sorry, mom,” Louis said. “I have a flight out tonight. I just needed to see you—in person.”

“Oh. I’m sorry to hear that. You’ve come such a long way. Would’ve been nice to spend a little time together?” Johannah glanced up at Louis’s subdued tone of voice. “Work okay?” Johannah picked up a pile of papers on her desk and started sorting through them, placing them in three piles.

“Yes. Second year is—definitely—better than internship. At least I know where all the bathrooms are.”

“Haha! Right. I remember those days,” Johannah said. “And your research? How’s that coming along?”

Louis bit his bottom lip. Johannah noticed his slight hesitation, the tentative expression on his face. “Actually, mom, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

Johannah stopped fiddling with her papers. “All right, Boo. Talk to me.”

“Mom, do you remember my presentation at ISC this year, when a guy from biotech asked me a bunch of questions?”

“Microtonics,” Johannah said, “if memory serves. Is that what you’re referring to?”

“That’s right. They were interested in my programming of the interface between real-time animated graphics and micro-robotics—what Harry was working on.”

At the mention of his name, Johannah sighed and gazed at Louis. “Honey,” she said. “I’m so sorry about Harry. Do you know how he’s doing?”

Louis fidgeted in his chair, his hands twisting. “He’s still home with his mother Anne. I really haven’t had a chance to see him or talk to him at all. I’ve been so busy at work, and Harry needs his rest. He’s usually asleep by the time I get home and—I just don’t want to bother his family too much.”

“Will he come back to residency this year, do you think?”

“I don’t know, mom. Like I said, I hate to impose on his family for information. They already have so much on their hands—I don’t want to make it worse.”

“It’s too bad,” Johannah said. “His research was at such a crucial juncture.”

It was typical for his mother to focus on the academic work rather than the person. But he knew it was unfair for him to think critically of her. Even caring about Harry’s work was a form of caring—maybe the sincerest form, from Johannah. He should appreciate her effort.

“Actually,” Louis replied. “Harry’s work is what I’m here about. Partially.”

“Hmm?” His mother linked her hands together. “Elaborate.”

“Mom, at the conference there was another firm that heard my presentation—and Harry’s seminar. A small biotech start-up, named Praxa. Have you heard of it?”

Johannah knitted her eyebrows. “Hmm. I’m afraid not. Micro-robotics is not my area.”

“A few weeks ago,” Louis continued, staring down at his hands, “Praxa called me. They wanted to
start a subdivision in micro-robotics.”

“Really.” Johannah’s face showed skepticism. Medical technology was not for the small fry. It was dominated by the Johnson and Johnsons, the Siemens, the GEs, the Duponts. “What did they say?”

“They wanted us—Harry and me—to head up a division. There is a surgical subspecialty that is relatively untapped for research, that Praxa feels is wide open. Pediatric surgery. Specifically, maternal-fetal surgery.”

“Louis, that’s a very specialized field—” Johannah began.

“—which is why no one is working on it,” Louis said, “because there’s no profit in it. But it is a perfect research subject for what we do, using robots where conventional surgeons cannot go, doing real-time animation where every second counts, working on esoteric, unique diseases. I would love to do something like that.”

Johannah tilted her head skeptically. One could never wield power in the surgical world working on something so esoteric.

“Have you researched the field, Louis?” The question was Johannah’s gentle way of asking Louis whether he even knew what he was getting into.

“In the past few weeks, I’ve read a lot of pediatric surgery journals,” Louis said. “I’ve also talked to the pediatric attendings. You know how surgeons are generally skeptical about any new technology.” Johanna nodded in agreement. “But I think micro-robotics could make an important change in how we approach maternal-fetal medicine, drug delivery, pediatric neurosurgery. It could be revolutionary.”

Johanna considered what Louis said. The idea seemed far-fetched, yet plausible. Any new technology always seemed unlikely to catch on, but micro-robotics made so much sense in this context. She was secretly pleased that Louis had embarked in this path. It was unexpected yet bold and courageous, like physicists who dreamed of atomic fission or engineers who wanted to go to Mars.

“Of course, I'll support you if I can,” she said. “I have a feeling I'm really going to regret this. But here I go anyway. Louis, what do you need?”

“Mom,” Louis stood up and walked around to hug her from behind. “I love you. I know I don't say it enough. But I truly do.”

Johannah turned around to pat his elbow. “You're scaring me, Boo. Tell me what you want.”

But Louis was sincere. Through all the ups and downs, there was never a time when Johannah hadn't loved him wholeheartedly, completely. Her armor had been used to shield him from blows. Her strength had been used to build him so that he could defend himself, to realize his own strength. She was only as strong as her love for him, and her love was boundless. Louis realized that. She had always been in his corner.

Louis turned around to look at his mother. “Mom, I need your help now. I wouldn't ask you if this were not important. I want you to know that.” He paused, gazing at her. “I want to borrow some money. I know it's not a sure thing. I know we’re going into the undiscovered country. But please, listen to me.”

Johannah had wrinkled her eyebrows and scrunched her lips into a line.
“This could be a big chance for us, mom. It's not much money—it’s going to be more sweat equity than actual equity.”

“Louis, just to give me an idea, how much are you asking for?”

“Praxa has asked both of us to kick in $500,000. Each. We are going to have a company with 35-35-30 ownership between us two and them.”

Johannah considered. This was a tiny sum for a start-up. They might not even last two months.

“The corporate structure is fairly conventional; I've reviewed it with lawyers,” Louis said.

“Which lawyers did you use?”

“A firm recommended by Dr. Fernbank and Dr. Warner, chair of the department. The lawyer is Jonathan Dawbell, of Dawbell Paulson.”

“They’re respectable,” said Johannah.

“I've thought it through, mom. The research is similar to what I was doing before, only this would be our own company. We can finance most of this cost, but I need about 10% as a collateral, and I need a guarantor.”

“Oh, honey. This is risky.”

“It's $500,000. If we lose it, at least we tried to do something good. We have the potential to earn it back. And I promise, no matter what, that I will pay it back.”

“But residency? How can you continue to work such a hard surgery schedule and still work on this? I know what a resident’s life is like, Louis.”

Louis laughed. “Mom, last year was the hardest I ever worked, and I still got it all done. Maybe it will be slower than we like, but if I don't take the chance now, someone else will do it. It will pass me by.”

Johannah chewed her cheeks, and then said, “How soon do you think you’ll have a commercial product?”

Louis said, “We discussed this with the in-house Praxa team, which is basically two programmers and a biomedical engineer. I know, I know,” Louis answered Johannah’s expression of distress. “Mom, I've been doing this on my own for years. I know I can do it. I don't need much help other than equipment and money. Our estimate is ten years. Four or five until we have a working product for animal trials, and then clinical trials afterward.”

Johannah sighed.

Louis continued. “The thing is, companies like Microtonics have already started applications to the FDA. Their precedent actually makes it easier for all subsequent applications.”

“What are the practical logistics of this, Lou? You are literally inventing sand castles out of thin air.”

“Not true,” Louis said. “Harry already had a working prototype that he wrote about in Science. They were about to start clinical studies. That was the whole point of his ISC seminar. Of course, since that model was patented, we can't use it exactly. But Harry has the knowledge to transfer the technology over to pediatrics. I'm sure he can do it.”
“And Harry,” Johannah asked, “he agreed to this? He knows?”

Louis fell silent. He looked down and fussed with a button on his shirt.

“Louis William Tomlinson. Does Harry know?”

“The short answer is no, mom, he doesn't,” Louis answered. “But he's already said ‘no’ to Microtonics.”

“Why? How do you know—did you talk to him?”

_The red leather journal._ Its pages popped involuntarily into Louis’s mind. He had returned the journal to Harry’s apartment two nights after he took it, but only after reading it cover to cover.

Louis’s cheeks flushed. “I just know, all right?”

“Oh, Louis. I am all for adventure and ambition, but this is a big step. It's the next ten years of your life we’re talking about here. And if it doesn't go well—“

“—then I will have had a great lesson in entrepreneurship. Mom, surgery is fun, it's great to help people one-on-one, but don't you see how this could help so many more people, people who have no recourse right now? It might change medicine as we know it.”

“If I know you, Louis, you’ve probably formulated a plan before even coming here.”

Louis smiled. “You know me.”

He was exasperating, this kid. Despite his intelligence, his cleverness, his sharp mind like Theseus approaching the maze to the Minotaur, a mind that foresaw every problem in its entire complexity, he acted like an eager child sometimes, throwing himself into the unknown like an explorer sailing out to an uncharted world. His spirit was infectious, if reckless. Johannah, who preferred more conventional challenges, felt vertiginous from Louis’s proposal. She was intrigued by the proposal, and she was proud that Louis had taken the initiative to do something so bold and ambitious.

“What's the plan, then, Einstein?”

“I need to fly out tonight, mom. To see Harry. But I really need your okay with underwriting this money.”

Johannah got up and walked over to stare out the window. The days of taking Louis to the zoo and to Disney on Ice and to Mardi Gras seemed infinitely far behind. Here was that same child with the shy grin, sitting with self-confidence, legs apart, back straight, a serious expression on his face. She loved him with all her heart. She walked around to face Louis.

“You have my backing, Louis. Congratulations on your company.”

Louis stood up and hugged his mother. “Thanks for believing in me.”

Johannah held him tightly, “Darling, believing in you has been one of the grandest pleasures in my life. I love you.”
Anne answered the door in a pale blue T-shirt and loose cotton drawstring pants. Louis had called her several days ago, and had reconfirmed when he flew in last night. Small feet padded to the door next to Anne. The warm air outdoors merged with the cool air rushing from the house. Louis’s eyes adjusted to the dark interior.

Lady rushed at him from inside the door.

“Oh! Lady! Sweet girl, missed you,” Louis bent down to hug her, framing her face in his hands and nuzzling her head. Lady let out a few short barks, her tail wagging madly.

Anne came forward, laughing, and hugged him. “So nice to see you, Louis.”

“Thank you for letting me come, Anne.” Louis petted Lady again, standing up. Lady ran circles around Louis, and then paced around his legs, looking up at him. She panted and barked again. You're here! You're here!

“Of course. Don't be silly. We love having you. Harry's bored out of his mind. He’ll be so thrilled.” Anne welcomed him inside.

“Does he know I'm here?” Louis asked.

Anne smiled. “I didn't tell him, Louis. Thought it might be a nice surprise. He's out back, actually, in the hot tub. Getting his water therapy. Come on, I'll take you.” They walked through the kitchen, Lady chasing them noisily. “Would you like something to drink? Have you had breakfast?”

“A glass of water would be great,” Louis said. His throat suddenly felt parched.

Anne filled a glass at the sink. “Did you have a good flight?”

“I did, thanks.”

“That’s nice.” The conversation lulled while Louis drank his water. Louis looked around Harry’s house. It seemed so perfectly normal. It was hard to imagine this lived-in house as the place where Harry grew up, where he ran wild. The kitchen cabinets were normal wooden cabinets with molded paneling. The refrigerator was an ordinary two-door fridge. There were books and magazines on the counters, bar stools pushed against the bar. It was difficult to imagine Harry going to high school, running cross country, going to prom. It was hard imagining Harry before Louis was in his life.

Finally Louis finished and put his glass in the sink. “How is he?”

Anne gave a weak smile. “He seems to be coming along really well. He's going to therapy twice a week, and the doctors at rehab feel like he can return to work in another month or so. He still has some pain, on and off, but I suppose that's to be expected.”

“He’s—up and around?”

“Yes, yes. Ever since they took off the cast two weeks ago. He was on crutches for a while, but with the rib fractures—it was pretty rough.”
“Is he in pain?”

“You know Harry,” Anne said, turning to Louis. “Stoic. Doesn't like to admit to pain. Doesn't take much medication. But he is, I can tell. You'll see. He's lost so much weight.” Louis came closer and gave her a gentle sideways hug.

They walked through the back door of the house. Lady followed them out, nipping happily. The backyard was framed by a stand of tall poplars in the back, separating it from the woods beyond. A wide, green lawn ran toward the trees. It was quiet and still, the heat of the day still at bay, the air cool and comforting.

In the distance, Harry sat with his head tilted back, his arms on either side of the hot tub. His hair, which had been completely shorn after he came home from rehab, was still short on the sides, and he had sunglasses on. There was a large scar that ran along the right side of his scalp, pink and jagged. His skin was a golden, toasted color. The excoriations on the right side of his face had faded. They resembled the water marks on parchment, faint and transparent. He had the defined, skeletal look of a model; Louis noticed he had lost a lot of weight. His face was delicate, thin, fragile, his zygoma prominent, the hollows behind his masseter muscles deeply concave. The skin of his face seemed loose and lax. He looked like an underfed waif. Louis’s heart clenched in his chest at the sight of Harry.

“Look who’s here,” Anne called out, as they walked up.

Harry sat up and turned his head. Louis couldn't see his eyes because of the sunglasses, but he could see the rest of Harry’s face. Harry frowned, then his lips parted slightly. Harry lifted his sunglasses from his face and rested them on his head.

“Louis.”

“Harry. Hi.”

Anne said, “You guys catch up. I'm going to go—to make some—uh—something. Come on, Lady! Come on, girl. Let’s leave them alone.” She smiled and walked away, glancing back at them from time to time.

It was odd, now that Louis thought about it. This was their first real face-to-face contact since Harry left MSH, and the first time for a real talk between them since their argument months ago. It felt like another lifetime. When Louis looked into Harry’s face, he felt scared, but there was, nevertheless, a comfort like no other. He was home.

“Get over here, Louis,” Harry said. His gruff baritone pulled Louis as strongly as ever. It worked its magic.

Louis came around to touch Harry’s shoulder with his fingertips. Harry reached around and clasped Louis’s hand with his own. He swung his other arm around to give Louis a wet hug. Louis could feel the length of Harry’s shoulder muscles, his biceps, the deltoids, the latissimus dorsi. A pang shot through him; Harry was anatomy made real, devoid of body fat, the thin sinews visible under skin. Louis could feel how Harry moved differently, guarding his sides, slower than usual, with deliberateness and care.

“You're looking good, Haz.”

Harry’s dimple was deep and slow, his face craggy. “Come on. Be honest, Louis. I don't. I look bad.”
Louis knew that's what Harry would say. Even though it had been months since they last spoke, he still knew Harry as if Harry were grafted in him, a tree inside Louis, its branches and tendrils reaching to his fingertips, to the pores of his skin, to his kneecaps and his elbows. He felt every molecule of Harry, embedded in himself.

“I think wrecked and scarred is quite an attractive look, really,” Louis said. “Makes you look tough.”

Harry did a new version of his loud laugh, not so loud, mouth wide open. “You think? I should win the prize for being the most handsome wreck?”

“Come on, Haz. Does a universe exist where you’re not beautiful?”

“Ah, you're full of shit,” Harry laughed again. “I'm a scarecrow.”

“Nah, just healing,” Louis said. “You'll gain the weight back.”


Louis looked at Harry fondly. He had not remembered what Harry’s laugh did to him. There was so little of Harry, Louis thought. He was so thin. His clavicles popped out. Despite the strength of his voice and humor, he looked frail and vulnerable. A grasshopper farting could topple him over.

“Lou, I'm going to get out. Give me a hand?”

“Yeah, sure,” Louis said. He stood behind Harry as he stood up, dripping wet, and turned around.

Harry carefully climbed the wet steps out of the hot tub, using his hands for balance. Louis could see the outline of his ribs. His shoulder blades stuck out like scythes. Louis could even see the bony top of his hip bones through his wet shorts. There was a long, vertical scar in his right shin, with several other shorter, smaller scars around it, wide, fleshy, and dark brown. His right foot appeared to be slightly more swollen compared to the left foot—maybe just an optical illusion, Louis thought. Harry held on to Louis’s arms while he climbed out of the tub. Each step was slow and careful.

“Can you hand me that towel, Lou?”

“Sure.” Louis unfolded the beach towel and gave it to Harry. Once upon a time, I would have covered him with it. I would have dried his hair and kissed all the wet spots until they were dry. I would have tasted the chlorine and the sweat on him, his salty sweetness. I would have reached out to touch his scars without hesitation. Once upon a time.

As Harry took the towel, he glanced at Louis’s dagger tattoo. He put the towel over his hair to dry it and camouflage his stare, but Louis had noticed it.

“Want to go in the house?” Harry asked.

“It's up to you, Harry. I'm okay whichever way.”

“Then let’s sit out here for a bit. I like being in the sun,” Harry said. He walked over to the lounge chairs by the porch door and sat down, stretching his long legs out, towel behind him. The sun shone down all around them. Louis noticed how Harry’s butterfly tattoo sank into his midriff, his belly a scooped concavity. The hip bones jutted out acutely. Harry’s shorts were so loose around his waist, they were barely touching him. Anne had planters everywhere, and the profusion of flowers was dazzling. Every hue of flower surrounded them.

Louis sat down next to Harry, suddenly shy. He had a job to do. But he didn't want to break the
comfortable feeling of the moment.

“Tell me, Louis,” Harry said. “How’s the MSH crew? How are the new interns? Are they as horrible as we were?”

“Now that I have the wisdom of the retroscope,” Louis said, “I don’t think we were that bad. Certainly better than the current crew—in my humble opinion.”

Harry squinted his eyes, looking at Louis through the sunbeams. His sunglasses rested in top of his wet hair. “What rotation are you on now?”

“Vascular.”


“Oh, it’s not bad, really. The attendings are an uptight bunch—well, you know. But the surgery is great; I’m getting to operate a lot, harvesting veins and so on. It’s cool.” Louis looked down and smiled. It felt good to be talking surgery with Harry. It felt like medical school, when everything was simpler, and learning was fun, uncomplicated.

He thought back to their Thanksgiving meal, how stilted he had felt sitting next to Harry. Their closeness then was fraught with anxiety and awkwardness. Even now, after everything that had happened, Louis was at peace. His head was clear. He accepted whatever would happen.

Life was too precious, too short. Was it really worthwhile to win the battle? Louis no longer believed in small victories. It was what it was. There were things beyond his control. It was going to be okay. He had to let things work themselves out naturally. Even as life went through highs and lows, love was a constant.

And I love you. Always.

“Those guys are relentless. I’m surprised they let you out of the vascular prison. How d’you get time off?” Harry asked.

Louis shifted in his chair and cleared his throat. “I asked for time off, Harry. I have to go back tonight. I'm on call—Niall’s covering me for a few hours.”

“Oh,” Harry said soberly. He glanced briefly at Louis, and looked down.

Louis looked away as well. He thought he knew Harry’s feelings—he had read the journal and knew about the rings, after all. But since Harry’s accident, they hadn’t talked at all. Harry’s recovery took precedence over everything. As soon as he was well enough, he had been transferred to a rehabilitation center near his home, and that was more than a month ago. Seeing him like this, in civilian clothes, thin and scarred, made Louis feel reluctant to impose on him in any way.

Love seemed like the last thing in the world he should ask of Harry right now. Louis had made his peace. There was time. He would wait thirty years if he had to. The way circumstances interfered, it was as if fate meant to keep them apart. So maybe Harry and Louis, the couple, were never meant to be. Strangely, Louis was okay with that too. He had surrendered to something bigger than himself.

Pressing Harry about work seemed cold and calculating—but it was what he was here to do. Reality had a time limit.

“Harry—“
“Louis—“

They both talked at once.

“You go first,” Louis said.

Harry looked up at him, his green eyes focused and squinting, a smile curled on his lips.

“Okay, Lou. First of all, promise me.”

“What?”

“That you won't interrupt, and will listen to me to the end.”

“Am I going to like this?”

Harry looked away with a big smile. His dimple was deep enough to swallow Mount Everest. Louis would never, ever get over the fucking dimple. He wanted to get his backpack and move into the dimple, set up a sleeping bag inside, with RBB.

Harry paused dramatically, letting seconds tick by. Then he turned back.

“Being on the verge of death—“

“Oh, please, Harry! You're not—“

Harry held up a finger. “No interrupting.” Louis rolled his eyes, fond, exasperated.

“As I was saying, being on the verge of death, I’ve had a lot of time to think. All I have been doing is thinking. If it isn't obvious, I'm not exactly in shape to run a marathon right now, Lou.

“I had been thinking about what I want. We’re both lucky to be in positions where we’re given choices, a lot of great ones. Jobs, career possibilities, positions where we can use our creativity. At the ISC, Dr. Nestor and I met with a couple of biotech companies. What they offered was very, very enticing. Lucrative positions, research support, the works.”

Louis wanted to interrupt and apologize. He wanted to say he knew that Harry had been telling the truth about not meeting Microtonics at Thanksgiving, that Louis had been blindsided at the ISC. But he stayed quiet.

“I had to think about what I was looking for. I'm not sure how to put this, Louis. Before we fought, everything was so confusing. I felt guilty and sad and excited. I wanted to think about every possibility, but I just couldn't reconcile them. Too many feelings were in the way. I was angry, too. Am I making any sense?”

Louis nodded quietly.

“I'm not going to talk about us, Louis. I had—have—a lot of feelings. But I don't know if I'm ready to talk about it, or if you are, even. So I'm going to wait. I just can't, right now.”

Harry looked at Louis tentatively. Louis knew it was unfair. It had been wrong to read Harry’s journal. Louis was in the wrong, morally. Furthermore, it was wrong because Louis had a lot more information than Harry, that Harry never knew about. Louis knew so much about Harry’s actions, but Harry was completely in the dark.

Louis said, “Of course not. You should concentrate on healing, Harry.”
“Louis, don't take this the wrong way,” Harry said, after a pause. “Our fight, our argument—it clarified my thinking.”

Harry looked into the distance of the poplars. Louis waited anxiously.

“I had thought that my choices were between you and Microtonics—really, between you and my career. And it made me so angry. So angry. I couldn't believe you would make me choose. I blamed you, sort of. And you know what else? It really pissed me off that you didn't believe me. That you would be so suspicious of me. Yes, I've made mistakes in the past, but I was trying to be better. I didn't lie. I was so angry you would even accuse me. You have to trust me on that.”

*You don't need to say it, Louis thought. I was wrong. I do trust you. I do.*

“So I stewed and stewed. I went to work angry, and I didn't even enjoy surgery anymore. I thought about quitting, to be honest. The offer for research looked good, and I didn't feel like being there anymore, at MSH. Everything reminded me of the stupid argument.”

Louis felt guilty that he had a part in destroying Harry’s love of surgery, which was enthusiastic, genuine. Harry loved working with patients. It was probably the best part of medicine. Louis felt contrite.

“Then something cleared up for me, Lou, even before the accident. One day, the thought just popped into my head. *Just put Louis aside for a minute. What if it didn't depend on Louis? Take him out of the picture.*

“I know, I know,” Harry said, looking at Louis’s face of indignation. “It's pretty tough to ignore you, kitten. Just listen.” He grinned. Louis’s cheeks warmed to the nickname, but he said nothing.

“I thought—what would happen at Microtonics? What would happen at any huge biotech company? You know what happens. They take control. They front the money, they decide what direction the research will go, which patients the therapy gets marketed to, who gets to have the technology. That's the way industry works, isn't it? The money makes it seem okay—like it's normal, certain people deserve to be saved, and others don't. It's just their shitty luck if they aren't. And I was not okay with that. No matter how great the research is, I don't want that—to have my work become another gimmick for biotech to make money, to not really make any difference in medicine. I'm not going to do that. No.”

“Harry,” Louis said quietly. “Sorry to burst your bubble, but some people will always be left untreated. That's the way medicine is.”

“But I don't have to add to the misery of it,” Harry said. “If I work on something, I’d like to decide how it's done, how it's distributed. I know it's a business, and biotech is in it to make money. Of course. But I want some control of that—if I am working in it at all.”

Harry looked into the distance, silent for a moment. Then he looked back at Louis.

“So?” Louis asked.

“Well,” Harry said. “That’s it for now. I think I'm going back to MSH. I've decided not to take Microtonics’s offer. They want my share of the patent, so, I’ll probably get something in settlement.”

Harry exhaled. “That's pretty much all of it.”

Louis looked at Harry’s face, which had turned from serious to soft. Louis felt as if a weight had been lifted. Harry had been brilliant in this time to himself. *Maybe yoga and kale did do some wondrous shit,* Louis mused. Physically, he was diminished, but in every other way Harry had
become stronger. Louis felt a swell of pride in his Harry. He was going to be his Harry to Louis’s
dying day. It didn't matter a bit what happened to them. There was no way, no world, no universe,
where Louis would not be rooting for him. Spasms of love may come and go, but Louis was going
to be Harry’s friend for good. And it felt amazing.

Anne came out with a tray of lemonade and cookies. Louis felt like a child on a play date, having a
snack. She smiled at them warmly.

“Boys, refreshments.”

“Thanks, mum.” Harry took a cup of ice cube-filled lemonade from her.

“Anne, I love how you call us boys even though we’re twenty-six.”

“You are my boys, though?” Anne turned her head to look at Louis. “Always will be my boys. Just
like Gemma will always be my little girl. I see all of you at once, the baby Harry and the grown-up.
You know a mother can't help it. The years go by like seconds. You’ll be my boys when you’re
fifty, let alone twenty-six.”

“I hate when she force feeds me from her mouth in public,” Harry said. “Like a baby bird. It's so
embarrassing. Or changes my diapers. Ouch—I probably shouldn't be making jokes like that. Hits a
little close to home right now.”

“Oh, Harry,” Anne admonished.

“Don't worry,” Louis said, “My mom still does those things in public too.”

Anne and Harry both laughed lightly. Louis loved their rapport. They were more like two friends
than parent and child. They were so alike in appearance, with their bright eyes and dimpled smiles. It
was even more apparent when they were side by side.

“Louis, are you staying?” Anne asked. “I can make up the guest bedroom. There's plenty of space
here.”

“I'd love to, Anne, but I can't,” Louis said. “Niall will murder me if I don't get back tonight. He's
suffering an extra day babysitting dead toes as it is.”

“Dead toes?” Anne made a horrified face.

Harry laughed loudly. “Vascular service, mum. Patients have poor peripheral blood vessels,
especially smokers and diabetics. And their extremities are at risk—fingers and toes. We end up
amputating some of them. Sometimes they change from hour to hour.”

“I'm sorry to be so graphic,” Louis said. “I guess I forget to censor myself. I have to remember
normal people don't mix dead toes with cookies and lemonade. Aren't you glad you're not there,
Harry?”

They all chuckled together. “Actually, all this talk of surgery has made me miss it,” Harry said. “Not
sure if I remember how to tie a surgical knot anymore. No, really! I'm not joking. On service, I used
to go over it in my dreams—one-handed, two-handed, left, right. The things interns stress over.”

“It'll come right back,” Louis said. “Just like riding a bike.”

“Which, truthfully, could be a challenge right now,” Harry answered.
Anne looked at Harry with worry and love. “Your therapist says you're coming along marvelously, Harry. You need to drink your protein shakes. And take your iron. Will you tell him, Louis?”

“Anne,” Louis said. “You do know it’s hopeless? Doctors and nurses are the worst patients ever? We think we know everything and we don't listen.”

Harry nodded slowly. It was a well-known fact. Telling a group of doctors what to do was like herding cats in the best circumstance. Individual doctors were impossible.

Anne patted Louis’s hand. “You're not being a good role model, Louis. Still, thank you for coming to see Harry. He's missed MSH so much. It's all he talks about.”

“I know everyone wishes the best for Harry, and we all talk about him behind his back, too,” Louis said. “Just kidding. He’s definitely missed. We all want him to heal quickly and come back. Part of the reason is kind of selfish, though. Everyone has to take extra call when one of us is gone. Nice long vacation, eh, Harry? Haha.”

“I knew you were a bunch of self-centered bastards!” Harry grinned. “Always thinking about yourselves.”

“Harry!” Anne said.

“No, it's true,” Louis said. “We’re more selfish than altruistic, when it comes to personal time. Myself included. I’m here to petition for Harry to come back as soon as possible and take call.”

Anne smiled. “Well, it’s very nice of you to think of Harry, Louis. I know he has been going stir-crazy here. You can only watch The Notebook so many times.”

“Mum!” Harry said. “That is not true, Lou. At all.”

Anne stood up, “I'm going to go make lunch, Harry. Louis, come get me if you need anything?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Louis said.

Louis turned toward Harry. Now he would have to say what he came to say, and risk being crass and careerist. He loved Harry, but he had to set it aside. Now was not the time.

“Harry, let me say my thing now, okay?” Louis’s hands twisted in his lap. Harry looked down at Louis’s hands, at his tattoo, and then back up at his face.

He frowned. “Okay?”

Louis cleared his throat. “Harry, The reason I'm here—I need to borrow some money. Or rather, I need you to commit some money, serious dollars.”

Harry raised his upper lip in confusion. He stared at Louis, waiting.

“Harry, listen to me. I have a proposal. Just listen all the way before you decided yes or no, okay? It's part of the reason I'm here, but I just have to get it out of the way.” Louis cleared his throat and looked down. “I didn’t want to do this while you were still recovering. I—I hated to bother you. I really do want you to take as much time as possible to get better, but unfortunately this can't wait.”

“What is it, Louis?” Harry said.

Louis raised his eyes. “I talked to Praxa—do you remember the company in Boston?”
Harry nodded. “Yeah. Dr. Nestor had talked to them. Briefly.”

“They called me.” Harry appeared intrigued. “They’re interested in our research—not for cardiothoracic surgery, but for pediatrics. For maternal-fetal medicine.”

Louis watched Harry’s face change as the pieces fell into place, and realization dawned on him. He frowned, puzzled, and then relaxed.


“It’s not hot like cardiothoracic surgery. It would be applying the technology to rare problems. It's an area of high risk.”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “Untapped, though. And challenging. The applications can expand into so many areas.” He sat straighter, excited.

Louis smiled. It was amazing how he and Harry were on the same page. “They’re offering us a partnership, Harry, you and me. We would be co-owners, with Praxa, of a subdivision. We would have ownership control of the company.”

Harry silently digested this information.

“What do they need from me?”

Louis leaned in and explained the offer. He watched Harry’s familiar features look into the distance to absorb all the information, then back at Louis. Harry’s lean face reflected back the sunlight. His brows were tinted in gold and the sun cast harsh shadows on his cheeks. Even in his thin, recovering state, Harry was beautiful. His intelligence and humor shone through his eyes, their dazzling green flecked with a hint of orange and blue. Louis couldn't help smiling at him.

“Harry, I've gone over this offer with some lawyers. I'll leave you the paperwork. We have two weeks to look it over and sign. You should probably have your own lawyers look them over. And of course, think about what changes you might want. There’s time for negotiations. I had Jonathan Dawbell, of Dawbell Paulson, look it over. He was recommended by Dr. Fernbank. He gave a lot of good advice.”

“Lou, I don't think I can be back in two weeks—“

“I don't think you have to,” Louis said. “It's just the paperwork. I think we have time. Besides, I'm there, remember? We're partners. You can take your time.”

“Partners, huh?” Harry looked bemused at Louis, but something about his tone was wistful. “Yeah, I guess that will do. I'll look the papers over. Thanks for doing all this. I mean, it's a lot to absorb, you know. I thought I had made my decision, but this—is something brand new. It sounds good. But the devil is in the details, and all that. You know, I've had experiences in my life that just seemed too good to be true.”

Louis coughed and felt terrible. He felt he contributed to that pile of things that seemed too good to be true.

“Harry, there's no pressure. You know that, right? Take your time and do what you think is right. I think it's a good opportunity, but you have to decide for yourself. Don't think about anything else but whether you want this. Okay?”

“But you think it’s a good offer.”
“I've thought about it and reviewed it with other people—the lawyer, Dr. Enright, Dr. Fernbank,” Louis said. “I do think it's a good offer. I think the company has good people, honest people, and good scientists. It has a few promising products in the pipeline. It's a small company, but we are joining from the ground up. Its financials seem very solid, and the accounting is reliable. I mean, I've never done this before, Harry. It's a gamble, for sure. But I think it's a good opportunity, too.”

Harry smiled. Louis could always see the whole picture; he was a mastermind. It was why he was a brilliant doctor. He didn't lose the forest for the trees.

Harry held out his hand. “Louis?”

“Yeah, Harry?” Louis took his hand. Harry’s skin had dried but was still puckered at the fingertips. His hand was cold from holding the lemonade. Still, Louis felt his hand instinctually curl around Harry’s, holding him comfortably and running a thumb over his skin.

“I'm really happy to see you.” Harry looked down and smiled, but it was a guarded smile. He felt much more than he could show. “I'm glad you came.”

“Me too, Harry.”

“I mean it. I didn't expect it, and—it was a great surprise. The best. I will look everything over. It seems very exciting.” Harry sat up. “You said this was part of the reason you came. What's the other part?” Harry waited for Louis. His voice was light and soft, hopeful. At the same time, his hand relaxed.

“Harry, you said you didn't want to talk about us, so I'm not going to. But I want to apologize. I know, I'm always apologizing, right?” Louis tried a light-hearted laugh. He tried to sound casual as he continued. Their bodies felt too close to each other. He did not want to give the wrong impression—that he was here to pressure Harry about their relationship. “I’m sure this won't be the last time I apologize. I mean, I'm human, you know? But this is important. I just have to get it out. I was wrong in Barcelona. And I was wrong about our argument. Though not all of it.”

“No?” Harry seemed poised to say something. Louis interrupted.

“No. I was wrong. I know that now. Harry, when you—when they brought you into trauma, it was the most terrifying feeling in the world. When I saw that it was you—I thought I could handle anything, but I was wrong. I couldn’t. I couldn't bear seeing you hurt, in pain. I can't describe the moment to you. It was worse than being hurt myself.”

Harry glanced away, his eyes glimmering. Louis raised his chin so as not to get emotional, and then continued.

“I thought I might never get to apologize, to say goodbye. I know, I know it was worse for you—I know what I went through was nothing compared to what you went through. I just couldn’t bear the thought that I might never get to tell you how wrong I was. Despite everything, I realized that there was something I had told you that was true. I wanted so much to talk to you again. I would have done anything.”

“Lou—“ Harry’s voice cracked.

*I would die for you,* Louis had said once.

“Harry, you said before that the argument clarified something for you. You know, I was afraid you were going to say—” Louis paused. He almost couldn't bring himself to say it. “That you didn't feel anything anymore. I know we’ve been through a lot. You've always been there for me. I have
depended on you so much. I just didn't realize how much.”

“No, Lou,” Harry said. “You've been the one to always be there and take care of me. Look at you now. Still taking care of me—coming with this proposal.”

“I wish things had been different, Harry, and we could start over. You know? Just forget everything and start from scratch.”

Harry looked down and digested Louis's words, and then raised his head and tilted it in question.

“But if I hadn't had the accident,” Harry said, tentatively. “Would you be here? Would you still feel the same way?”

Louis knew what Harry was asking. How much of this was pity? How much of Louis’s feelings were swayed by guilt? Where did they stand in their disagreement, which had never really resolved?

Louis gazed into Harry’s eyes. He knew that confession might have a different response from Harry, now that they had spent so much time apart. They had never really reconciled after Barcelona. Harry had no idea the countless hours Louis had sat by his bedside, thinking about him, worrying about him, and feeling protective of him.

Louis knew what he knew. Harry had always been honest with him. He had to be honest, too, whatever the cost. He owed it to Harry.

“I love you, Harry,” Louis said simply. “I guess that's the truth at the bottom of everything. I figure if something were to happen—you know, after the accident I was panicking that you would never know. I have to say it. Just so I don't have to live forever knowing that you believed anything different. Whatever happens, just remember it, okay, Harry? It’ll never change. Never. I love you. I’d carve it on my forehead if I thought it would make any difference. I’d have it tattooed onto every red blood cell so that when they appear under the microscope, each one would carry a tiny little message, shouting up to whoever’s looking at them.”

Harry burst out laughing, but he listened carefully.

“I know it's too late, maybe. Even before your accident, Harry, I went over in my head what we had said to each other. I hurt you so much, because I thought—I thought you weren’t thinking of us. But something you said kept coming back—you wanted to spend the rest of your life with me. In spite of everything. It made me realize how wrong I was. You can’t imagine how I went over it and over it in my head.

“I’ve been in love with you so long that I don’t even think about it any more. Things pop up randomly. You’re part of my subconsciousness. I eat my cereal in the morning and I think, Harry likes slightly soggy cereal. I love that about him—it’s irrational and it’s stupid. I walk to the T station, see some guy with curls like yours, and I think, that looks like him. So many songs remind me of you. It’s maddening—I can’t even listen to music without getting emotional. I swear the commuters on the T think I’m crazy.

“You’re always there in the back of my mind. When I hear a good joke, I want to tell you. I wash blood off my scrubs in the sink and I think about you, about how you’re doing, how you looked on that trauma table. That's an image I’ll never, ever forget. You have to tell him, I thought. There was no excuse not to. He can't think he wasn't loved—because you are, Harry. So, so much. I see other people with their babies and dogs and whatever, and I think, Harry likes babies and dogs. He’s pretty amazing and adorable, isn't he? And I fall in love all over again.
“I know you don't want to talk about us, and I'm not going to ask you to. I mean it,” Louis looked into Harry’s pained face. “Just let it go for now, or forever, if that's what you want. I accept that, and it doesn't hurt me. Not anymore. I don't want anything else except for you to get better. It’s not my place to ask for anything, and I won't, except—well—maybe for a chance to be forgiven. Someday. I hope we can be friends. I hope we can work together for a long time.”

Harry was silent for a long pause. Then he got up and walked over to Louis. His towel dropped off his lap. His legs were even thinner than how they were before, tall and spindly. A strand of hair dropped into his eye. He stood in front of Louis and reached out his hand. When Louis took it, Harry pulled him out of his chair. Harry wrapped him in a deep, tight hug.

Louis closed his eyes and relaxed into the hug, feeling the best he had in ages. Louis was reminded, vaguely and hazily, of their slow dance in Harry’s apartment. They had fit perfectly into each other.

Harry was alive. He was better than alive. He was himself.

“There's nothing to forgive,” Harry said, his voice cracking. “You mean so much to me, Louis. I'm so thankful for you.”

Harry’s hands rested around Louis’s waist. He could feel Louis’s breathing become jagged and irregular, his inhalations shuddering with quick sniffs. Harry tightened the hug and felt Louis digging into his shoulder blades with his hands, his thumbs tugging on for life. Harry rested his cheek on Louis’s temple. His eyes filled with warmth. His throat tightened.

“I love you, too,” Harry said. “You know that, I think. But in case you had any doubts, Louis, I’ll say it again. I love you, so much. There was never any doubt. Not for me. Louis, I promise you I'll be back. As soon as I can. I'll be back and we can start over. Blank slate.”

“I know,” Louis said. “I've been so wrong. I don't know if I deserve forgiveness.”

“Shhh,” Harry hushed him. “Come on, now. Let’s not talk for a bit, okay?”

They stood together for a while, resting their hands on each other’s back. The nearness of each other was consoling, comforting. A gap had closed. They felt like home to each other—not perfect love, not the pinnacle of romance, nor star-crossed lovers. They were not sonnets or lyrics, or symphonies or waltzes or laments or blues—only imperfect human beings. The hug promised acceptance, patience, honesty. Louis had waited for so long to see Harry, thin and worn, but also healthy, young. They were in it for the long term. When they came apart, Louis felt ready to tell Harry the final part.

“I want to give you something that belongs to you, Harry,” Louis confessed.

“What is it, Lou?” Harry pulled away to check Louis’s expression.

Louis said, “Maybe you should sit.”

“Is it that bad?” Harry laughed, and then checked himself. He sat at the edge of the lounge chair. His hair stuck straight up like wire bristles. There was a hint of whiskers under his lower lip. Harry tilted his head and squinted at Louis. He waited expectantly.

Louis looked at him fondly. He was still such a nerd.

“Harry, I'm really sorry. I know this was, I don't know, maybe meant to be a surprise. I know I'm not supposed to know anything about it. But I was going to your place to try to find Lady and—“

Harry sat forward and warmly interjected, “Thank you for finding her, Louis. I never asked you—
how did you?”

“The day of the accident, I was sitting next to your bed at the hospital—it was the night of the senior dinner.”

“Right. I remember looking forward to it. Got a tux and everything.” Harry remembered the faint anticipation to the party, like a faded perfume.

“I sat there next to you—stunned, scared, feeling really sad. I wasn't thinking straight at all. Wasn't thinking, period. Well, just before he headed out,” Louis said, “Liam suddenly remembered Lady, that she was missing, after your car accident.”

“Good old Liam!” Harry said. “He always thinks of the details. God, for once I love his obsessiveness.”

“Right?” Louis smiled. Liam was wonderful. “I went back to your apartment to start looking for Lady, and guess where I found her? She was hiding in the bushes. Had been there all day.”

“Oh, God,” Harry sighed. “She must have been so scared.”

“She was. And she had hurt her foot—it was just a sprain, thankfully. But she wouldn't rest her paw on it, and half of her was covered in blood. So I took her inside and washed her up. I didn't think you would mind. I ran a bath for her in your bathtub. She was a mess.” Louis paused.

“What is it, Lou?”

“Harry, it was the worst I had ever felt, in your apartment. It was so empty, you know? Dark and empty. And you weren't there. It still felt like you were there, like you should have been there. Your stuff was all over, your bed wasn't made, and, God, the place still smelled like you. But you weren't there. I couldn't stop thinking about how you were unconscious, in the hospital, and all your injuries.”

Harry looked up at Louis, at Louis’s expression of sadness and dismay.

“It was just terrible. I couldn't imagine you not coming back to that place. It was so full of you. I couldn't imagine the unfairness if it—why you? Why not—me, for instance.” Louis stopped himself, then continued. “Anyway, after I washed Lady clean, I was drying her. That’s when—“

“What?”

“That's when the phone rang.”

Harry waited for Louis to say more. Louis was acting mysterious and Harry was intrigued. The day of his accident was a complete blank to him, and many days afterward. When he had regained some consciousness, he remembered images of tubes, lines attached to various parts of his body, being prodded and poked and pinched, people coming and going. But it felt as though all those things had happened just minutes after his run; time stood still when his mind had been suspended.

Harry remembered having some odd dreams, but he couldn't remember details. Snippets of words and conversations sometimes drifted through his head like déjà vu, but he couldn't attach meaning to them. He had been so heavily sedated. Most of his thoughts during the induced coma were completely gone.

“Who was it on the phone?” Harry asked.
Louis gazed steadily at Harry, his blue eyes like glaciers. He raised his elbow and dug into his pants pocket.

There, deep in the recess of the pocket, was a small jeweler’s box, in dark blue velvet, with the imprint of Shreve Crump & Low on the inner satin lining. Within the box were two rings with identical inscriptions.

Louis took out the box and handed it to Harry.

Harry blinked at the box. The thought of the rings had been cast aside since he had come home. He had assumed that they would stay with Shreve Crump & Low until he got back—as his situation had changed so utterly. He had assumed nothing would happen to them, and that no one else knew about them.

He took the box and opened it. Two matching wedding bands lay snugly in the box, separated by a strip of satin and tucked into velvet clefts in the middle of the box. They were even more beautiful than he had remembered in the store.

Without touching the rings, Harry knew what the inscriptions were. He and Cabot had discussed it in detail, the height and maximum number of words, the style of the font. He had made Cabot show him a print-out of the exact appearance in the store.

Around one side of the inner rim was engraved the words “Louis & Harry.” Around the other side was the word “Forever.” One ring was sized slightly smaller than the other.

“That Claiborne Cabot, he's quite a guy,” Louis said.

Harry looked at Louis, his expression a mixture of surprise, awe, and deflation.

Louis knew. It would no longer be a surprise. Harry didn't have to plan anything now. And the rings, out in the open, was a confession of sorts. It was a summation of planning and hoping. A testament of Harry’s certitude. Or maybe, a testament to how little Harry knew of life’s unpredictability, the curves in the road.

And, Louis knew. Harry held his breath, worried about what Louis’s first reaction had been. Whether he wanted this at all. For Louis to find out like this—it wasn't ideal.

“Did you see the rings, Louis?”

“Harry, I went to the store. Of course I saw the rings.”

Harry recalled his trip to the crystalline austerity of Shreve Crump & Low, the miles of wood paneling, the rows of diamonds and gems and pearls. He imagined the bustle on a normal summer day, the store filled with brides registering for their weddings, and parents shopping for their children, and proper couples shopping for that once-in-a-lifetime purchase. And then Louis, his Louis, walking in by himself, a small lone figure, his fringe swept to one side, searching for Claiborne Cabot.

“This wasn’t the way I wanted you to find out, Louis,” Harry said. “I was going to come up with a grand speech. Was going to get on one knee and everything.”

“Harry,” Louis nudged Harry over on his lounge chair so that he could perch on the edge of the seat, next to him. He took Harry’s hands in his own. Louis promised himself he wasn't going to cry again. Too many tears. There were too many damn tears already. He swallowed and paused for a minute.
“We have time,” Louis said, watching Harry’s anxious face. He took the jeweler’s box from Harry’s hands. They both looked at the rings, at their concentrated, brilliant sparkle in the sunlight. Then Louis closed the box and handed it back to Harry.

Louis closed his hand over Harry’s, holding the box. “A lifetime, if you want. There's no rush.”

Harry looked down at their hands. Their forearms were lined up so that every inch was touching, the skin warm and still. Louis’s arm looked muscular and pale next to Harry’s thinner, leaner, tanned arms, Harry’s hands larger and more sinewy, concavities where there should have been fat and muscle. Harry traced up Louis’s arm with two fingers, lingered at Louis’s dagger tattoo. His fingers circumnavigated the dagger. His rose tattoo lined up with the dagger and the words, “Given a Chance.”

The harsh, uncompromising lines of the dagger contrasted with the curvaceous beauty of the rose. They asked for the freedom to be themselves, yet together they were more.

“Wait for me,” whispered Harry.

“I will,” said Louis.

Louis put his arm around Harry’s waist and leaned into him, as Harry kissed his hair. The sun grew steadily in strength. The air vibrated with heat. The morning was almost gone.

***

Feels strange to be back. Time hasn't stopped. It's just gone on. The restaurants kept serving food while I was gone. The trees kept shedding their leaves. The tourists kept coming and going. The sailboats have all been tied down at the Community Boating Center at the Esplanade. I've missed a whole season—all of summer.

Everyone else went through their rotations and are proper second years. Alice is on the cardiothoracic track. Everyone has moved on, grown a new skin.

I feel like the person in the video who stands still while everyone whirls and runs around him. Everyone has aged but him. He stays unchanged, dumb, ignorant to it all.

It's just a bit strange, that's all.

And the other strange thing—I don't have the dream anymore. I haven't had it since the accident.

Lady’s with me, at any rate. Poor thing. I wonder if she remembers. The apartment has a musty, chemical smell. There's a layer of dust over everything, as if someone died. It’s a bit weird and depressing—like moving into a haunted house. Except I'm haunting myself.
I'll clean it, eventually—just don't have the energy now.

But you know what Louis did? The day before I moved back, he lit a thousand vanilla candles here, so it would smell a little bit better. Maybe not a thousand, but like, seven. He tried.

Glad he didn't burn the place down.

He's not here now, but earlier he moved in all my clothes, helped mum set up the stuff I need for rehab, all the stretching bands and mats. Then he took mum shopping for groceries. I know how he hates driving—but he did it. For me. I'm grateful, I guess. Words fail me. I'm not sure how to say it.

Wise men say
Only fools rush in
But I can't help falling in love with you
   Shall I stay?
   Would it be a sin
If I can't help falling in love with you?
   Like a river flows
   Surely to the sea
   Darling, so it goes
   Some things are meant to be
   Take my hand,
   Take my whole life, too
For I can't help falling in love with you

***

The first time that Louis reached out to hold Harry’s hand, it happened without warning.

It was a year after Harry had returned to work. They spent every free moment at Praxa, just outside of Boston, working on a prototype of micro-robot to retrieve fetal cells in a pregnant woman. Amniocentesis was the current way to obtain it, but it was inefficient in some cases. Chorionic villus sampling, the alternative, had a higher risk profile. Micro-robotics could retrieve more fetal cells, earlier, for both diagnosis and treatment. The technology would be expanded for drug delivery, stem cell retrieval, even fetal surgery.

Harry had designed a prototype based on his previous work, altering the robot enough to obtain a new patent. Louis had reconfigured hardware code to allow for real-time control through difficult anatomy. Pregnant women should ideally not be subjected to the gamma rays of CT scanners, because of the rays’ penetration and teratogenic effects on the fetus. Louis wracked his brain to reduce exposure to mere seconds, and to combine data with safer ultrasounds, in order to have real-
time feedback.

On their days off, they went to Praxa and did their work. Often they went there alone, rarely having a coordinated schedule. If they met outside of work, it was for a coffee or a quick lunch. They both wanted the company to succeed more than anything, and let nothing get in the way of it. They were nice to each other, but stayed platonic friends, each afraid to disrupt the equilibrium.

The group of friends were meeting at the Wicked Bee, a live performance bar, on a Friday night, a miracle since they were all off call simultaneously. The Bee had just opened a month ago, not far from the Back Bay, across the Boston Common. They were meeting at the door early, at 10, hoping there was no line.

The September night was humid and warm. A hazy moon hung in the air, but the sky was a dull, dark orange because of the city lights. As Louis walked up to the door, he saw that the rest were already there, waiting in line. He met Harry’s eyes and winked, and Harry grinned.

“Nialler! Are you the one dragging us here?” Louis said.

Niall said defensively, “I heard it was a good time. Good live music, club atmosphere. Figure we could use some fun.”

“I got here about fifteen minutes ago,” said Liam, “and I don't think I’ve moved an inch.”

“How many people are ahead of us?” Louis asked.

“Niall and I counted about twenty,” Alice said. “But at this rate we’ll be here all night.”

Louis glanced at Harry, who was quietly watching him. Harry had returned to residency, full steam ahead, one year ago. Louis never forgot about his injuries. Despite Harry’s protests, Louis had set up their call room with an “emergency kit” for Harry. It was stashed in the closet, and had: Harry’s pillow and pillowcase, protein bars, ibuprofen, a heating pad, bottles of water, and ear buds. Louis kept yogurt and vitamin waters in the fridge for him. Of course, residents sometimes stole the emergency Vitamin water, but whoever did had better be prepared to meet the wrath of Tomlinson, who could rip a new hole into anyone threatening Harry with mild dehydration.

Whenever they were on rotation together, Louis made sure Harry had the lightest call schedule, and stayed as late as possible to help him, sometimes going home at 11 PM just to sleep. Harry always tried to rush him out, but Louis would not budge. There was always work to keep them busy.

He knew that Harry never complained, but could see days when Harry shifted his weight from foot to foot, his right leg bothering him. He never could unsee the thin scars along Harry’s right temple and eyebrow, in his hand and arm. Harry had joked about getting a face tattoo to camouflage the scars, at which Louis had answered, “Not on your life.”

Louis glanced to the front of the club. He saw a man in conversation with the person in charge of letting people in, and thought he recognized him. Was it a patient? Someone from the hospital? He seemed familiar, and yet Louis couldn't quite place him.

“Guys, I'll be right back,” Louis said.


“Lou-eh! Lou-eh! Lou-eh!” Niall and Alice chanted.

Louis casually walked to the front of the line. The man he thought looked familiar was deep in
“Excuse me,” Louis called. “I’m sorry to interrupt—“

“Dr. Tomlinson!” the man turned around and cried out. “I never forget a voice. You probably don’t remember me, do you?” Louis saw that he had a walking stick. He was blind.

“Remind me again?” Louis said.

“Jerome, from the emergency room,” Jerome said. “You took care of my wife, Ruthann? Two years ago, I think it was. Big girl. With the boil on her leg?”

“Of course!” Louis recalled. “How is your lovely wife?”

“Hopefully putting the kiddos to bed,” Jerome said. “You coming in? Me and the boys are playing tonight. Ned’ll let you in, won't you, buddy?” He turned back to the person behind the rope. He introduced Louis. “This is my wife’s doctor. He’s a surgeon.”

“A friend of Jerome’s a friend of mine,” Ned said, lifting the rope. “You can pay the cover just inside the door.”

“Do you mind?” Louis said, pointing back. “Sorry. I came with a few friends. They’re just back there.”

He ran back to the group and laughed as Niall swore. “Can't fucking believe how he does this. Can charm the food out of a starving man’s mouth, I swear to God.”

As the group stepped out of line, Louis reflexively, without thinking, grabbed Harry’s hand. When Harry pulled back, unaccustomed to the touch, Louis let go, as if touched by fire.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “I didn't mean to.” Louis glanced quickly at Harry, and then looked down and away.

Harry shook his head lightly. “Hey. It's all right, Lou. Come on.” He took Louis’s hand and squeezed. Harry pulled him along, following the others.

Once in the club, they looked for a place to sit, or even to stand. Liam and Harry went to order drinks. The music was loud enough that talking was nearly impossible. Niall gestured to Alice and they left for the dance floor. The band hadn't started playing. A DJ was spinning house tunes.

Louis waited by himself. A moment later, Harry came back alone, carrying two drinks. Louis’s heart lurched. They were rum milk punches.

“Liam’s chatting someone up,” Harry shouted. Those were his approximate words, anyway. It was so loud that Louis couldn't be sure. “Here you go, Lou!”

“Harry!” Louis shouted. He pointed to his drink and mouthed, “Thanks.”

Harry returned with a smile and wink. He raised his glass and clinked it with Louis’s.

They sipped their drinks with the bass pumping and rainbow lights shooting all around. People jumped up and down around them.

“Do you want to dance?” Harry shouted. He cocked his hip and raised one hand, index finger in the air, in a disco gesture, in case Louis didn’t hear him. His index finger waved back and forth. Then he shot air pistols at Louis. He was ridiculous. Louis snorted out his drink.
Louis nodded and followed him out to the crowded dance floor. They started dancing awkwardly, and then, as everyone around them jumped and pushed, began to let loose, dance more earnestly with each other. Harry’s hair was long on top, short on the sides, and the waves were brushed back. His gaunt cheeks had fleshted out to high, defined cheekbones, his jaw sharp as a file. Louis ran his gaze down Harry’s snug shirt, his skinny pants. Involuntarily he bit his lip.

Louis took their drink glasses and set them on a ledge at the periphery of the dance floor. He came back to find Harry laughing and shouting, his hands in the air, grinding his hips. It was so good to see Harry letting go, being funny, sexy. It was almost like seeing a captured animal released back to the wild. Harry’s eyes were wide and engaged.

Louis beamed. He danced up to Harry and put his hands on Harry’s waist. They matched rhythms and danced face to face, until Harry twirled Louis around. Harry’s hands were around Louis’s hips. Harry leaned down to give Louis’s ear a nip.

Louis backed up against him, swaying his world-class ass (it still was) against Harry. Harry leaned down and said, into Louis’s ear, “Naughty!” Louis laughed out loud.

Louis didn’t know what to expect, where they were going with it.

Wait for me, Harry had said.

Louis didn’t care if it was a hundred years. He was enjoying himself. That wasn't a crime.

The next song bled into the beats. Louis reached to his side and took Harry’s hand. He put it around his waist and swayed his hips. One hand held Harry’s hand to his belly, and the other hand was raised in the air. Harry tightened Louis against himself and breathed into Louis’s hair, drinking him in. Louis felt Harry close on his back, his breath on Louis’s neck, an occasional brush of his lips against his skin, accidentally—or maybe not so accidentally—creating friction between them. Louis felt himself stir, aroused despite months of suppressing desire.

It was light and fun, right? Flirting. Just a bit of banter. It didn't mean anything. A little alcohol-fueled back-and-forth. They were both stressed from work and let go a little, that's all. No biggie. They moved to the beat.

After two more songs, Louis pulled Harry off the dance floor. Louis had to get away. He was too riled up. If he didn't cool down, he would do something he’d regret.

They didn't see any of the others. Louis led Harry to a corner of the club. The band had set up and was starting to warm up.

“Harry, whatever we’re doing, there’s no pressure, okay?” Louis shouted, his ears ringing. “I just wanted to say that.” He hoped the club was dark enough that Harry couldn’t see his face well. He was flushed and aroused, sweaty, his eyes wide and wild, his hands and lips trembling. Harry had worked him into such a state.


“What?” Harry shouted back, his face radiant, his dimple deep. His face looked amused—Louis was sure he could read every intention clear as day. God damn it, Styles. Harry cupped his hand around his right ear. “Can’t hear you!”

“No pressure!” Louis shouted. He made a spastic gesture with his hand, pointing to himself and then Harry, back and forth, mouthing exaggeratedly.
“Sorry, Lou? It's too loud. I can't hear a thing.” Harry craned his head closer and shouted. “What was that?” Louis could see the lights glint on the top of Harry’s lips. Was he imagining it? Harry’s lips were full, curled up in amusement, flirty and coy. Louis was frazzled.

*Oh, fuck it, Louis thought, exasperated. *He can't hear me.*

“I want you,” Louis shouted. “You sexy motherfucker. I want you so bad. Don't care. Want to have you. Right goddamn now.”


*Couldn’t hear?! What a liar!*

Harry leaned in to look Louis in the eyes.

“Boo,” he said. “I'm in.”

With his right hand, Harry tipped Louis’s chin up. They grinned crazily at each other. Louis stared at Harry’s pouty, cherry-red lips.

“Now kiss me, you fool,” Harry commanded.

Louis put his hand around Harry’s neck and pulled him in.

***

They tumbled into the call room. Residents’ jackets, backpacks, and bags lay all around. It was an airless room, without windows, like a dungeon for training doctors, or a casino. Louis had always wanted to get lucky in a room like this.

“How much time?” Louis said, locking the door. All residents had keys to the door. The lock would only buy a few seconds.

“Conference will be over in—” Harry looked at his phone, “thirty minutes. Then I have to be back in the operating room.”

“Hmm,” Louis said. “What could possibly happen in thirty minutes? I suppose we could have a cup of tea.”

“What is it with tea?” Harry said, backing Louis up to the wall. “Why is it always tea?”

Louis tucked both of his legs between Harry’s as he tipped his head, “It’s tea.”

Harry threw his phone on the desk.
Harry’s lips smashed into Louis’s as they kissed. Louis opened his mouth greedily, and Harry took his tongue between both his lips, sucking it lightly. Louis sank a little. Harry’s arms floated unconsciously to grip Louis’s, as Louis flattened his hands on Harry’s chest, then traveled up to the nape of his neck to play with his hair. Louis felt the bulk of Harry’s arm muscles holding up his weight, and he wanted to sink his teeth into them.

“Dr. Styles,” Louis said, in between breaths, “help me. I'm so lovesick.”

“Oh. Are we playing doctor?”

Louis smiled and nodded. He sucked on Harry’s lower lip, pulling it with a pop. “Thirty minutes,” he said. “That’s long enough.”

Harry barked out a soft laugh. “What seems to be the problem, sir?”

“I have an ache,” said Louis. “Been having it for years.” He undid the button on Harry’s pants and played with the zipper, feeling the movement underneath.

“Oh?” Harry pulled off Louis’s lips and kissed around his jaw to suck on his neck. Louis’s beard was scratchy. His heart rate was speeding up. Harry felt the faint traces of the carotid artery through the skin, fluttering into his sensitive lips. He could taste Louis’s adrenaline.

“Be more specific,” Harry said. “Where’s the ache?”

Louis rolled his hip toward Harry’s, exerting a gentle pressure. He heard Harry grunt softly. Louis’s right hand traveled down, his fingers lightly resting on Harry’s nipple. His thumb played with it until it stiffened, until he heard Harry groan. Harry jerked his hip forward, shifted his feet.

“Everywhere, doctor,” Louis said. “My hands, for instance. They seem to wander.” Louis’s right hand traveled down to lift Harry’s scrubs, tracing the muscles in the dents above his hips, feeling the smooth skin and the trace of body hair. Harry’s body shuddered under the touch.

Harry grabbed Louis’s hand and pinned it against the wall, pressing his body to him.

“Control them, darling,” Harry said. “It just takes a little self-control. Doesn't it?”

Harry held Louis’s hands roughly and bent to open his mouth, tasting him. Louis tipped his head back and surrendered, helpless. He felt Harry’s hands holding him, and it was not a restraint but a comfort. He was tied to Harry. He felt secure, safe. Harry’s tongue pushed in, tasting the sweetness of Louis.

“Mmm,” Louis whined. “Speaking of which, my mouth, doctor. It’s so needy.” Louis gave Harry a knowing look, and then with a swift motion, he unzipped Harry’s pants and pulled it down, with enough force that his boxers slid down too. The back of the boxer exposed Harry’s crease. Harry’s erection showed through his boxers, bent to one side, engorged, his exposed tip wet, deep pink.

Harry’s mouth opened. He breathed out, making his cock twitch against his body.

At the same time that Louis used his hand to cup Harry’s balls, his mouth closed around Harry’s tip and sucked it in, with a swirl of tongue. He felt a sharp intake of breath from Harry, felt him locking
both legs.

“Oh God,” said Harry, “Louis—“

Louis pulled his boxers off so that they lay around Harry’s ankles. His hand caressed the length of Harry’s erection, tight and thick.

“No self-control?” Louis said, stroking Harry slowly, his hand at the base. He licked from the base to the tip, a slow, languorous movement. “Can you, doctor? Control yourself?”

“God—you’re—so—unprofessional,” Harry huffed out between. “Fuck, Lou. Feels so good.” He leaned forward, hands on the wall, a slow fire traveling up from the base of his spine. It had been so long. Harry was dripping around his foreskin. Louis watched the drops pool.

“No control at all, really,” Louis purred. His mouth sank down to engulf Harry, tasting the salty liquid and sucking it down. Harry cried out, his breathing becoming raspier, more erratic. He put one hand on the back of Louis’s head, with a light pressure. It was all he could do not to push violently into Louis’s mouth. He could only see Louis’s lashes, miles and miles of lashes, as his head bobbed up and down, his lips doing their magic, the warmth and wetness pulling him in.

Louis was so beautiful, Harry thought, his inner beauty the equal to the outer. But he could barely concentrate. Louis’s tongue was doing acrobatics around him. His teeth lightly dragged across the shaft. Harry felt the blood coursing through his cock, beat by beat. In the midst, Harry pushed Louis away and said, roughly, “Lou.”

“Yeah, Harry?”

“Where do you ache the most?” Louis looked up at him. He knew Harry had his dreamy side, his abstractly philosophical side, and Louis wasn’t sure what to make of the question. Were they still playing?

“Harry, I—“

_No pressure. I'll wait for you._

“Tell me,” Harry said. His eyes implored Louis. Louis felt a sling of conflict race through him. He could wait longer. But it seemed that Harry no longer wanted to wait.

Louis stood up.

“I ache where you ache,” he said. “Wherever you hurt. That's where I am.”

Harry was silent, watching Louis. His eyes were a storm of questions. Louis felt his worry, felt the seriousness beneath the harmony of sexual heat and the rhythm of play. All of this played as one song in his mind. The small boy who worried about seeing Louis again in this lifetime was asking, as well as the man who wrote love poems.

“I ache for you. Because I want you, I miss you and I want you,” Louis said. “But I ache for you even more because I want you to be happy, Harry. Just to be happy.”


“No, Harry, don't—“
“No, Lou,” Harry’s face lifted to meet Louis’s. He took Louis’s hand. Their arms were linked, rose lined up to the dagger. A invisible string tied them to each other, grew thicker over time, anchored them in place. “Thank you. For waiting.”

“Harry,” Louis said. “Don't. My love is mine to give. It's not an obligation. I want you to have it. I always did.” Louis pressed Harry’s hands. Despite the heat and lust just moments ago, their intimacy was greater now.

“No, Louis, not for your love,” Harry said, tenderly. “Not for the love you’ve given me. Thank you, for mine. For my love to you. For giving me time to love you. It has made all the difference in my life.”

“But Harry, I—“ Louis answered, faltering. Louis felt the power of Harry’s words. His feelings had encompassed years. Louis felt their strength building him from beneath. “Harry, I've only ever loved you.”

Harry’s eyes stayed wide and his eyebrows lifted a few millimeters. A ghost of a smile lingered on his lips. Harry’s eyes were like the deep pools of a lagoon. In them, Louis saw his own reflection, and he knew somewhere in the reflection were his own brilliant blue eyes, that would travel light years of darkness to find Harry.

“Oh, Boo,” Harry said. “There has never been anyone else.”

He kissed Louis gently and sweetly, ran his hand up Louis’s arm, and pulled Louis close. Louis felt Harry walk them slowly toward the twin bed in the room, kicking off his boxers along the way. Harry fumbled with Louis’s pants and took them off, and took off their scrub tops.

Harry took Louis’s chin in his hand and kissed him deeply. Louis pressed his body in, feeling every inch of skin where there was contact, their stiffening cocks a muscular pressure against each other. Harry cupped Louis’s ass and spread it apart, feeling Louis push against him, raising himself to be touched. Harry traced Louis’s rim with a finger, heard Louis whine in response.

Harry broke their embrace, went to his backpack and took out a few packets of lube and condoms. He reached for Louis’ hand.

“Holy cow, you must have been pretty confident,” Louis laughed at Harry.

“A surgeon is always prepared,” Harry said, dimple deepening. “The ABC’s, Lou. Always believe in chance. Isn't that what the ATLS says?” Louis shook his head, laughing. This boy was impossible.

“I knew this was going to happen soon.”

“Really.” Louis said. He was both charmed by Harry’s certainty and his sass. “All those confessions? Was it just a pretty way to get laid, Haz?”

“I knew how I feel, Lou,” Harry stated simply. “And from our night at the club, I sort of guessed you felt the same way. I just wanted to hear you say it.”

“God, you're impossible,” Louis said. “You drive me crazy.”

“I know,” Harry grinned. “It's my special talent.”

Louis looked at Harry, his body now fuller, his muscles sculpted and toned, a golden color. Louis had loved this body through sickness and health, intact and scarred, and now he felt a hunger for it. He wanted to ravish it, to be devoured by it.
“I’ve been wanting this for months,” said Harry, staring at Louis.

“Months?”

“For months. Been yearning for you, Lou, so badly. Wanted to see you. Wanted to hear you. Wanted to watch you being taken apart, to make you moan. Missed you so much.”

Louis squirmed. “Jesus, Harry. Now I have a different ache, if I’m honest.”

“Yeah?” Harry asked, lifting an eyebrow.

“Lie on your back,” Louis said. “Let’s finish what we started.”

Louis laughed again at the speed with which Harry hopped up on the bed and put his hands behind his head, crossing his legs at the ankles. He looked silly, completely nude but for his white crew socks.

Louis used his hands to nudge Harry’s feet apart, and then crawled between them. He kissed the scar on Harry’s right shin, and asked, “Does it still hurt?”

“Sometimes,” Harry said. “When I stand a long time. When the weather’s bad.”

“I wish I could kiss it all away,” Louis said. He kissed inside both of Harry’s knee, one after the other. “Wish I could take away all the hurt.” His kisses moved up inside Harry’s thighs, softly brushing against the hairs. Harry’s legs kicked.

“Ticklish! Ticklish, Lou. Ahh!” Harry wiggled, laughing, his hip and stomach muscles contracting. His hands pushed at Louis’s shoulders. “Stop!”

“Stop?” Louis said. “Are you sure?” With a devilish smile, he dug into Harry’s groin and tickled, hard, watching Harry writhe and shout in helpless laughter, his hands pushing Louis away, legs jumping.

“Ahh!! Lou! No more, no—“

Louis opened a packet of lube. He took Harry’s hands and pushed them down on either side of his hips, locking Harry’s groin in front of his face. With a wicked expression, he licked up Harry’s shaft and took him completely into his mouth, working the engorged muscles with his tongue. Harry, already stimulated from all the tickling, immediately stilled and hissed loudly, expletives leaving his mouth like little demons.


“It’s your—your fault, ah!—Louis—“ Harry whispered, pushing against the stimulation. His legs fell apart. Despite himself, his hips jutted forward against Louis’s mouth.

Louis’s fingers dipped into the lube and traced Harry’s rim. Harry lifted his ass and let Louis play with him. The first contact was cool and thrilling. Louis felt Harry shudder. From past experience, Louis knew that Harry was more than game, but he wanted to be sure.

“Harry?”

“Louis,” Harry said, raspy and rough, “go on, do it. Please.”

“What do you want? Want to hear you say it, Haz.”
“Want you—all of you—want you to fuck—“

Louis pushed one finger in, gently exploring, listening all the while to Harry’s voice. He felt Harry relax, his muscles loosen, then contract and tighten around him. Harry’s face was glorious, trapped between stimulation and anticipation, his hands pushing down the mattress on either side. Louis sucked and pulled, using his elbows to push Harry’s thighs up, and then added another finger, circling around to the front, where anatomy taught him was the site of the prostate, the sensitive organ that responded to the smallest touch. He could tell by Harry’s broken whines that he had found the spot, the most sensitive area. He could taste the salty, bitter drops in his throat. He was right there.

He pulled off and leaned down to kiss Harry on his belly, licked a trail down the hairs, following it all the way down. He licked Harry’s balls, first the right, and then lazily tracing his tongue to the left. Harry’s hip jutted rhythmically with the lack of contact, seeking heat.

“Please, Lou—“

“I’ve missed you, too, Harry. Want to make it good for you—“

“God—Lou—you’re driving me—wild—“

Louis dragged his lower teeth over Harry’s skin, just between his cock and his balls, sucking it in steadily, then scissored his fingers gently, spreading Harry apart. Harry touched the back of his neck and gave it a gentle pressure, and Louis swallowed him again, let Harry hit the back of his throat, over and over as he licked his tip, until his fingers felt the pulses start from Harry’s prostate. Louis pulled his face back, using his other hand to stroke Harry hard through the last burn before the orgasm, heard Harry keen in agony, then watched Harry shoot onto his belly and Louis’s hand. His fingers stayed where they were inside Harry, stroking him until every muscle had reached a peak and spilled over, until he was blissfully emptied, until he pulsed weakly, ran dry. Louis stroked inside until he felt the spasms ebbing away, until Harry held still.

“Fuck, Louis,” Harry said. “It’s been so long. Feels incredible.”

“You were so good, babe,” Louis said. “So, so hot. You’re such a turn on. Love seeing you, feeling you come.”

“I see that,” Harry said, looking at Louis’s erection, deep red, hard. Louis was still breathing shallow, fast breaths. “Let’s take care of you right now.”

“But Harry, the thirty minutes—“

“Lou, we have time,” Harry looked up at Louis, his lips pink and full, cheeks flushed. “I don’t care.”

“Spoken like a person of responsibility!”

“Stop seducing me with that administrative talk,” Harry said. Harry let his knees fall open and spread them wider. His voice gurgled from deep within the base of his throat, “You know what you want, Lou. Come and get it.”

Harry slowly turned onto his belly like cat, and stretched his torso, arched his back. He waved his ass at Louis, who puffed out a shallow, breathy laugh. Harry was ready for him.

Louis couldn’t believe how good it was with Harry, after all this time. This time it was different. They had waited and waited. They had thought and wavered. They had chosen it. They wanted it. They both wanted each other, not just for now, but for good.
Louis put his fingers around Harry’s rim, and tested with two, then three fingers, rubbing with his thumb. Harry arched his back and pushed against the fingers, encouraging Louis to go on, to do more. As Louis moved, Harry clenched and groaned.

Louis rolled the condom on, poured on more lube, and tentatively rested against Harry. Harry pushed against Louis, nudging him in. With one strong stroke, Louis fully entered Harry. Louis felt his whole body shiver in loving Harry, the whole person, the generosity of him, the stubborn beauty of him. He pulled out almost completely and then entered him hard, feeling emotional. Harry was so tight, so warm and ready.

Louis had his hand on Harry’s hip and felt Harry’s body jerk forward with each push, his rhythm steady. He fucked hard into Harry, hard and steady, a hand on Harry’s back, powerful thrusts from months of longing. He saw Harry’s cock stiffen again from the stimulation, heard Harry’s drawn out moan.

Louis bent over Harry, his voice rough, “You like that, Haz?” He licked Harry’s shoulders, ran a hand down his side.

“You fill me, Louis,” Harry said, raspy and low, “so well. I feel all of you. Fuck me harder. Been wanting this, imagining it.” Louis didn't want to touch Harry’s cock, being so recently stimulated, but it was already half full, and was still sticky. Louis reached around and palmed Harry’s nipple, felt the stiffness turn stiffer, perkier, more sensitive. He felt Harry twist his body from the stimulation, arch his back even more.

“Could fucking eat you, Harry, you look so good.”

Louis put a palm on Harry’s belly, spread the wetness on his hands and pulled Harry’s ass up toward his cock, fucking him closer. He was so swollen that it felt hard to move, his hand sticky with Harry, their sweat and sex mixed with each other. Harry cried weakly and reached for his cock, to give it more friction.

“Let me,” Louis said. He leaned over to envelope Harry, his chest on Harry’s back. Harry hissed as Louis touched him. The sound of Louis’s thrusting against Harry, rhythmic and wet, made him harder.

Louis caressed Harry’s length, and jerked it in time with his hips, pushing down and jerking lightly. He could feel Harry clenching around his dick just before he came again, groans growing in intensity, dragging out of his throat, small, tight spurts coming into Louis’s already wet hand.

“Harry, God, you're amazing. You're—fucking—amazing,” Louis said, as unbearable pulsations built from his groin. “Fuck.” Louis thrust harder, frantic, felt himself breaking apart. He felt Harry arch his spine and lean into him. Harry was urging him on. Still holding Harry’s softening cock, Louis leaned down and bit Harry’s back, sucked on his skin for the sweat and salt. One hand pulled Harry against him tightly. Louis fucked fast and hard through the final arcs, too frantic to say more than grunts, pulsing into Harry. He bit his lips hard not to scream with the pleasure of it, letting out a soft, tortured moan.

A spark of green flickered behind Louis’s eyes and flew apart in a wash of color. Each time Harry moved against him, another spasm and spurt would release, until Louis felt emptied of strength. Finally, Louis slowed down and pulled out.

“Harry. Harry. Harry.” Louis kissed the base of Harry’s spine. He reached up to touch Harry’s arm, stroking him down to the elbow, to rest on the rose. Harry sank down to his belly, his face turned sideways. Louis’s hand traveled down to rest on Harry’s hand, their fingers interlocking.

“I am, darling.” Louis said. He slid up and kissed Harry, their lips exchanging caresses. “This is the best day, love. The very best. We’re here. Will never be anywhere else again.”

***

Claiborne Cabot was surprised to find himself here, sitting in a pew of a church just a few doors down from his place of work. Normally he never mixed his professional work with his personal life. He had been an employee at Shreve Crump & Low for twelve years, and this was definitely a first.

He was thirty-seven years old and had walked past this building almost daily for the last twelve years, but had never set foot inside, never looked at it twice. He had grown up in a suburb of Boston, had gone to school at Emerson College, studying graphic design. His thesis had been on the influence of Keith Haring on social media platforms. His parents had studied history and chemistry in college, and had also gone to school in Boston, as had generations of Cabots, including the distantly related, wealthy Cabots who lived on Beacon Hill and were on arts foundations and hospital boards.

Despite being a Bostonian, and his parents being in Boston for all these years, despite working in a historic store not one city block away, Claiborne had never known about the large panels of Tiffany stained glass windows in the church. He looked around them. The windows lent a modernity and warmth to the stony façades of the church. He thought about his visit to Paris years ago, how immense and dazzling the stained glass windows were at the Notre Dame Cathedral, and even more so, the magnificent panels at Sainte Chapelle.

These Tiffany panels were not imposing, but were almost sparely elegant in contrast. They invited
the viewer in with their magical amalgam of jewel tones, the colors of the earth as it rotated through
dawn and dusk.

He sat toward the back of the church so as to draw less attention to himself. He was here alone. And,
truthfully, he had made himself attend at the last minute. He questioned whether the wedding couple
had invited him out of politeness or whim, and whether they even sincerely wanted him there. But
deep inside, he was curious, too.

They were kind people, of course. He had known them for more than three years. One or the other
had stopped in the store from time to time to purchase a gift for a friend or family member, and had
also referred friends to him—the Horans, for one.

Lovely couple, young doctors, just like the wedding couple. They had also just gotten engaged. The
man, Niall, his name was—a warm and handsome lad—had selected an 18 karat gold 1.1 carat
diamond solitaire for his fiancée, a young woman named Alice. Claiborne remembered them fondly.

A middle-aged man, heavy-set, smelling strongly of cigarette smoke, plopped down next to
Claiborne.

Was he at the right place? Claiborne was doubtful the man would normally even set foot in church.
Below the cuffs of the man’s blue sports coat, intricate tattoos covered the back of his hands. He
exhaled loudly, turning over the program with his large, ringed fingers.

Claiborne leaned over and said, in a friendly way, “Which side do you belong to?”

“Hmm?” the man grunted.

“Groom’s or groom’s?” Claiborne asked cheekily. “Which groom?”

The man didn't stir. “Am I sitting in the wrong place or something?”

He was not terribly friendly, Claiborne thought. Did he not know about wedding-guest small talk?

At that instant, the man turned to Claiborne and extended his hand.

“Mark Meehan,” he said.

“Claiborne Cabot,” Claiborne replied, shaking his hand. Claiborne felt slightly guilty for judging
Mark prematurely. Mark’s hands were large and strong. His fingers squeezed down.

“How do you know them?” Mark asked.

“Oh,” Claiborne said, remembering. “I work at Shreve Crump & Low. Down the street—do you
know it?” Mark stared at him. “It's the luxury goods store on Newbury. Next to Valentino. Across
from Brooks Brothers?”

“Ooo, fancy,” Mark said. “Not exactly my zip code, bro.”

“Yeah, well,” Claiborne said, defensively, “I work there. It happens to be a nice place to work. I’m
in charge of the wedding and engagement counters. Anyway, I was there the day that Harry came in
to buy the wedding rings. Three years ago.”

“What, by himself?” Mark raised an eyebrow and twisted his lips to one side.

“It's actually an interesting story,” Claiborne said. “Not many people know this, but three years ago
they weren't together.”
“You’re telling me,” Mark muttered.

“You knew that?” Claiborne swiveled his body to face Mark. “How? Did you know Harry?”

“Nope. Never met him until recently,” Mark said. “Nice kid, though.”

“Oh,” said Claiborne, confused. “So you knew Louis then?”

“I did,” Mark said. “Yeah. I’m Team Louis. Or whatever the kids say these days. But you were saying? Harry came in to get the rings when they weren’t together.”

“He did. I asked why he was buying the rings. I’ll never forget it, because it was unusual. Just in case, Harry had said,” replied Claiborne. “For some distant future. I mean, can you imagine? They weren’t on speaking terms at the time, which was very curious. I think it’s the first time I ever sold wedding rings to a couple who had broken up. Or was supposed to be broken up—except not really.” Claiborne looked at Mark, who was pursing his lips into agreement. “You just got a feeling, know what I mean? Like, they were gonna make it. Like I wanted them to make it.”

Claiborne saw Mark nod his head, ever so slightly. He continued, “Harry was obviously—no doubts about it—not over Louis. It was all very romantic, and adorable, and also, I don’t know. Odd? I didn’t feel sad. It wasn’t sad. More like it was destiny. Like the universe was going to bend their way.”

“I met Louis first,” Mark said. He took off his sports coat. He unbuttoned one shirtsleeve and rolled it up. There was a full sleeve of tattoos of intricate design; almost every centimeter of skin was shaded. Claiborne marveled at the density of the tattoos. The skin was so extensively, lovingly marked, with such attention to colors, highlights, shading—it was like the gold leaf illustrations on medieval parchment. “Louis came in for a tattoo. His first.”

“Are you a tattoo artist?” Claiborne glanced up at him.

“Own a shop on Commonwealth,” Mark said. “You should come in. I'll show you around.”

“I don't know,” Claiborne demurred. “I'm not a tattoo kind of person.”

“Oh?” Mark raised a brow. “What’s that mean—a tattoo kind of person?”

“I don’t mean—” Claiborne stammered. “No offense. I work with high-end clients, and—my supervisors—they wouldn’t condone a tattoo. It's just not done.”

Mark turned to Claiborne with a look of incredulity and indignation.

“Claiborne, is it?” Mark asked. Claiborne nodded his head. “Your life is your history. You know? You only get one chance to write it. You can't let someone else tell you what to write.”

“Hmm. I guess I never thought about it like that,” Claiborne said. “I don’t think of tattoos as history.”

“They fucking are history,” Mark grumbled. “Excuse my French. The most important kind. Personal history.”

“I'm not as free to express myself as you are,” Claiborne said. “I can't let everyone see.”

“Come to the shop,” Mark said. “Maybe you'll change your mind.”

Claiborne considered this offer. After all, here he was, chatting with a tattoo artist at the wedding of clients he had met years ago. Why were tattoos out of the realm of possibility? The world was his
“Maybe I will,” he said. “So, go on with your story. What kind of tattoo did Louis get?”

Mark stared at Claiborne. “When Louis first came in the shop, he was in this post-breakup funk. He was looking for courage. He is a courageous person, I think.”

“I agree,” Claiborne said. “Yeah. Both of them.”

“But he needed to find it. That’s what I mean when I say a tattoo is history. They don’t always mark what happened, like, an actual event. Sometimes they’re about a change of heart. A reminder of how it feels to face the music.”

“Louis was trying to convince himself he was over it,” Mark continued. “Over Harry. Over love. He brought in a picture of a dagger. You know, dangerous, quick, deadly. But here’s the thing. The picture was on a menu.”

“A menu?” Claiborne was confused.

“A menu from a romantic dinner with Harry. And he was trying to get over this dude? Gimme a break. The dagger was actually part of a couples tattoo—part of a rose and dagger pair,” Mark paused for effect, and by Claiborne’s look, he knew Claiborne had already anticipated the next part. “A dagger to complement Harry’s rose tattoo. How do you like that for history?”

Claiborne pondered this information.

“I don’t know which story is worse now,” Claiborne said slowly.

“Right?” Mark laughed.

They both turned when they heard noise in the back of the church. Claiborne recognized Niall and Alice walking in, their voices raised in conversation.

They looked stunning. Niall was in a black long tail tuxedo with a silver cummerbund, with a pale pink rose boutonnière. Alice wore a long silver taffeta gown, and her hair was pinned up with sprigs of baby’s breath and lavender tucked into the nape of the bun. She had a small corsage of violets and baby’s breath on her left wrist.

“Why is it always my job?” Niall was saying, his eyes smiling.

“You’re so good with the bakery,” Alice said. “Mr. O’Shaughnessy loves you, Niall. And she’s dealt with you so many times—Harry’s birthday, my birthday, our summer party, the department dinners. You have her eating frosting out of your hands.”

“Somehow I went from boyfriend to the cake guy over the last few years,” Niall said. “I’m not sure I like the trend, Al.”

“You’re better, Ni. You went from boyfriend to fiancé. From a lovely person to a lovely, supportive friend, the best kind of person.”

“Al, you’re just buttering me up,” Niall said.

“Is it working?”

“But seriously, am I more than cake to you, babe?”
“Much, much more,” Alice said. “You’re the champagne and the cork.” She whispered in his ear, “And what a cork.” He gave her a nudge with his elbow.

She straightened Niall’s lapel so the boutonnière lay flat. They smiled at each other and started to walk down the aisle. Claiborne watched them walk by; they hadn’t noticed him. They were young and perfect.

A young man ran up to them, also dressed in black tails. He kissed Alice on the cheek and put his arm around Niall’s shoulder.

“Hi, handsome,” Alice said in greeting.

“Liam, buddy!” Niall said. “You ready for this?”

“Damn, look at you. You’re both gorgeous,” Liam said. “Hot, hot, hot.”

“Not you,” Niall said. “Your fly’s open.” He pointed to Liam’s crotch. “Genuinely wide open.”


“Gotcha,” Niall said, running his finger up Liam’s chin and nose. “Have to fill in for Louis, you know? He’s not here to do the honors.”

“You little—“

“Liam, you look adorable,” Alice said. “Scrumptious.”

Liam adjusted his tie. “The first ones of us to get married. Who would have thought?” Liam asked.

The friends looked at each other, and then said, in unison, “All of us.” They went to the front of the church, and sat down on the right side. Stan and Jimmy sat waiting in the pews for them, dressed in long tails just like Liam and Niall.

Behind them, Des and Gemma sat waiting, Des wearing a navy suit, Gemma in a one-shouldered crimson satin gown with matching silk shoes. A slew of Harry’s relatives and friends were seated just behind. On the other side were all of Louis’s siblings except Ernie and Doris. The Deakin-Tomlinson sisters were dressed into matching gray taffeta dresses.

The youngest Deakin twins gathered at the back with their handsome father, Dan.

A small dog, with caramel coloring, circled Dan, her tail wagging. Around her neck was a new leather collar stating she belonged to Harry and Louis. Tied to her collar today was a pretty pink ribbon. Ordinarily, the church allowed only service animals, but Louis had somehow convinced the church deacon that she was vital to the wedding party.

Ernie, wearing a blue checkered suit, a gray silk square tucked into the pocket, was holding a blue velvet pillow, on top of which was a deep blue velvet box with the Shreve Crump & Low imprint. His long hair was brushed so the curls flipped at the very end. His twin sister Doris had a pale pink bow in her strawberry blond hair. She carried a small woven basket with white and pink rose petals inside. A pink rose was tucked into her waistband. Their father walked behind them. Ernie’s face was solemn as he held the pillow aloft, as if holding the Crown Jewels. Doris giggled as she cast rose petals on the church floor. The humans and the dog made their way to the front of the church, then settled down with the rest of the Deakin-Tomlinson family. The little dog trotted over to lie down next to Gemma Styles.
In the very back of the church, Harry stood at the doorway, his arm linked to Anne’s. His hair, now long enough to brush the nape of his neck, was tucked behind his ears, curls at the bottom. His eyes narrowed as he tried to take it all in—the white and pink roses and ribbons decorating the side of the pews, their friends and family dressed in their finest, the excitement bubbling from the front.

The Tiffany panels surrounded them in a warm, incandescent glow. Harry felt as if his chest were alight, the spirit of lost sparrows finding their way home to him. He answered them in kind, *I’m here.*

The music started. Harry met his mother’s eyes.

“Here we go,” Harry said. He cleared his throat, not for the first time that day.

“I love you, darling,” Anne said. Her lips curled upward in a tearful smile. They pulled together in a tight embrace. Harry gave her hand a slow and loving squeeze.

This was Harry’s big day. To Anne, Harry would always be the ship at sea, exploring, learning, getting into danger. He would always wander back to her, but he was on his own journey now. A wedding was one of life’s great milestones. Once crossed, a new story would start, but old stories must be let go, set aloft on ice floes to the world of memories. Anne’s heart ached as these stories waved in the distance, floating away.

“Mum, I—“

“Yes, Harry?”

“I love you, too. Before anything else happens today, I wanted to tell you.”

“Oh, my baby boy,” Anne said, taking his arm. “You’ve brought me so much joy. How is it possible that you’re this grown up?”

Harry said sheepishly, “I don’t know.”

“You love him, don’t you?”

“I love him more than anything.” Harry looked down. “We have been through so much. I—I’ve been thinking about this day for a long time. And to see it realized is like a dream. I have to pinch myself.”

“Harry,” Anne said, “you’ll be fine. You’ll always come back to each other. You’ll make your own stories now, the story of your family.”

Harry saw his confidence and joy reflected back in his mother’s face, the two of them so similar that they knew each other’s feelings from a telltale expression. They walked slowly up the aisle, and at the end, Anne kissed Harry on the cheek, letting him go. She stood to Harry’s side. They both turned toward the back of the church.

The wedding march started, and there, in the back of the church, Louis waited with his mother Johannah.

Harry watched their still silhouettes, his heart full. The moment had arrived, at last.

Louis’s hair was brushed into a delicate quiff. He was cleanly shaved and dressed, like Harry, in beautiful long tails. Johanna wore a long emerald-colored gown. Her eyes reflected the intense color, her cheeks glowing with warmth.
Louis looked at his mother with great love, the person who had held him so many times in distress, who had laughed at his antics, who had given him a boost up when he was down, and who had made him work hard, dream hard, love loyally and fiercely. Without her, Louis would not have been the same person.

“Thank you, mom, for everything,” he said. “I love you very much.” Despite his best efforts to control himself, Louis’s eyes were tinged with tears.

“And I love you, Boo Bear,” said Johannah. “I'm so proud of you. You've been everything I've dreamed of and more. You're going to be married!!”

“I know,” Louis said. “I can hardly believe it. It doesn't seem real.” He gulped down his nerves. Despite feeling a multitude of feelings, Louis kept one hand around his mother’s back, ready to link arms and walk down the aisle with her. He was not anxious. His hands stayed where they were. He had prepared thoroughly and was more certain of this decision than any other in his lifetime. A calmness anchored him.

Louis looked toward his fiancé at the front of the altar. The light behind him, Harry could only be seen in silhouette. His angular features were sharpened in the light: the square jaw, the sharp chin, the curve of his head and the soft halo of hair. His long legs and arms were beautiful in their familiarity. Louis could almost see the bemused smile and the excited crinkles near his eyes.

Fiancé, yes, for the last moments. Soon, he would be Louis’s husband. A word with so many promises, so much meaning. Louis couldn’t wait.

“You've picked such a wonderful person, Louis,” Johanna said. “He’ll take good care of you. And you take care of him, you understand?” Louis nodded imperceptibly. “Love each other. It’s your greatest gift.”

Louis felt affection radiate from her to envelope him, the way her arms used to surround him as a small child.

“Mom,” Louis said. “You’ll always be a part of my life. You know that, right?”

“Oh, don’t worry, Boo,” Johanna laughed. “I'm right here.” She pointed to Louis's chest, just left of the sternum, to the atria and ventricles, the arteries and veins that allowed him to express his capacity for love. “I'm stuck to you like glue.”

Louis kissed his mother’s forehead and then turned to face forward.

He looked down the aisle and felt Harry’s rain-speckled eyes, dappled like a green thought in a green shade. Harry’s eyes traveled to Louis’s heart, where they had always been. Louis felt Harry embrace him with his entire being. Harry’s lips were pressed tightly, as though trying to keep from smiling or crying.

Louis linked his arms to Johannah’s and began the first step.

He took a deep breath.
"Can’t you drive faster, Niall?" Louis called from the back seat. Harry turned to look at him, eyebrows wrinkled in a light frown.

The stirring, thin cries of an infant punctuated the air.

"Jesus. I’m not going to violate traffic laws for you, Louis," Niall stared straight ahead, braking slowly at the yellow light. "We’ll get there soon enough."

"You're picking now to become traffic-compliant? What the actual, fucking hell, Niall? Did you forget we live in Massachusetts?" Louis’s heart rate sped up as Niall slowly braked for another yellow light.

"Lou," Harry widened his eyes. "Language."

"She's a baby, Haz. She can't understand."

"Old habits die hard. We’re role models now." Harry raised an index finger. "Better get used to being good. Don't want Jennie picking up any bad language."

"Holy bloody fucking piss and hell," Louis muttered.

"That's it," Harry whispered. "Get those swears out."

"Fuck off." Louis flipped Harry the bird. Then, turning to the baby, he added quietly, "You didn't hear that."

Niall chuckled, eyes straight ahead.

Louis looked down at the baby, facing him in the car seat. Both hands held the car seat protectively. She was scrunched down as if she had no neck. She had been frantically sucking on the pacifier, but now had spit it aside and was howling from a small, rosy mouth, her tiny tongue wagging, microliters of tears gathering at the corner of her eyes. Her barrel chest rose and fell like baffles.

"She's hungry, I think," Louis worried. How could such a tiny sound cause such a rent of anxiety?

"So, you've been a dad for fifteen minutes and you're already a baby whisperer?" Niall said. "Trust me, Lou, after your second kid, you don't even hurry to change diapers anymore."

"Please just drive faster," Louis said.

It was a perfect storm.

For a few years, Harry and Louis had visited various agencies to look into options of adoption and surrogacy. At last, they had signed papers with a surrogacy agency, with the help of their longtime lawyer, Jonathan Dawbell. They had met and discussed arrangements with the surrogate mother, had visited her and worried all through her pregnancy. Two days after her due date and a day before her
water actually broke, their one car, Harry’s ancient Prius, bit the dust and had to be towed to the shop. Harry was just on the phone trying to arrange for delivery of a rental car, when the text came through that the baby was expected to be delivered later in the evening.

As Harry paced up and down the kitchen with the phone, dialing Mr. Dawbell, Louis sat on a kitchen chair, watching his calm, capable husband. He tried not to scream or throw up. It had been their dream to raise a family, and now the reality was so close. They were going to have a baby. An actual baby.

After some consideration, Louis had called Niall to take them to the hospital and bring them home. Both Harry and Louis were overwrought. Niall, with two-year-old twins, had a Volvo SUV that was almost indestructible, fitted with more safety features than an armored tank.

Niall kept the car meticulously clean, like a piece of modern art—simply mind-boggling for a father of two-year-olds. The car was washed weekly, and detailed once a month. Niall also had the disposition of a father who could not be perturbed if water balloons and guacamole were being flung at his head or if World War III were going on outside, so completely was he focused on driving safely.

Louis himself was almost the equivalent of a World War.

Harry and Louis had promised not to tell many people about the baby beforehand, not wanting to jinx things. They hadn’t even dared to shop for baby furniture or clothing until a month ago. Harry thought about the stacks of onesies in a rainbow of colors lying in the dresser at home, with small diaper pants and shorts to match. Their family and close friends knew, and that was about it.

Anne had bought the baby crib for them. She was on standby, ready to come to Massachusetts on a moment’s notice. For years she had hoped for a grandchild, and now Gemma had just had a baby boy, and Harry and Louis were going to have a baby. The babies were being born within two months of each other. Anne was a bit overwhelmed. Whether by joy or fatigue was hard to tell.

Gemma, a new mom herself, was full of great parenting advice. She had recommended newborn toys and supplies, and had sent a gift of baby bottles, sterilizing equipment, diapers, formula, wipes, warmers—the works. Harry didn’t know who was more emotional about their baby, post-partum Gemma or pre-partum Louis. They were materially prepared. Psychology was a whole other ballgame.

Now Jennie was tucked into her rear-facing car seat, installed by the hospital safety staff, with a rumpled green beanie on her dark blond head, her eyes two dark sapphires set into a scrunched face. A powder blue fleece blanket covered her body. Her fingers were so small—her whole hand could fit into the crook of Louis’s thumb. He marveled at the perfection of her, her fingerprints and palm markings in perfect miniature, the completeness of each phalangeal joint, the rapidity of her heartbeat, the translucency of her skin revealing her weblike blood vessels.

Harry thought about the irony of it. Louis and Harry were two of the world experts in maternal-fetal medicine. Their research was working toward the development of the world’s first in vivo micro-robot for stem cell harvesting and delivery, a first step toward the treatment of congenital and hereditary disorders. Because of their research, great strides were being made for pre-partum diagnosis and treatment of spina bifida, hemophilia, and other disorders. Yet here they were, reduced to blubber by their own seven-pound newborn.

When the car stopped, Louis unbuckled the car seat, threw the car door open, and ordered Harry to unlock the front door. Niall watched them with amusement. Louis treated the arrival of baby Jennie like a NASA space launch, except with maximum panic. Niall’s schadenfreude was on full-throttle,
if he was honest. After two years of diapers and strollers, he was enjoying his best friends’ domestic chaos, their tidy lives slowly being dismantled by a tiny infant.

“I'll get the diaper bag,” Niall said, laughing. “You guys go ahead.”

Louis scrambled out of the car and hauled the baby carrier through the front door. A thought fleetingly passed through his head: *nothing would be the same after this moment.*

Children’s picture books would gradually displace the medical textbooks on their bookshelves. The coffee table, now aesthetically decorated with a single bonsai evergreen, would be overrun with sippy cups and toys, the bonsai perhaps tipped precariously sideways. Between the oil paintings on the walls would be candid photos of Jennie, and then pieces of art from school taped up with cellophane tape.

Their house would be turned upside down. They would never again have a moment alone. They would always have to pee with the bathroom door open, listening for helpless children’s cries. They would never have a moment when they weren't thinking of their child, worrying about the whens, hows, and wheres of their daughter.

*It's paradise,* Louis thought.

As Harry always said, *I love the pain.*

Lady padded over and lifted her head to Harry. She circled Harry with curiosity, her tail wagging.

“It's okay, girl,” Harry said, petting her. “Lou’s a bit nervous. He's never been a dad before. Of a human baby, that is.”

Louis made his way to the family room. “I suppose you aren't nervous, Harry?”

“I actually feel fine,” Harry said. Louis glared at him with ferocious exasperation. “Boo, I do.”

Louis gave him a knowing look. Niall had warned him that all parent couples were divided into a good cop and a bad cop, a “fun” parent and a “strict” parent. Well, he was not going to get stuck being the bad cop. *No way.* Not fuck-it-up Tomlinson. He was going to be the one to teach them how to ride a bike, scoop their first ice cream cone, stay up late with them to watch Saturday Night Live, eating popcorn and playing card games.

Louis hoped to maneuver Harry—responsible, good Harry—into being the one to enforce bedtimes and supervise homework. Harry would build dioramas for school. Harry would do the time-outs, and he would do it in the gentlest way. *Harry’s the bad cop. I'm the good cop.*

Setting the carrier on the floor, Louis took out a 3-oz. bottle of ready-to-use infant formula and attached a nipple to it. Gingerly, he lifted Jennie out of the carrier into his arms.

“There, sweetheart,” he cooed. “Daddy's right here. We'll get you all sorted.”

He held her in one arm, watching Jennie hungrily drink the formula. Harry sat next to him, knees apart, his large hands together, helpless.

Harry had a feeling that Louis was going to be the most intensely over-protective dad in the world. He almost laughed out loud, imagining all the people who would quake at their front doorstep, waiting on a date with Jennie, only to have Louis scrutinize them from head to toe. He knew, so well, Louis’s look of disdain, the slight tilt of the chin, the steady downward gaze. It was intimidating, even to Harry sometimes, if he didn't know Louis's sweet side.
The irony was that teenager Louis had been such a merciless prankster; he had driven his parents batty with worry. Karma was a bitch.

Jennie paused to take a deep breath, and then belched, dribbling formula out of the corner of her mouth and onto her clothes. Harry suppressed a laugh, watching Louis scramble to wipe up the mess with his T-shirt.

Niall came in and stood next to them. “So, uh, guys? Need anything else? If not, I gotta go home. It's a departmental meeting night.”

After finishing residency, Alice had dived into her cardiothoracic fellowship. She was the first female to be pregnant while doing the fellowship, to be on bed rest for the last month because of twins, to pump breast milk between three-hour cardiac bypass surgeries, to go home to twins at the end of a fourteen-hour day.

Two working surgeons were hell on new parenthood. Niall was working in private practice, in a hospital just outside of Boston. They had a full-time nanny, but nights and weekends were sometimes a scheduling nightmare.

Louis glanced up as if he’d forgotten Niall was still here. “Ni! I’m so sorry—I’m an asshole. Would you like a drink or something?”

Harry stood up. “Thanks so much for driving, Niall. Talk soon?”

“Get some sleep, you two,” Niall said, “whenever you can. Your brain will thank you for it. Don't bother seeing me out. I'll catch you later.” He jangled car keys from his pocket and let himself out the back door.

Harry looked after Niall as he left, then back down at his Louis and Jennie.

Jennie dribbled formula out of her mouth and fell into a post-eating coma, her lips slightly parted, her cheeks full. One hand rested on her chest, one was slung above her shoulder. Louis seemed battered as well, hands cradling her, eyes nearly shut.

“Louis,” Harry said gently, his right hand on Louis’s shoulder, “go take a nap. I got her.”

Louis roused out of his catnap. “Haz?”

“Mmm?”

Louis reached up and took his husband’s hand. Harry, the father of his child. Harry’s hand was warm, dry, steady. The hand of a friend and a father. Louis felt safe.

Louis pulled him down to sit with them. Instinctively, Harry put his arm around Louis, and Louis leaned into him.

Lady circled over and put her head on Louis’s lap. *I'm here,* she seemed to say. Harry scratched the top of her head and rubbed around her chin.

Louis and Harry watched their infant daughter sleep, her eyelashes tinged blond at the ends, her hat tipped to cover her eyebrows. Her breaths were shallow. She reminded Louis of a tiny distillation of Harry, warm and sweet.

“I can't believe it, Haz.”
Harry waited quietly for Louis. He scratched Lady behind her ears. Lady contentedly closed her eyes.

“She’s here. She’s real.”

“She is,” Harry said.

“Thank you, for being here. Sharing this.”

“She’s ours, Lou. Our own baby.”

Louis looked at his infant daughter. Her fingers wrapped about his. He knew it was an instinct, but it still felt intentional, somehow. He knew more than most mothers about newborns. But strangely, he felt emptied of knowledge at the same time. How could an infant, so small and weak, feel like a window to a new adventure?

“I love you, Harry,” Louis said. “I love us.”

“Me too, kitten.” Harry pushed Jennie’s hat out of her eyes. She had the poutiest lips. There was a shadow of a dimple on her left cheek when she moved her mouth. Harry nuzzled his face against Louis’s, feeling a faint prickle of whiskers, and then leaned in to smell him, to brush his lips against Louis’s cheek. “I love us, too.”

***

“After the bath, we’ve been reading just one book at bedtime,” Louis said to the babysitter. “There are some favorites on top of the book shelf. Jennie can pick one out. Usually we have lights out at eight.”

“Yes, Louis,” Fiona said. She had babysat Jennie a few times now.

“Did we go over dinner? It's the quinoa salad in the fridge, then the grilled chicken to heat up?”

“Yeah, we did. I’ll get that going soon.”

“Do I have to eat the quinoa, Daddy?” Jennie padded next to Louis, holding onto the side of his pants. “It's yucky.”

“It’ll help you get so strong, sweetheart. My Supergirl.” Secretly Louis hated quinoa salad and dumped his into the garbage when Harry wasn’t looking. “Poppy eats it all the time. You see how strong he is. Don't you want to be like him?”
Jennie pouted, “But you put yours in the trash.”

“What—?” Louis gasped. *Supergirl. More like Eagle Eyes.* “I do not. It must have been a bad batch. Anyway, Poppy will be sad if you don't.”

“Poppy says I should do what is comfortable for my body,” Jennie said. “I don't like salad.”

*God, she was Louis’s kid. Independently minded, testing boundaries. Never forgets a thing. Argues until she wins. What was Louis going to do? It was like arguing against a tiny, miniature version of him and Harry.*

Harry and Louis hadn’t wanted to do genetic testing to see whether she was Harry’s or Louis’s biological child, but as she grew, Jennie’s resemblance to Harry was unmistakable. She had the same sharp brows, the same alarming doe eyes, the same full lips and wide smile, even the same deep dimple. Her Aunt Gemma even remarked how much she resembled her cousin Nicholas, born two months before her. They were like siblings.

Louis felt as if he was watching a child version of Harry grow up—the pouts and temper tantrums were so cute, it was hard to take them seriously. But he had to remember that Jennie was her own person. She had her own likes and dislikes, her own talents and destiny. Louis had to remind himself not to treat her like Harry.

Jennie had a maturity that was scary at times. She had periods of silence and observation, just like Harry, where it felt as though she was weighing Louis’s actions in her mind.

*Nonsense,* Louis thought. *She’s only five. How could she know what I'm thinking? I'm reading too much into things.* Still, Jennie sometimes asked the oddly prescient question, and the dreams she had were abstract and complex. She was definitely Harry’s child.

*Where was Harry, though? They were supposed to be out the door by now. If he left work late again…*

The door between the kitchen and garage opened, and Harry came in. Both Jennie and Lady ran at him.

“Poppy! Poppy!”

“Hello, love!” Harry scooped her into his arms, gave her a kiss. Lady ran around Harry and wagged her tail ferociously.

Harry was wearing his work clothes of dress shirt and khaki pants, hair combed back, glasses on. He needed a haircut, Louis thought. Ends were getting straggly.

Harry looked weary and unprepared. Maybe he had forgotten? But he had taken in Fiona’s presence without any surprise.

“Haz, everything okay?” Louis asked.

“Yeah, fine,” Harry said. He looked up at Louis, nodding his chin slightly. “Got some news today.”

Louis studied his expression. Harry could be a melodramatic little shit. He was grave, slow. Louis twisted his hands lightly, without thinking. What now? Did the robotic hardware crash again? There had been a few prototypes for the new model that hadn't been up to par. Harry was cryptic and silent. Louis could kill him for his brooding mysteriousness—but then he loved it, too. Harry’s darkness was really sexy.
“Oh, for God’s sakes, Harry. Spit it out!”

Harry cast his eyes down for a somber second, and then raised them to stare at Louis. He broke into a wide smile.

“Lou, we got the FDA approval,” he said. “It’s a go.”

Louis shouted. *You brilliant ballbuster!* Their work of ten years had come to fruition, even if it took a bit longer than expected. Louis was proud of the work, but even more so, he was proud of the way they worked together through all of the adversities. Money was tight, and though the research was promising, it had been far from a sure thing.

He walked to Harry and enveloped him in a hug. After all this time, Harry still felt like coming home. Louis inhaled the scent of Harry’s body, his work, his fatigue, the faint traces of sweat and salt. Harry’s chin scratched Louis’s face in a familiar way. Louis could kiss him, right now.

“Is that good, Poppy?” Jennie nudged Harry’s leg, his left one that did not hurt. She knew.

“Yes, it’s very good, Jennie. It’s the best.”

“Hooray!” Jennie did a little dance around Harry, and Harry took her hand and twirled her. Lady scampered around them, letting out short, excited barks.

“That is amazing. We did it. We really did it.” Louis laughed happily. So much work, so much time spent at night and on weekends, so many laboratory and then clinical trials, until finally they could market their product. They already had several medical labs working in collaboration. It was not glamorous work, but it was exciting, and could change the field of surgery.

But best of all, they were still young, in their mid-thirties, and they were in complete control of their careers. They had their own company, albeit small and struggling. They had several loans and a double mortgage to pay back. They were about to break out upon the world. So many things were about to change.

“Yes, we really did.” Harry’s smile was deep and genuine.

“Haz, sorry to change the subject,” Louis interjected. “But do you remember our dinner tonight?” In the celebration, Louis finally remembered they were late.

“Yeah, at Niall’s,” Harry wearily replied. “I should get ready.”

Niall was holding a pre-opening party for his new restaurant, The Craicken. It was a pub and restaurant in the South End. Alice has initially vetoed the project, with two small children and two surgical careers. She was now an Associate Professor of Surgery at MSH. Niall was working as a general surgeon in a private practice group. Somehow he had talked her into opening the restaurant anyway. The party was to celebrate the grand opening in a few days.

They closed the door as Fiona distracted Jennie with dinner. Jennie settled happily at the table, a puzzle book in front of her. She started on her juice and carrots.

Louis and Harry walked down the back steps.

It was one of those autumn New England days when the air was chilly, the sky was sapphire, the foliage was brilliant all around, and paradise felt close at hand. It felt as if the world was newly minted and would always be this way, crisp, clear, and sweet.
“Hey,” Louis said. “Nice job.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, with a tired grin. “You too, kitten. Good work.” He took Louis’s hand, and then pulled him closer to his side, kissed his cheek. Harry was wearing one of Louis’s favorites, a tailored maroon cashmere sweater. Harry’s broad shoulders were outlined by its softness. He had the sexiness of an athletic professor. He smelled like flowers, spices, and sin.

The madness was ahead of them, a night of celebrations, drinking, loud music. All of their friends would be there, people they had known forever, taken call with, learned surgery with, grew up with. These were people who had seen them at their best and worst.

“Harry?” Louis opened the car door, slid into the passenger seat. The car was still warm from Harry’s drive home.

“Yeah, babe?”

“Do you have any regrets?”

“Hmm?” Harry turned to face him.

“Do you think, maybe, you could have done something else? Be somewhere else?”

They were so busy these days. They almost never had moments of intimate conversation anymore. Harry watched Louis’s eyes, darting over his face. There were lines in it that hadn’t been there before. Change happened slowly but inevitably.

A string of universes lay behind them, just as new strings opened before them, the choices beckoning them as seductively as myths and folklore, so many paths to take, so many chances.

“Mmm,” Harry considered. “I don't think so. For the most part, I'm pretty content. You?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Louis said. “I was just thinking though. Our careers are going so slowly. It feels like forever.”


“I mean, I'm happy, don't get me wrong;” Louis said. He didn't want to say it out loud—*our debts, the loans. We're in deep*. He turned to face Harry. “It’s just—we were unsure for so many years. Now we’ve finally made it. FDA approval, Harry!”

“I know,” Harry grinned. “I was there, remember?”

“It’s like we've reached a safe harbor,” Louis paused. “It's been so long. We’ve had some rocky times.”

“Well,” Harry said, playfully, “it might have been easier if one of us hadn't been a prima donna.” He glanced askance at Louis. “Holding out on me.”

“Oh, hilarious,” Louis glanced in Harry’s direction. “Prima donna? One of us pretended to pass out on purpose to get CPR. For attention. Can you imagine? And you wonder where Jennie gets it from.”

Harry pretended to be indignant. “Excuse me, Lou-eh. I was not well. And I was not pretending. One of us took advantage of the other person’s weak state and assaulted him with chicken soup. And raw oysters. And kissing—I didn't remember asking for kissing. Genuine lip-on-lip action. Without
my consent. Then flashed his fine ass all over my face until I had blue balls for weeks—months.”

“Blue balls! Oh my God. Look who’s talking!”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you hypocrite, one of us liked to be naked,” Louis said. “All the time.”

“So?”

“Like, platonically naked. Puffy tits. Full frontal. Curls in my face. Penis draped over my textbooks.” Harry burst out laughing, remembering those days. “What was I supposed to do with that? I can’t imagine how I lived like that for so long—how it didn’t kill me.”

“Sharing is caring,” Harry said. “Platonically speaking.”

“Tell the truth, Haz,” Louis looked at Harry with a new seriousness. “Were you flirting with me back when we first met? A little?”

Harry looked at his husband, whose expectant face was more beautiful than anything he had ever known. “Of course, you fool. Every second.”

“Even Barcelona?”

“I was enchanted,” Harry said. “You were magical, Lou. The whole day. Easily the best day of my life, up to that point. I was afraid I’d never see you again. I fell in love.”

“Really?”

“Mmm.”

“Was I your True Blue?” Louis blurted.

Harry paused for a long minute, and then turned to Louis with an unreadable expression. “Now what do you mean by that?”

“I was your True Blue,” Louis slowly quoted. “And you were my little spoon, the green spot in my ocean. My love, my blue, my you.”

Harry took in a deep breath. Louis was afraid this would happen. Harry sometimes got into a state of such concentrated fury that he would go dead silent. It was like the eye of a storm.

“What else did you read, Louis?”

Sometimes Louis had forgotten that Harry never knew Louis had read his journal. Louis had never opened the journals again, after that time. There was no need. He trusted Harry completely.

Louis bowed his head. “I had to know, Haz. I had to know everything. I know it was wrong.” He looked up at Harry. “After your accident, I got the phone call about our wedding rings, and it shook me to the core. Haz, I thought I knew all the facts, but something had to be missing. I couldn’t talk to you, couldn’t ask you. I had to know. I was in your apartment with Lady. It was right there, in your drawer. Right where it was all the time.”

A moment of silence passed. Harry took his hands off the steering wheel. He turned away from Louis and looked out the window, his hands in his lap.
“Lou,” Harry said quietly. “Why didn't you tell me?”

Louis shook his head. “It was wrong of me. I was scared. When I read that you never met Microtonics that Thanksgiving—you were right, you were telling the truth. I was ashamed. I couldn’t tell you. Because of your accident—there was no chance.”

Louis added, softly, “I’m sorry, Harry. I know it was wrong. I’m so sorry.”

“Is that why you went to Praxa, Louis?” Harry asked. “For me?”

“Not just for you, Haz,” Louis said. “I did it for us.”

“For us.”

“For us. I knew you were disappointed—that you had turned Microtonics down. I didn’t want you to give up everything for me. And I didn’t go to Praxa—they came to me. It just happened at the right time. It was a second chance for us, but only if you wanted to do it.”

Harry was silent again. Louis could see the gears turning in his mind, his eyebrows knitted and his profile turned away.

“When you came to my house to visit me, you already knew. Everything.”

“I wanted to see how you felt,” Louis said. “It had to be something you wanted too. I wasn’t sure. I had my hopes up, I’ll say that much.”

“But you didn’t tell me that you knew about Microtonics.”

“No,” Louis said. “It had to be your choice.”

Harry looked out the window, his elbow resting on the car door, hand on his chin. Louis watched him anxiously. It had been years, but the feelings were fresh and raw.

Louis’s eyes traced the faint scars on the right side of Harry’s face. They were part of him now, the thin mesh of lines faintly pink under his skin. The jagged scar in the scalp could only be felt by hand. Finally Harry turned back.

“You are,” Harry said, “my True Blue.”

Louis asked, tentatively, “Do you forgive me?”

“I didn’t say that,” Harry said. He paused again. Louis fidgeted in his seat, and Harry let him suffer a bit. “Doesn’t make it right. Maybe I’ll never forgive you.”

“I swear,” Louis said. “It was the one time. It never happened again.”

For a minute, Harry did not move, his face stolid. And then, after a moment, his lips pressed into an amused smile. He turned to Louis.

“You’re unbelievable, Lou.”

“I’m sorry, Harry.”

“You were snooping.”
“I know,” Louis said. “I was a dick. But it was for a good cause.”

“Devious. Should have told me earlier.”

“Yeah, I should have.”

“You're—incorrigible. Like an child. Worse than a child. Jennie would never do something like that.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” Louis said. “Agreed. I've set a low bar.” Louis was sure the worst was over. He could hear the smile in Harry’s voice. “Now can we go?”

“Can I ever trust you?”

“I'm chaotic good, Harry,” Louis said. “Mostly good.” Harry raised an eyebrow. “And I’m really, truly sorry.”

“We’ll go after you answer this question then,” Harry said, crossing his arms, keys in his right hand. “What’s been the best day of your life?”

“Harry,” Louis said. “Do I have to, right now? We’re going to be late. We were supposed to be there a half an hour ago.”

Harry watched Louis expectantly. Louis knew, by Harry’s expression, amused, kind, yet calmly, patiently non-negotiating, that Harry was not going to let it go.

Louis fidgeted with his hands. “Come on. Are you really going to make me say it, Harry?”

“I'm waiting,” Harry said. He chucked the car keys into the cup holder, put both hands in his lap, and watched Louis closely.

Louis reached across and traced Harry’s thumb with his index finger. The anchor and rope tattoos on their wrists played across from each other. Their surgeons’ hands were supple and sinewy, and Louis’s smaller hand seemed made to be locked into Harry’s lean, larger one.

“I don't know,” Louis said. “Honestly, I don't know. Every day with you seems better than the previous day. The day we met, in Barcelona? Exceptional. Our oyster tour day? Legendary. Mardi Gras. The Christmas Day after my twenty-sixth birthday. The day you showed me the Tiffany stained glass windows. Our wedding day. How can I rank them? It's always been about love with you, Harry, from day one. From the first minute, the first second. The first time I saw you in your aqua polo shirt, maybe a thought went through my head—I’m going to spend the rest of my life with him.”

Harry breathed in. Louis continued.

“Haz,” Louis said, unconsciously tracing up Harry’s forearm, “We’re scientists; we’re not supposed to believe in destiny—“ Louis traced down the inside of Harry’s arm and held his hand, entwined their fingers. “But I don't think I would have learned how to love someone if not for you. You wrote the book of love for me.”

“Me,” Harry said. Louis could glimpse his two front teeth under a trace of a smile.

“From day one. You were always unbelievably—“ Louis paused, “hot. Everyone wanted you.”

“And now?” Harry gazed at Louis from beneath his piercing brows. “Still hot?”
“’Course you’re still hot,” Louis blushed. It was funny how such a moment seemed to draw out a confessional intimacy from Louis, even though he had known Harry for more than twenty years now. “More than just hot. You’re lovely.”

“Hmmm.”

“But it’s not just your beauty. I’d live a thousand lifetimes to find you, Harry. You’re a good person. Your love showed me how to love someone. Your love taught me how to be worthy of it.”

“We don’t have to live a thousand lives,” Harry said. “Just this one.”

Harry leaned in to give Louis a lust-filled, fun, dirty kiss with promises for later.

“Damn, Harry,” Louis sucked in a breath. “I don’t want to be elsewhere. This is my best day.”

“This one?” Harry smiled. “Why? Because of the FDA?”

“No,” Louis said. He inched his face up to Harry’s, waiting for a kiss. “Because it’s now. Because you’re my husband. Because we’re alive. Because no more secrets.”

“You sure about that?”

“I’m all out,” Louis said, contrite.

Harry laughed a little at Louis’s seriousness, a flicker of fight rising in his chest.

Somewhere in Boston, Niall, Alice, and Liam were waiting for them—their future history was waiting to be written. Everyone’s life was limited, but living was not merely existing. Someone told Harry that once. He couldn’t remember who.

“Lou,” Harry said, “me too. I want us to be together, everywhere.”

“Like the song,” Louis laughed lightly. “Fleetwood Mac.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, embarrassed. He knew that Louis knew this very well. It was hardly a secret. “I know, I say it all the time. Sorry.”

“No, no,” Louis said. “Harry, say it again. I love hearing you say it. The song reminds me of you. Like so many songs.”

Harry looked mischievously at Louis as he started the engine of the car. He winked, backing the car out of the driveway. When he hit the road, he turned toward Louis.

“Day turned black—“ Harry sang. Louis laughed out loud, catching on. It was one of Harry’s favorite ex-Beatle songs, by Mr. George Harrison.

“Sky ripped apart—“ Louis continued.

“ Rained for a year ’til it dampened my heart,” they sang together.

Cracks and leaks
The floorboards caught rot
About to go down
I had almost forgot.
All I got to do is to love you
All I got to be is, be happy
All it's got to take is some warmth to make it
Blow away, blow away, blow away.

***

Had an argument with Louis. His stubbornness drives me around the bend.

He wanted to use our Halloween picture for the Christmas card.

We were the Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band album cover. Jennie was Paul, and Michael, little two-year-old Michael, was Ringo. Which meant Louis, dressed as John, had to hold Ringo on his chest, binkie and all. Not only that, but Lady was dressed as the child in the striped sweater in the right hand corner.

Fantastic album cover, but that photo! We all looked a bit psychotic, to be honest. I told Louis that it was fine as a Halloween card, but Christmas needed more—gravitas, and—well—that went nowhere. The man is a menace. Maybe it was okay for our friends, but how can we send Sergeant Pepper’s out to the entire surgical department?

So after our argument, I said we’d table it for later, and then he brought out the photo cards he had already ordered. All two hundred of them.

“Were you even serious about discussing it?” I asked him.

Incredible, that man. Freaking incredible.

“I was pretty sure you were going to say yes, H,” he says.

Pretty sure!

Our daughter, memorialized forever as young Paul McCartney, and our son as pint-sized Ringo Starr. Not to mention Lady with the stigma of being the sulking child in the striped sweater. For Christmas! For posterity!

R.I.P.!!
“Dads! We’re going to be late!” Jennie stuffed her jeans and make-up into her duffle bag.

“Jennie, you’re going nowhere, young lady, until you’ve had dinner!” Louis shouted from the kitchen, where he was at the stove. “You don't have to be there for another forty-five minutes, and I've spoken with Mrs. Ryan.”

“But Dad,” Jennie said, petulant, sitting at the dining room table, “she said to come earlier today for make-up. Last time Ms. Wilson did my eyebrows and they looked like caterpillars.”

“Your dad is right,” Harry said. He kneeled on the kitchen floor, struggling with Michael’s shirt buttons. “You have to have a balanced meal before a full night of rehearsals, Jen. Michael, please stand still until your shirt is done.”

Michael fidgeted, turning every which way. Winston Churchill was running away with his tennis ball, and Michael was impatient to chase him.

In times like these, Harry sometimes wished that Louis hadn’t insisted on the entire family going to every dress rehearsal, Monday through Thursday, on the week of the show. He gets that their daughter was starring in her very first play, and true, she had the starring role, but having dinner as a family and then getting a rambunctious six-year-old brother ready was a challenge. The brother would rather chase their English bulldog, and sometimes, Harry had to admit, he did, too.

Lady had passed away. She had died peacefully after thirteen years with Harry. She was cremated, and Harry had taken her ashes to bury in Congo Square, in New Orleans, to party with the ghosts of rock & roll and jazz stars. She was there now, with the crickets and butterflies.

Winston Churchill had started as a foster dog. His owner was a 93-year-old British ex-patriate who could no longer properly look after him, and had brought him in, tearfully, to the ASPCA. The director had known Harry because Harry was on the Board of Directors, and had mentioned the recent passing of Lady. The director thought Winston Churchill, a sweet, good-natured dog, was the perfect pet for the Styles-Tomlinsons. He was right.

Eight years after Jennie was born, Harry and Louis were finally able to have another child, by adoption. Michael was born in South Africa. After a year of correspondence, they had flown as a family to bring him to the United States when he was eighteen months old.

They met a lively, pudgy South African toddler who immediately charmed them. Michael was loud, funny, giggly, and spirited. From the first day, he had kept his dads running after him while he left a path of destruction. Louis often thought it was karma coming back to bite him.

Jennie Eliza Styles-Tomlinson was now fourteen and a freshman in high school. She excelled in math and field hockey. She wanted to be a NASA space engineer or an astronaut. She was a dramatic girl, and has started in theater when she first played a carrot in the school parade for healthy
“Poppy,” she turned to Harry. “can you please run my lines with me? It's in Act III. I don't know why, but I get stuck.”

“How about this?” Harry answered. “You eat, and we'll run lines.” Michael’s buttons done, Harry turned him around to sit at the kitchen table as Louis set down the plates.

“Okay.”

Jennie threw her knapsack on the ground. She dug out her script and found the relevant pages.

“Start at the beginning of Scene 5,” Jennie said.

“Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day.
It was the nightingale, and not the lark,
That pierced the—crap.”

“Fearful,” Harry prompted.

“—fearful—hollow of thine ear.
Nightly she— nightly—I forget.”

“—she sings on yond,” Harry prompted.

“—she sings on yond pomegranate tree.
Believe me, love, it was the nightingale.”

Harry smiled. The lark and the nightingale was one of the most beautiful passages from *Romeo and Juliet*. Juliet argued that the bird they heard was the nightingale, a bird of the night, so that Romeo could stay, but Romeo knew it was the lark, a bird of the morning, telling him he must go.

Harry read Romeo’s lines.

“It was the lark, the herald of the morn,
No nightingale. Look, love, what envious streaks
Do lace the severing clouds in yonder east...”

Harry finished and waited for Jennie. After thirty seconds, he said, “Yond light is not daylight—“

“Yond light is not daylight, I know it, I...” Jennie stopped, looked up at the ceiling, and mumbled, “Damn it.”

“Darling, you're doing fine,” Harry said.

“Why can’t I remember it?” She seemed dejected. “Four days until performance.”

“Maybe it's all the pressure,” Harry said. “Do you want to start from the top?”

“Poppy,” Jennie blew out her cheeks. “Can you teach me how to remember the lines? I need, like, an idiot-proof system. In case I get nervous.”

Harry could see the panic in her brows, in the twist at the corner of her mouth. He knew it well, just as he knew how those same muscles felt in his own face.
Harry remembered the days of medical school, with all the pornographic mnemonics he and Louis had used to memorize ungodly lists of anatomical terms. Louis had kept his promise to help Harry study. Here was the mnemonic, for instance, to the branches of the external carotid artery: *As She Lay Extended, Oscar’s Penis Slipped In:* the ascending pharyngeal, superior thyroid, lingual, external facial, occipital, posterior auricular, internal maxillary arteries.

He couldn't teach Jennie dirty mnemonics!

What, then?


It was another system of memorization Harry used. They imagined walking up from the end of their street, strategically placing figures along the familiar landmarks from the text. Nightingale at the end, the time being night, the light soberly indigo. The lark singing from their neighbor’s driveway, wearing Romeo’s bright yellow tights, screaming a pop song into a huge styrofoam ear. The more ridiculous the visual was, the easier it was to remember the image. Then the nightingale flew over the lark and landed in the pomegranate tree in their front yard. The nightingale was then blown to bits by a meteor from the sun, turning into a torch. They ran the lines and images over and over.

**JULIET**

Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day.
It was the nightingale, and not the lark,
That pierced the fearful hollow of thine ear.
Nightly she sings on yond pomegranate tree.
Believe me, love, it was the nightingale.

**ROMEO**

It was the lark, the herald of the morn,
No nightingale. Look, love, what envious streaks
Do lace the severing clouds in yonder east.
Night’s candles are burnt out, and jocund day
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops.
I must be gone and live, or stay and die.

**JULIET**

Yon light is not daylight, I know it, I.
It is some meteor that the sun exhales
To be to thee this night a torchbearer,
And light thee on thy way to Mantua.
Therefore stay yet. Thou need’st not to be gone.

“Jen, have you started dreaming in iambic pentameter yet?” Louis asked. He was trying to scoop up all the peas that Michael randomly chucked from his plate onto the table. Michael was playing table
billiards with the peas and a pen.

“Of course not, Dad!” she laughed. “That would be a nightmare!”

“Do you think Shakespeare did?”

Jennie answered, “Yeah, he probably pissed in iambic pentameter.”

Harry cackled out a loud laugh, as did Louis.

“Poppy, you're a life-saver,” Jennie turned toward Harry. “I don't even know why these lines are here. You would think they had better things to do than talk about birds. Like, it's their last night together.”

Harry was amused. In the play, Romeo and Juliet had just spent their wedding night together. Jennie wasn't wrong. Poetry was the last thing two teenagers would be doing on their wedding night. He'd been there, with Louis.

“Jennie, come on,” he said. “Give Will Shakespeare a break. He’s trying his best.”

“He’s torturing me, though.”

“Is he? Bad man,” Harry said. “Maybe, just maybe though, the poetry isn't just an evil plan to torture high school kids of the future.”

“Yeah, right.”

“What if,” Harry asked, “the birds are metaphors? You know, a way of talking about things that are too scary to talk about?”

Jennie sniffed at the word *metaphor*. “Such as?”

“Do you really love me? Will you stay with me? Is your love true? How can you prove it to me?”

“Poppy, it’s poetry. I get it,” Jennie said, “But you know it’s unrealistic, right?”

“What is?” Harry said, bemused.

“This whole play. Teenagers talking like this, for one thing. And, people can't really fall in love when they're teenagers,” Jennie said. “Not like that. They don't find their true love after one day. They can't, like, commit their whole life to each other after a few hours.”

Louis sat up, “Oh? You don't think they can?”


“Hah!” Harry laughed, glancing at Louis. “That is probably true. Especially the running away part, eh, Lou?”

“Oh, whatever, Haz,” Louis said.

Michael chirped up happily. “How about us, daddy? Can we go to the park today?”

Louis cleared his throat. “Maybe this weekend, Michael. Work on your noodles, little man. Don't just play with them. We have to be leaving soon.” He twirled noodles onto a fork and gave it to his son.
“It is true, Poppy,” Jennie said. “Teenagers aren't old enough for these things.”

“You're right, darling,” Louis answered her. “You, especially, aren't old enough.”

Jennie glared at him.

“Ah,” Harry stopped him. “You're a realist, Jen. But tell me one thing.”

“Mmm?”

“Did you believe in them?”

“Believe whom?”

“Romeo and Juliet. Did you believe they were in love?”

Jennie thought about the question, and then looked down, “Yeah, I guess.”

“Why?”

“Because they are,” she said. “They’re the exception. They’re in love with each other. It's true love.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” Jen answered. “Because of their emotions. Poetry, maybe. Are you saying the poetry tricked us into feeling this way?”

Harry smiled. Can't trick her. “Could be.”

Harry felt amusement and tenderness at the same time. His daughter was so like him at this age—skeptical yet wonderfully sensitive, so alert and responsive to the power of words, so mature about her emotions. She was so honest that it hurt him.

“Shakespeare gives them exquisite poetry, Jen. And Juliet, the girl who plans it all, the bravest girl in the world, has the most beautiful poetry of all.”

Jennie answered, “Yeah, the poetry is beautiful, at least it is when you don't forget the lines and get yelled at for it. But I feel like Romeo and Juliet are almost stereotypes, you know? Like, they’re what adults think teenagers are like.”

“In what way?”

“They're impulsive and their decisions are always wrong. You know, like Shakespeare is standing to the side saying, See? This is what happens when you try to act like adults! You get yourselves killed, and all your friends too. It's just—annoying how adults treat teenagers all the time.”

“Hmm,” Harry pondered. “I see your point, Jennie.”

Louis cleared Michael’s dishes and set a big bowl of chocolate pudding on the table. He set down small bowls and asked Michael to get spoons for all of them.

“Tell me again where we are in the play?” Harry asked, spooning out the pudding.

“Romeo has just killed Juliet’s cousin, Tybalt,” Jennie explained. “Romeo narrowly escapes being killed, himself. And his best friend, Mercutio, is dead, because of him.”
“So Romeo is very aware that people die,” Harry said. “He’s mortal like everyone else.”

“He himself could get put to death for the crime. He’s in hiding,” Jennie said.

“Romeo and Juliet both know that,” Harry said. “Time wasn’t just an abstract concept for them. It was pretty urgent. They might have been spending—actually, come to think of it, they were spending—their last few minutes together. Yet they spend this precious time spinning out this beautiful poetry, about songbirds, about pomegranate trees, suns and meteors.”

Harry watched his daughter’s delicate features change, absorbing this information.

“So, love,” Harry said to her, tenderly, “what are they arguing about? The lark and the nightingale?”

Jennie looked at her father’s face, the craggy lines she had assembled into “Poppy” and had never thought about twice, a face that was always reliable, a face like hers. His mind worked like hers, the gears duplicates of each other. He left the string in the labyrinth for her to follow.

_It's scary how similar they are_, Louis thought.

“The way to live and die,” she said.

“Bravo,” Harry said. “It's about how to spend the time they have left. How to deal with their mortal nature.”

“How to die well,” she added. Harry’s eyes lit up.

“Yes!”

“Like an alarm bell for your life,” Jennie said.

“Ha! Yes,” Harry said. “Well put.”

Maybe he was too hard on her. She was only a child. And she was also Louis’s child—he wondered how she hadn't stopped him by now.

“For your information, Jennie, it's okay to fall in love when you're a teenager,” Harry added. “It's not a bad thing.”

“Well, it’s not for me,” she said. “No, thanks.”

“No?” Harry asked. Louis gave him a warning glance. Harry winked at him and saw Louis roll his eyes.

“I think you've made a great decision, Jen,” Louis said. “Wait for the right person.”

“There's no one interesting enough, Dad. You know what is interesting, though?”

“What?” Harry prompted.


Harry turned to wink at Louis. “Touché, sweetheart. All right, let's get going. Poetry first. But,” he dropped his voice, “it’s still okay to fall in love, J. With someone, someday.”
“Haz! That is literally the opposite of what we’re trying to teach her,” Louis protested. “It’s really not okay,” he said with mock solemnity.

*Good Lord,* Louis thought with a shock. *Harry was turning into the good cop, damn it! The fun parent. The rock ‘n roll and sexy one. How did I get trapped into being the boring one? Me?! The boring one!!*

“Lou, we can’t be hypocrites,” Harry raised an index finger. “Trust your feelings, Jennie. Life isn’t about how long you live, but how passionately. Not just in romance, of course. In every way. You can come talk to us any time. You know that, right?”

“It’s hard,” Jennie said, slightly embarrassed. “I can’t talk about it with you. You’re my dads. Do you know *anything* about how girls feel? And, you’re really old?”

Harry and Louis exchanged glances. Had anyone dusted them off recently? They were antiques.

“Let’s get going, Jen,” Louis smiled. “Romeo and Juliet are waiting for us, even if we can’t understand it because we’re so desiccated.”

“So decrepit,” Harry added. “So misshapen and grey and arthritic. We know nothing about romance, Lou. Remember that.”

In truth, Harry and Louis were still beautiful men in their early forties. They worked out, they ate healthily. Sure, their faces were more lined and their bodies less flexible. And of course, having children meant less time to work out. But they were probably the best-looking couple in school, enviably toned, fit, handsome, always polite and well-dressed. Teachers loved them. They never missed sending something in for snacks or bake sales. They were so supportive that Jennie wished, sometimes, they were a bit less supportive, so she could complain about her parents like everyone else.

Jennie finished her dinner and put her plate in the sink.

“How does a person know, anyway?” She turned around. “What it's like? To be in love. What if you never fall in love?”

Louis snuck a look at Harry. Was Mr. Good Cop going to answer this? No, Harry was wiping off the table. Maybe he hadn't heard her.


“Just boring, breakfast-lunch-dinner like you guys have?”

Louis burst out laughing. He and Harry were as boring as day-old doughnuts.

“Daddy, you know what I mean,” Jennie said. “You guys just go to work and come home. You love each other. Poppy lets us do fun stuff, and Dad is strict.”

Louis sat up, alarmed. “*What?!* I am the *fun* parent!”

Harry laughed loudly. “Dad is the fun parent, Jennie, and don’t you dare forget it!”

“Jen, Jen, Jen,” Louis said. “You’ll know. It’s not always dramatic, that’s true. What you have to do is to be open to it, to the possibility of love. Don’t close yourself off, don’t feel bad about it. It's not always about eyes meeting across the room, hearts racing and all that.”
“Jennie, darling,” Harry said, “you’re so lovely, and someday someone will be lucky enough to fall in love with you. Like Dad says, it’s not always something you recognize. It doesn’t have to be flowers and chocolates, or dinners and movies. Sometimes it creeps up on you very slowly, you know? Over months of friendship, over years.”

“Sometimes it’s something as small as sharing a cup of hot chocolate,” Louis said. “Having a food fight. Taking a walk.” He looked at Harry.

“Sharing some music that you love,” Harry said.

“A chance meeting,” Louis added, “perhaps.”

“Ewww,” Jennie said. She made a disgusted face. “Are you talking about yourselves? Gross.”

“Getting tattoos together!” Michael said gleefully.

“That’s very true, Michael,” Louis said. “We do share some tattoos, don’t we?”

“Like your compass and Poppy’s ship.”

“Yep,” Louis said.

“Your dagger and his rose.”

“That is true.”

“Your rope and his anchor.”

“Okay, love, we do have more than the average person. We don’t have to list every one,” Louis said, scratching his scruff, while Harry laughed. “It doesn’t mean you should run out and get tattoos with the next person you like,” Louis said to Jennie.

“But if I do, I can go to Mark, right?” Jennie asked innocently. “Like you guys.”

*Good Lord. Karma really was a bitch,* thought Louis.

“We’ll talk about that later,” he said. “Come on, Juliet. Your balcony awaits.”

“I don’t see why Juliet can get married at 13, and I’m 14 but can’t get a tattoo.”

“That is—that is not the same. Um—Harry, can you help?”

“I believe tattoos are a ‘fun’ topic, Lou,” Harry said. “You handle it. You’re the fun parent, right? Have fun.” He winked at Louis. “Come on, Michael, let’s zip you up.”

Louis glared at Harry.

*Spiked, and BLOCKED. Oh, he was good, that Harry Styles. He’s not giving up the good-cop throne that easily,* Louis thought.

He scrambled various summer event schedules in his mind. *Was there a good concert coming up? Something sexy, something rock & roll. But also something he would enjoy. One Direction was coming to Boston. Twenty-fifth Anniversary Tour. They were touring with Ed Sheeran. Hmmm.*

“Hey, Jen,” Louis said. “Maybe we can get tickets for One Direction this summer.”
“No way!” she shouted. “Would you really take me? Can I invite a friend? Ahh!! You’re not kidding me, right?”

“We’ll get tickets right after we come home,” he said. “Floor seats. Maybe even stage passes—I’ll see what I can do.”

“Dad, you’re the best ever,” Jennie rushed at Louis and hugged him tightly. “I love you so much!”

Louis looked over at Harry and winked. *Who’s sexy now?*

Harry shrugged.

Lou’s small victories. Cute.

Harry had liked One Direction first.

***

**Night Train**

_for Louis, always_

At 3 A.M. a train whistle sounds outside the house, across the fields, which may as well be the veld, full of sleeping lions, or the pampas of Argentina with its grotesque capybaras (in waterfalls), or the arid steppes of Patagonia, where wild horses run. The zonda winds flatten the spare bushes of the Tierra del Fuego, the land of fire, or was it the sirocco crossing from the Sahara into Spain?

You, in pajamas, schlep to the kitchen in bare feet, fill a glass with water, tread across Alaskan tundra haunted by the purga, humpback whales surfaced just south of our sidewalk—can you hear them? Not trains, but the howl of bears locked in combat, thunder of caribou migrating, maybe even Christmas elves restocking the shelves, growing tiny Christmas trees for the next millennium—
all this, just outside our doors,  
life and death playing its perennial 
drama—while we dream our cinnamon  
dreams, and a child, a girl or a boy,  
cries out, Daddy, where is my water?  

I am thirsty in the Badlands,  
tell me a story of adventure,  
then tell me how to come home.  

—Harry

***

“Harry, did you wrap the presents? Should we bring it as a carry-on or pack it and wrap it there?”

Louis was in the bedroom, transferring folded shirts and underwear into their suitcases.

Jennie was going to be married in five days. They would be leaving for the airport tomorrow to fly out to San Francisco. Jennie was working on her Ph.D. in computational physics at Stanford University. She was getting married in Napa Valley, and they had hotel and car reservations all set. Michael, a freshman at UCLA, was going to meet them in San Francisco.

Niall and Alice were flying in two days, just in time for a surgical conference. Alice was going to give the welcome address as the Chair of the Department of Surgery at MSH. Liam and his family, Gemma, Stan, and Jimmy with their families would be there too.

Despite Louis’s admonition not to kiss anyone until she was thirty-years-old, Jennie had, in fact, met someone worthy of kissing earlier than that. In her sophomore year at Stanford, she had met Marco when he ran into her, literally, at the Starbucks on campus.

He was a student concentrating in the Department of Film and Media Studies. He had been watching Casablanca on his phone when he pushed open the door to Starbucks and upended Jennie’s coffee onto her pink blouse.

That was another thing Jennie shared with Harry, their love of the color pink.

According to Jennie, Marco immediately lifted the hem of his T-shirt to towel off the hot liquid on her chest, heedless of the propriety of either showing his naked torso (well-defined) or of rubbing the
boobs of a stranger.

“Get off, you knuckle-dragger!” Jennie tried to back away from him, holding a half cup of coffee dripping from its sides. The coffee coated her bag and books, too. She peeked inside the bag. Her laptop computer had stayed dry. Thank fucking God. What an asshole.

How Jennie had acquired a sailor’s salty vocabulary was a complete mystery to her friends. Her dads were the epitomes of dulce et decorum.

“You’re soaked, bub. My shirt is one of those fast-drying jobs. Here,” Marco said, taking off his shirt. “Go to the bathroom and take your shirt off, and put my shirt on. I'll walk you back to your dorm and wait for you to change.” He brought his shirt up to his face and sniffed it. “Smells all right. Just washed it.”

“Eww.” Jennie made a face. She examined him. Curly dark hair, dark brows, round dark eyes. A hint of facial hair all around the jaw. Levi’s and Converse sneakers. Sort of a nondescript person, she thought.

“No,” she said. Jennie crinkled her nose in distaste. She meant to say that she didn’t want his shirt, but instead said, “I don't want your shit.”

“It's not shit,” he said, affronted. “It happens to be my favorite concert T-shirt. One Direction, Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Reunion Tour, Boston. Floor seats, with my mom. That show was sick.” He held up the shirt by the shoulders to show her. “I was fifteen. Still the best show I've been to so far.”

“No way,” she said, leaning in despite herself. “That's—1D.” Jennie’s eyes widened. She recognized the familiar One Direction tour logo in blue and green, the four men with their trademark ripped skinny jeans.

“You like them?”

“I was at that show,” she said, “with my dads. In Boston.”

“I know. Good, wasn't it?”

Against her better judgment, she nodded.

“Favorite song?”

“Um—“ Jennie paused. Seriously? She was soaking wet. “If I Could Fly. It’s a sentimental favorite. It reminds me of my Poppy—one of my dads. He used to sing it to me, at bedtime.”

“That's a good one. Made in the AM. Great album, stupid title. Mine’s Midnight Memories, just a jamming song. The scales in the bass? Siüickk. Reminds me of a Tom Hardy movie or something, you know? Full speed ahead.”

“Siüickk?” Jennie imitated him. “What are you, twelve?”

He shrugged, unbothered.

“Who’s Tom Hardy?” Jennie said.

“You're kidding me.” He scrunched his face at Jennie, as though pained. “Peaky Blinders? Inception? Dunkirk?”
Could this guy actually be interesting? Her dads always told her to be open to possibility. Nah. One cool concert T-shirt notwithstanding, he seemed like a weirdo. She shook out of her 1D memories.

“Never heard of those movies,” Jennie said. He made an expression with his eyebrows raised, as if to say, Too bad. “And anyway,” she continued, “if that shirt’s so precious to you, why are you getting it stained with coffee?”

“Ha, no worries,” he said. “I bought five of these. And I had them all treated with this 3M coating so they literally can never fade or be stained.” He wrung out the hem of his T-shirt on the coffee shop floor, and then moved to wring out Jennie’s shirt.

“What—no—!”

“Sir!” the barista said in a loud voice. “You have to wear a shirt in the store or you have to leave. I'm sorry!”

Marco gently laid his damp shirt on Jennie’s dry shoulder.

“I'll wait outside, bub,” he said. He took the cup of coffee from her, took a sip, and then, absent-mindedly turning around, carried the cup with him out the door, continuing to watch Casablanca on his phone. He seemed oblivious that he was bare from the waist up. His jeans were low slung and his underpants stuck out a little above the waist.

Jennie had followed him right outside and thrown the T-shirt on his phone, almost in his face. He chucked it casually over one shoulder and kept watching the movie. Without looking up, he raised two fingers in a haphazard wave good-bye.

Jennie stormed off back to her dorm to change. Not only had she lost her coffee, she had missed the first half of her linear algebra lecture. Granted, it was on tape and she could watch the lecture online, but it was an extra hour out of her day. What a waste of a day.

A couple of days later, when she came in for her cappuccino, he was sitting in the store, waiting for her. He jumped up as soon as she came in.

“I'm really sorry,” he said. “I should have at least paid for your coffee last time. I had to watch the film for class, so I wasn't really thinking. Was I rude?” He took out a wallet to pay for her coffee.

“Ugh,” Jennie said, waving him away. “No thanks, man. I got this. You're kind of rude now. You're giving off some stalker vibes.”

“No! Am I really?” He seemed aghast. “Yikes. I don't mean to.”

“What did you do, sit here every day until I showed up?”

“Nah,” he said. “I'm here almost every morning anyway. Just thought you might come in one of these days. And you did, see? And if not, no biggie. I get my caffeine fix, and my free wifi for class assignments. I figured, win-win. You seem like you’re addicted to coffee too. Bound to be back.”

“Do you ever think before you talk?” Jennie picked up her things to go. “For real.”

“Hang on a sec!” he said, opening up a plastic bag that he had been carrying. “Brought you something.” He grabbed something noisy, in a cellophane bag, and took it out.

It was a adult, sized large, One Direction Twenty-fifth Reunion Tour T-shirt, in mint condition, still in the merchandise packaging.
Jennie stared at him.

“Come on, take it. I got four more.”

“But it’s yours. You don’t even know me.”

“Well, I did ruin your shirt. Felt kind of bad about that.” Jennie was surprised he had feelings. He had seemed as human as a robot or an iguana. “This shirt’s been treated with—“

“—the 3M thing that prevents fading and staining,” Jennie finished. “I know. You told me.” What a dork. But he was cute. Jennie could actually see that now. His eyes shone with an oblivious sincerity.

“Yeah. You said you were at the concert. So the shirt might actually mean something for you. Here you go.”

Jennie couldn’t decide between her genuine love for the band and the weirdness of the encounter, suspended between a true, honestly good moment and the creepiest pick-up tactic ever. Finally she took the shirt.

“You sure?”

He extended his hand. “I’m Marco Taddeo. Film and media studies. Junior. I’m from Portland, Maine. I’ll tell you anything else you want to know. Got three sisters. Mom’s a nurse. Dad’s a teacher. Been a vegetarian since I was twelve.”

Jennie opened her lips, unsure how to proceed. Finally she shook his hand. “Jennie Styles-Tomlinson.”

“That’s a cool name.” Marco did something weird with his lip. He was making a “toot toot toot” sound and vibrating his lower lip.

“What are you doing?”

“What?” Marco said. “Oh, this thing.” He did the “toot” sound again. “Nervous tick.”

“Oh, brother.” The barista called her name and Jennie got her order. “Why should you be nervous?”

“Huh? No reason. Not nervous, like anxious or anything like that. I mean, not because of you, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“No,” Jennie said. “Course not.”

“Just nervous, like, not sure what happens next. Like reading one of those adventure tour books, you know? What’s next. Lunch, or a shark encounter. Deep sea fishing, or vomiting and diarrhea.” Jennie grimaced, but then she laughed. “Hey, uh, speaking of lunch—Jennie, you want to grab lunch sometime?”

“You promise no vomiting or diarrhea?”

“Hmm. No guarantees,” Marco said, deadpan. “There’s a place downtown that makes a sick quinoa-bean salad. They use some sort of fruity vinegar—it’s tasty.” He saw Jennie scrunch up her nose. It was a cute, involuntary gesture. “I’ll pay. You don’t even have to talk, you know, if you don’t want to. Like, you’re not a great conversationalist, I can tell.”

that. And, if you mention quinoa again, I will stab you in the eye with this coffee stirrer.”

Marco looked at her for a beat, and then said, deadpan, “Quinoa. Again.” He watched Jennie as her lips curled up slowly in a smile. “Wear the T-shirt! That way I can find you.”

“Whatever, Marco. The way you were waiting for me, I'm pretty sure you can spot me from a block away.”

Six years later, they were engaged to be married.

Harry had already hung up the garment bags with their tuxedos in the bedroom closet. Louis scrambled over the last few things they needed, the toiletries, the money they had taken out of the bank. What else was he missing? What was Harry doing? There wasn't much time.

“Harry?” Louis called out once more. There was no answer.

Music was coming from the family room. Despite technology expanding so much in the last twenty years that everyone stored their music on tiny hard drives, with terabytes of memory, Harry still stubbornly kept his vinyl records, now wrapping around the four walls of their large room. A smell of books, lavender candles, and old plastic permeated the air. Harry had treated this room with state of the art sound isolation, so that it was dead silent. He had finally gotten every high fidelity piece of equipment he wanted.

Louis padded down the hallway and heard only faint music seeping out of the room. Not even Clifford, their black labradoodle, was anywhere to be found.

... I wanna shine like the sun  
I wanna be the one that you want to see  
I wanna knit you a sweater  
Wanna write you a love letter  
I wanna make you feel better, I wanna  
Make you feel free

Louis smiled. As he got closer, he heard the sharp, light strumming of Joni’s guitar getting louder.

In the room, Harry was asleep on the lounge chair, hair pushed away from his face, his glasses sitting on top of his head, resting in his curls. His face was beautifully calm, at peace, the lips slightly apart. His journal was lying face down on his faintly respiring chest. A pen was slipping out of his right hand. A heating pad was wrapped around his right shin, the old injury aching more these days. Clifford was quietly curled at his feet, but as Louis came into the room, he shook out of his sloth and padded over to Louis, tail wagging.

Louis put his hand on Harry’s shoulder. He shook Harry’s shoulder lightly.

“Hey, Haz,” he said softly. “C’mon. We have to get ready.”

For a few seconds, Harry didn't open his eyes, but only sighed in his sleep, pushing a breath out between his lips. There were traces of grey in his facial hair. Louis marveled at how long he had known the small mole on Harry’s left cheek. It was a tiny, irrefutable confirmation of Harry’s realness.
“Haz,” Louis said. He bent down to take Harry’s left hand between his own and gave a squeeze. Louis’s lips brushed over Harry’s cheek. Harry’s rose tattoo hadn’t been retouched and was fading like a memory.

Without opening his eyes, Harry tugged on Louis’s hand so that he lost his balance. Harry swung him lazily around so that Louis was sitting in his lap. The heating pad fell to the floor. Louis gave a startled gasp.

“Hey, kitten,” Harry said. “Is it time?”

Louis put his face into the side of Harry’s neck and inhaled the familiar, sweet scent of him. Wherever they were, with Harry’s scent to anchor him, Louis was home. He put an arm around Harry’s broad shoulders, rested it on Harry’s loose sweater.

“Soon,” Louis said.

The next song came on the phonograph, a nostalgic, ancient, loosely strung ballad of a man long gone, an everlasting love, a poem and a life, a million lives connected through vibrating air molecules in space. The singer’s admiration was hidden in the audible smile of her voice.

“C’mon,” Louis said, “stand up.”

“Mmm,” Harry breathed in deeply. “Tired.”

“Darling.” Louis stood up and pulled Harry to his feet. He dragged Harry’s hand up and started to walk to the door.

Harry stopped in his tracks and resisted. His eyes slightly open, he pulled Louis toward himself, and put both hands around him. Then he nestled his chin into Louis’s neck, nipping at the curled ends of his hair. Harry leaned against Louis, who held his sleepy, towering, slowly waking body. As always, Harry’s weight slightly favored his left leg, but it was so familiar to Louis that he had already accommodated. They danced, dreaming together.

But when he’s gone
Me and the lonesome blues collide
The bed’s too big
The frying pan’s too wide

Then he comes home
And he takes me in his loving arms
And he tells me all his troubles
And he tells me all my charms

We don’t need a piece of paper
From the city hall
Keeping us tied and true

My old man
He’s a singer in the park
He’s a singer in the rain
He’s a dancer in the dark
We don’t need a piece of paper
From the city hall
Keeping us tied and true

No, my old man
Keeping away my lonesome blues

Louis’s mind rushed back to another room, another time, when they had pressed their bodies against each other with urgency and need, when they hungered to mix themselves into one another like two complementary pigments, because life was short, and epiphanies few, and signs of love were sometimes fleeting and unique, and once they left, like ancient gods visiting upon earth, they were gone.

They swayed lightly to the sweet, tender voice of a singer whose poetry fluttered down on extended wings. The song finished, the needle lifted and returned to its holder.

Louis and Harry were still dancing, buoyed by something they could not name.

The music seemed to go on.

The End

I hope you enjoyed the story!

It was a lot of fun to write.

Come visit on Tumblr.

Please visit the playlist.

Art by the incredible Nina.
Playlist from *Lonesome When You Go*:

A Case of You. Joni Mitchell (Blue)
A Million. John Legend (About Last Night soundtrack)
Across the Universe. Fiona Apple (Pleasantville soundtrack)
All I Want. Joni Mitchell (Blue)
All I Want. Kodaline (A Perfect World)
Anything That’s Part of You. Elvis Presley (Elvis’ Golden Records)
Barcelona. Rufus Wainwright (Rufus Wainwright)
Best Song Ever. One Direction (Midnight Memories, Deluxe)
Better Than Words. One Direction (Midnight Memories, Deluxe)
Better Together. Us the Duo (Better Together)
Blackbird. The Beatles (The Beatles)
Blow Away. George Harrison (George Harrison)
The Book of Love. Gavin James (Bitter Pill)
Breathe (In the Air). Pink Floyd (The Dark Side of the Moon)
Breathless. Corinne Bailey Rae (Corinne Bailey Rae)
Can’t Help Falling in Love. Elvis Presley (Blue Hawaii)
Cold Cold Cold. Cage the Elephant (Tell Me I’m Pretty)
Come Away With Me. Norah Jones (Come Away with Me)
Comes A Time. Grateful Dead (30 days of Dead 2015)
Crazy. Aerosmith (Get a Grip)
Dance with Me. Orleans (Dance with Me)
Drag Me Down. One Direction (Made in the AM, Deluxe)
Dreams. Fleetwood Mac (Rumours)
Ein Deutsches Requiem. Johannes Brahms.
Embraceable You. Willie Nelson, Sheryl Crow (Summertime)
Everywhere. Fleetwood Mac (Tango in the Night)
Ev’ry Time We Say Goodbye. Ella Fitzgerald (The Cole Porter Songbook)
Fever. Carly Rae Jepsen (Emotion)
The First Thing You See. Bruno Major (Live)
Fix You. Coldplay (X&Y)
Fool’s Gold. One Direction (FOUR, Deluxe)
Freedom! ‘90. George Michaels (Listen Without Prejudice Vol. 1)
From the Night. Stars (No One is Lost)
Gale Song. The Lumineers (Cleopatra)
Given to Fly. Pearl Jam (Yield)
God Only Knows. The Beach Boys (Pet Sounds)
Gone Away. Lucy Schwarz (Adam soundtrack)
Gravity. Sara Bareilles (Little Voices)
Greens and Blues. Pixies (Indie Cindy)
Half a Heart. One Direction (Midnight Memories, Deluxe)
Hate to See Your Heart Break. Paramore (Paramore, Deluxe)
Hibernation Day. Jars of Clay (Christmas Songs)
Home. One Direction (Perfect EP)
How D’you Like Your Eggs in the Morning? Dean Martin (Dean Martin, the Capitol Years)
Howlin’ For You. The Black Keys (Brothers)
I Don’t Want to Miss a Thing. Aerosmith (Armageddon)
I Want It That Way. Backstreet Boys (The Hits - Chapter One)
I Want to Write You a Song. One Direction (Made in the AM, Deluxe)
I’m a Mess. Ed Sheeran (X)
I’m Like a Bird. Nelly Furtado (Whoa, Nelly!)
If I Could Fly. One Direction (Made in the AM Deluxe)
Infinity. One Direction (Made in the AM, Deluxe)
Into You. Ariana Grande (Dangerous Woman)
Just Hold On. Steve Aoki, Louis Tomlinson (Just Hold On)
Just What I Needed. The Cars (The Cars)

The Lady is a Tramp. Ella Fitzgerald (Ella Sings)

Let’s Get It On. Marvin Gaye (Let’s Get It On)

Let’s Spend the Night Together. The Rolling Stones (Flowers)

Like a Star. Corinne Bailey Rae (Corinne Bailey Rae)

Listen to What the Man Said. Wings (Pure McCartney)

Love You Goodbye. One Direction (Made in the AM, Deluxe)

Maybe I’m Amazed. Paul McCartney (Wingspan)

Midnight Memories. One Direction (Midnight Memories Deluxe)

My Everything. Ariana Grande (My Everything)

My Favorite Things. John Coltrane (The Very Best of John Coltrane)

My Old Man. Joni Mitchell (Blue)

Need You Tonight. INXS (Kick)

Need Your Love So Bad (live). Fleetwood Mac (Shrine ‘69)

Never Enough. One Direction (Made in the AM, Deluxe)

Night Changes. One Direction (FOUR, Deluxe)

No Control. One Direction (FOUR, Deluxe)

Oh What a World. Rufus Wainwright (Want One)

Olivia. One Direction (Made in the AM, Deluxe)

Once in a Lifetime. One Direction (Four, Deluxe)

The One. Kodaline (Coming Up for Air)

Oooh Love. Blaze Foley (Live at the Austin Outhouse)

Real Love. Tom Odell (Real Love)

Reckless Serenade. Arctic Monkeys (Suck It and See)

Rest, Shame, Love. Augustana (Can’t Love, Can’t Hurt)

Rhiannon. Fleetwood Mac (Fleetwood Mac)

Rock With You. Michael Jackson (Off the Wall)

Romeo and Juliet. Dire Straits (Making Movies)

Roundabout. Yes (Fragile)
Run Away With Me. Carly Rae Jepsen (Emotion)

Sara. Fleetwood Mac (Greatest Hits)

Shine. LOLO (In Loving Memory of When I Gave a Shit)

Sign of the Times. Harry Styles (Harry Styles Deluxe)

So What. Miles Davis (Kind of Blue)

Someone to Watch Over Me. Ella Fitzgerald (Pure Ella)

Something Great. One Direction (Midnight Memories, Deluxe)

Spaceboy. The Smashing Pumpkins (Siamese Dream)

Stockholm Syndrome. One Direction (Midnight Memories, Deluxe)

Strong. One Direction (Midnight Memories, Deluxe)

Summer Nights. John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John (Grease Soundtrack)

Sweet Creature. Harry Styles (Harry Styles)

Tangled Up in Blue. Bob Dylan (Blood on the Tracks)

Telephone Line. Electric Light Orchestra (A New World Record)

Through the Dark. One Direction (Midnight Memories, Deluxe)


Trouble. Coldplay (Parachutes)

Truth. Gwen Stefani (This Is What the Truth Feels Like)

Us and Them. Pink Floyd (The Dark Side of the Moon)

Vicious World. Rufus Wainwright (Want One)

Waiting on a Friend. The Rolling Stones (Tattoo You)

Walking in the Wind. One Direction (Made in the AM, Deluxe)

We Can Never Go Back. Joy Williams (Before I Sleep)

What a Feeling. One Direction (Made in the AM, Deluxe)

What Makes You Beautiful. One Direction (Up All Night)

When I Come Around. Green Day (Dookie)

When You’re Gone. The Cranberries (20th Century Masters)

Where Is My Mind? The Pixies (Death to the Pixies)

Where the Sky Hangs. Passion Pit (Kindred)
Wherever You Will Go. Charlene Soraia (Love is the Law)

With or Without You. U2 (The Joshua Tree)

Yellow. Coldplay (Parachutes)

You Shook Me All Night Long. AC/DC (Who Made Who)

You’re Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go. Bob Dylan (Blood on the Tracks)

You’re Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go. Miley Cyrus (Chimes of Freedom)

Play it here.

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