Now In A Minute

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Mature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>No Archive Warnings Apply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>M/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>One Direction (Band)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Harry Styles/Louis Tomlinson, Louis Tomlinson/Original Male Character(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Louis Tomlinson, Harry Styles, Niall Horan, Liam Payne, Zayn Malik</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>13 Going on 30, Inspired by a Movie, Childhood Friends, Growing Up Together, Famous Louis, Non-Famous Harry, Football Player Louis, Photographer Harry, Humor, Comedy, Horrible 90's jokes, And 90's fashion, And of course 90's music, Shameless exploitation of the oops/hi rhetoric, There's a touch of, Angst, but not too much, its more on the fun and wild side lol, oh and!, Fluff, more like, Fluff and Crack, LMAO</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Published: 2017-08-20 Completed: 2018-01-17 Chapters: 13/13 Words: 150462</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now In A Minute

by thealmightyavocado

Summary
13 feels like yesterday for many people, but for Louis it actually was.

More than anything in the world, Louis Tomlinson dreams of growing up. Simply skipping over all of the awkward, embarrassing years of teenage existence and getting on with life. Real life.

So when thirteen-year-old Louis wakes up in the body of his thirty-year-old self, he expected everything in his adult life to be picture perfect. And maybe it is. He has it all…or so it seems.

Except his favorite person and lifelong best mate, Harry Styles, is totally missing from the equation and Louis doesn’t understand why. He has a lot of catching up to do and as adult life turns out to be more than what he bargained for, Louis can’t help wondering why a life
that seemed so perfect, feels so empty.

Or the 13 going on 30 au that should have been done years ago.

Notes

Hi loves!! :))

ok first of all!! imma just take a moment to say that uh...i truly! can! not! believe! that an au of this movie did not yet exist! so i dropped all my other projects to do this because i can't stand for that level of injustice lol

so the original movie is set in the 80s, but this is set in the heart of the 90’s like mid-late 90s, maybeee around 1996? to be able to roughly accommodate for the jump to present day. Time and events might have been fudged a bit to make it all fit, but time isn’t real anyway so its ok lol. And since I myself am a proud product of the 90s (1994 ayyee) I can only imagine what it must have been like to be a teenager in that time. I think it’d be pretty lit so this is my ode to what could have been. I tried to put as much corney 90s slang in there as i could and of course 90s music. i'll probably make a fun little playlist for all the music I end up using in this. just remind me!

as for the story itself, the whole thing is in louis’ pov, but I think you can get a sense of what harry is feeling too. hooopefully lol. also there is some downright blatant exploitation of the words oops and hi and I choose to blame that on Lou @louis-tummy because they initially suggested it and then I kinda ran with it haha

anyways!! this goes out to all the thriller loving, razzle chugging, six-chick hating, matty+jenna shipping, 13 going on 30 fans. i hope you enjoy this, i did it for you :))

also! come scream at me @avocadolouie, i can take it. and honestly we will probably become friends.

love you all!

lex .x
Chapter 1

Chapter One

“Alright boys, here we are. Three milkshakes, extra whip cream and a fresh basket of chips.”

“Aww nice!” Louis’ mouth already starts to water, as Lucille arranges the food neatly along the surface of the table.

“Oh! And two extra cups.” Lucille adds at the last minute. “I nearly forgot.”

“Thanks Lucille!” Harry beams up at the older woman warmly, sitting up in the leather booth.

“You’re the best.” Louis smiles appreciatively from his side of the table. He shifts his weight a little, legs crisscrossed underneath him, purple converse tucked under his thighs.

“No problem, loves. Enjoy.” Lucille sets a few extra napkins and straws on the table, rubbing her hands against the apron fastened around her waist. “If you need anything else, you know where to find me.”

“Right, so how should we split it?” Harry pipes up as Lucille makes her way back behind the counter. Louis knows it’s more of a rhetorical question, Harry’s subtle way of prompting Louis into splitting it.

“Oh come on Haz, you know the drill.” Louis grins, already reaching for the two empty cups.

Lucille’s diner is a bit of a usual for them. Usual meaning, a daily occurrence. Especially since Christmas break started; they’ve hung out here in this exact same booth nearly every single day. Partly for the old juke box and arcade machine in the back corner, but mostly for the milkshakes. Lucille makes the absolute best milkshakes in town. Louis loves the French Vanilla one, while Harry always orders Banana. The problem is that they both also love Strawberry. And of course they could probably just ask Lucille to mix it for them, like any normal person would, but that’s hardly any fun at all. So instead they always order three milkshakes and two extra cups to mix it themselves. It’s a guaranteed mess, but it somehow tastes even better. Plus, they get a lot more that way.

While sucking on his freshly mixed Strawberry Banana milkshake, Harry resumes his usual habit of mindlessly doodling on the far corner of the table with a pen. It’s not much of a doodle really, more of a carving of the letters H&L. It started out as a little light pen marking, but as Harry continued to go over it, day in and day out, the letters soon became engraved deep into the grains of the table, solidifying the fact that this is their booth.

“Lucille is gonna kill us if she ever sees that, you know.” Louis comments with his straw hanging out of the corner of his mouth. “She just got the all the tables refurnished.”

“She’ll never see it.” Harry promises, sliding the napkin dispenser back over it to conceal the markings. “Besides, no one ever sits in this booth but us.”

“Yeah, exactly so when she does finally notice, we won’t have anyone to frame it on.” Louis points out keenly. “She’ll automatically know it was us.”

“She’d know it was us anyways by our initials.” Harry reminds with a grin. “But I’d like to think she loves us way too much to do anything about it.”
“That’s probably true.” Louis smiles as he looks over at Lucille from across the diner. They may come for the milkshakes, but they stay for Lucille. She’s a bit like another Nan to them, always sliding them freebies or pardoning their bill. Sometimes she’ll sit down to tell them stories or have a nice chat if the diner’s not too busy. To repay her, many times they stay after closing and help her clean and close up. Louis and Harry are probably Lucille’s most loyal and regular customers and that’s because they adore her and she adores them right back.

“Hey Tommo!” A loud voice bellows from the far end of the diner near the doorway, startling Louis from his thoughts. The voice is followed by a bustling of raucous noises and heavy feet.

Harry groans at the sound of the disruptive voice alone, automatically rolling his eyes without even bothering to turn around in the booth. Louis flicks his eyes up and recognizes the rowdy faces of his football teammates, led by Rusty, one of the co-captains of the team. Although they are Louis’ friends, Harry has never cared for any of them, in fact he can’t stand them. And he never, ever bothers to hide it.

“Whatcha got here? You gonna finish that?” Rusty uncouthly perches himself on the edge of the table, picking up what’s left of Harry’s milkshake and peering in the glass.

“Yes, actually. Considering I paid for it.” Harry scowls, snatching the cup right back from Rusty’s grasp.

“Don’t get testy with me, Harriet. Play nice like the good little princess you are.” Rusty patronizes rudely, patting Harry’s fluffy curls.

Harry glares back unamused, dodging away from Rusty’s hand. “Don’t touch me.”

Harry has always been sweet and a bit soft, far softer and more vulnerable than most boys their age. He’s an angel with cherub-like curls and dimples to match, as far as Louis is concerned. But a lot of people, especially Louis’ new friends, don’t appreciate him for the way he is, making him an easy target and resulting in a constant onslaught of demeaning slurs and condescending nicknames.

“Aww Snowflake, are you upset?” Rusty demeans even more, poking each of Harry’s cheeks roughly with his fingers. “Poor little baby.”

Harry swats Rusty away again, scooting further into the far side of the booth bitterly. “Did you come here for something? Or are we just that unlucky to be cursed with your presence?”

“No duh, Twinkle Toes. Obviously, I’m here to talk with Tommo.” Rusty rolls his eyes flippantly, hopping down from the table and sliding into Louis’ side of the booth. He slings an arm over Louis’ shoulders and looks to Harry pointedly. “So why don’t you just run along.”

“Make me.” Harry grits in challenge, eyes narrowed from across the table.

“You’d like that wouldn’t you.” Rusty stands up again, rounding the table to Harry’s side and lowering himself down slowly towards Harry’s face.

Harry doesn’t break his stubborn gaze, refusing to back down as Rusty tries to stare him into submission. Louis feels like he should intervene but he doesn’t really know what to do or what to say.

“Beat it, Curly Sue.” Rusty barks through his teeth. “This doesn’t concern you. Go paint your nails or something.”

“Haz…it’ll only take a minute.” Louis finally mumbles towards Harry, no longer able to silently
Harry begrudgingly shifts his gaze from Rusty to look at Louis. He sighs heavily before pushing past Rusty to slide out of the leather booth. “Um…I’ll wait for you outside, Lou.”

“No one cares, Pollyanna. Just go, it’s not like he needs a play-by-play.” Rusty mocks as Harry shrugs his coat on over his jumper, adjusting his camera around his neck.

Harry gives Louis one more meaningful look before shoving his hands in his coat pockets and turning to leave. Rusty and his posse, in all their immaturity, hold their hands up to their foreheads in the shape of L’s, sticking out their tongues as Harry walks past them.

Louis doesn’t really like to see his best mate bullied like that, he hates it. Really, he does. But he’s kinda in a rough situation at the moment. Torn between defending his oldest and closest friend or getting the approval of his new teammates. Louis only just made the footie team a few months back at the start of Year 9. He’s still pretty expendable at this point and bottom line is Louis needs his teammates to like him, especially Rusty.

“Ugh, why are you even friends with that dweeb?” Rusty rolls his eyes again in annoyance, dropping down into the side of the booth Harry just left. The other four boys lean over the seats behind Rusty, hovering around him loyally. “Anyway Tommo, so about your party tomorrow…”

“Oh yeah, what about it?” Louis questions anxiously, shifting his weight against the leather seat. The only reason he decided to throw a thirteenth birthday party in the first place was to create an excuse to invite his teammates over and maybe score some much needed brownie points. Truthfully, Louis doesn’t really care about celebrating his birthday, because what is there to celebrate? Thirteen is a god-awful age and if Louis could have his way, he’d rather just skip over it completely.

“I dunno. Like? We want to come…I guess.” Rusty shrugs carelessly, playing with a discarded bendy straw. “But Coach has been really riding our asses about getting our grades up before next term starts. He’s got us doing a shit ton of make-up assignments. It’s majorly fucked up, bro.”

It’s no secret that the popular kids, coincidentally the football players, have the most unimpressive grades in the school. Louis likes to think it isn’t because they are dumb or anything like that, they’re just too cool for school. They have better things to do than worry about getting high marks and perfect scores. It’s commendable in Louis’ opinion, what does calculating the square root of four hundred and having the periodic table memorized amount to in the real world anyway? Nothing.

“Right, so…”

“So yeah, it’s killer…we’re totally swamped with hella coursework, you know? Not much time for anything else…”

“Oh.” Louis nods, hanging his head a bit as he grasps the implication. “So you aren’t coming then?”

“I dunno, I mean…I know it’s not due till after Christmas break or whatever, but…it’s just too much pressure for me and with the holiday and everything…I dunno…” Rusty shrugs again, eyeing Louis closely for a response. “And uh…Brady has the same deal, so he probably can’t come either.” He adds knowingly in an almost calculated manner. “Shame too, cuz he told me that he really, really wanted to come. Bummer…”

Louis has been in love with Brady, the other co-captain of the team, since Year 7. Not to be cliché or anything, but he is literally the hottest guy at school and that’s just the god honest truth. And not only is he unfairly attractive for his age, he is also insanely talented on the pitch, almost guaranteed to be
signed to a professional football club before he even graduates secondary’s. Basically, he’s a god among mortal men. Is that too dramatic of a statement? Probably, but it’s completely true as far as Louis is concerned.

And of course, he and Brady are cool and all, they’re great teammates. They just aren’t cool in the way that Louis would like for them to be. And that, probably—definitely, has something to do with the fact that Brady is apparently straight, if the string of girlfriends and whispered hookup stories is anything to go by. But who says that really has to mean anything anyway? He could be into both guys and girls? Who knows? Maybe Brady doesn’t believe in labels? Maybe he just hasn’t explored that potential side of himself?

A boy can dream, right? Anyway, Louis chooses to keep hope alive, no matter how notably unwise that may be in the long run. Besides, Louis isn’t even really sure what his own label is yet, he hasn’t totally figured out the specifics of his sexuality. But his mum always says it’ll come with time and right now what he knows is that he has a huge head-over-heels crush on Brady. And whatever he can do to get closer to him, Louis is definitely going to do it. This party could be Louis' chance to finally get Brady to notice him.

Actually notice him.

“I could…um…I could help you with it.” Louis finds himself offering before even processing his words. “So um…you and Brady have more time to come…maybe?”

“Ah could you, man?” Rusty leans in over the table eagerly. “The guys would all really appreciate it.”

“Yeah, uh it’s no problem.” Louis rushes to say, shrugging it off like it’s no big deal.

“You’re a champ, Tommo. What a legend.” Rusty leaps from the booth to clap Louis roughly on the back, giving his shoulder an unnecessarily firm squeeze. “Wait till I tell Brady. He’ll love you forever.”

Louis can’t help but smile dreamily at that, nearly melting at the idea alone. Until Rusty snaps his fingers and the other boys drop a huge stack of papers and notes on the table, immediately bursting his bubble.

“All this?” Louis blinks at the colossal pile of coursework in front of him. Sure, he agreed to help, but he didn’t really mean he’d just do all of it. This is way more than Louis thought he was signing up for.

“Yeah, but that’s not gonna be a problem is it?” Rusty leans forward, eyebrow cocked.

“No, no of course not. No. I can handle it.” Louis shakes his head, scooping up the papers hastily and stuffing them in his backpack.

“Good.” Rusty smiles slowly, returning to his full height. “So I’ll see you tomorrow then. It’s at seven right?”

“Yes. Seven, yeah. Yep—Right.” Louis nods dumbly, clutching his overstuffed backpack in his lap. Why can’t he ever sound normal when talking to Rusty and the guys, he’s always stumbling and tripping over his words. It’s so embarrassing. They’ll never think he’s cool at this rate.

“Alright boys, let’s dip.” Rusty announces, already heading for the door as the team of boys scramble to follow after him like lapdogs. “Catcha later, Tommo.”
Once all alone in the large booth, Louis lets out a heavy breath, scrubbing his hands over his face and through his hair. He takes a small moment to collect himself before shrugging on his coat followed by his ridiculously heavy backpack.

“Bye, love.” Lucille farewells sweetly from behind the counter as Louis walks by. “And if I don’t see you, have a wonderful birthday.”

“Thanks, Lucille.” Louis smiles warmly back at her, waving as he pushes out of the swing doors of the diner.

The cool December air chills Louis’ face the moment he steps outside. He pulls his jacket tighter around his frame as he looks around the lot for Harry. He spots him leaning up against the side of the brick building, absentmindedly kicking around a few stray stones with his feet.

“Sorry about that, Harry.” Louis apologizes as he strides up to his best friend.

“Yeah, it’s whatever.” Harry shrugs, pushing himself up off of the wall to meet Louis’ halfway. He’s quiet for a moment, chewing over his words before turning his face to Louis. “You know…you really don’t need them, Louis.”

“Except I totally do.” Louis argues instantly as they start down the paved sideway, walking their usual route home.

“With them you’re just Tommo. They don’t even care about you as a person.”

“No, they care about me as an athlete. I need them if I wanna actually get any time playing on the team. How am I ever supposed to go pro one day if I never even touch the pitch?”

“Louis, you made the team without them, you know?” Harry reminds pointedly, matching Louis’ strides. “You basically killed yourself practicing and training and you made it. That was all you. Nowhere in the footie handbook does it say that you are required to ass kiss the brainless jocks of the team.”

“They’re my friends, Harry!” Louis sighs in exasperation, throwing his head back. “We play on the same team, we’re mates!”

“Brady and Rusty and their whole gang of mindless goons are nothing but scrubs.” Harry insists bitterly, pausing his steps just to make a point.

“Oh, take a chill pill, Haz. Don’t be such a buzz kill.” Louis bumps Harry’s arm playfully, linking their arms together and forcing him to continue along the cobblestone path. “Yeah, Rusty is kind of a dick, but you have to at least admit Brady is hot. Insanely hot.”

Harry blushes slightly, lowering his head. “I mean yeah…sure…I guess…but he’s still pretty dumb though, don’t you think? Not much going on up there.”

“He’s not dumb.” Louis defends automatically, this time making his own dramatic stop and untangling his arm from Harry’s. “He’s just really, really cool and he doesn’t need to talk much. He’s above all that.”

“He’s an airhead.” Harry corrects flatly, lips pursed with disapproval. “Just because he’s older doesn’t mean he’s cooler. In fact, it definitely confirms he is just dumber.”

Louis shakes his head, hands stuffed deep in his pockets as he starts walking again. “Not true.”
“Come on, the guy is fifteen and still in the same class as us. How many times is he gonna have a go at Year 9? Not the brightest tool in the shed.” Harry continues, jogging a bit to catch up with Louis’ quickening pace. “But still a tool nonetheless, I’d like to point out.”

“He’s fifteen and hot as hell, so I don’t think anyone is complaining about him sticking around.” Louis asserts, refusing to admit anything about Brady’s intelligence or the lack thereof. “Anyways, besides the unanimous fact that he’s gorgeous, he’s also extremely talented. He’s the best midfielder on the team.”

“You’re better.” Harry insists adamantly, without so much as blinking an eye. “I’ve been to every single one of your games and you have so much more talent than any of them. They know it too, that’s why they keep you around.”

Louis can’t help but scoff a little at that. Harry means well and always has so much faith in Louis and his abilities, supporting and praising him no matter what. It’s the sweetest thing and Louis loves Harry for it, if only it were true. “Thanks for the vote of confidence, Haz.”

“I’m serious, Lou. You’re better off without them.”

Louis snakes his arm around Harry’s waist, snuggling against him. “Harry, just because I’m making new friends doesn’t mean you aren’t still my best mate.” He reminds gently with his head resting on Harry’s shoulder. “You’re my favorite person in the world, but we don’t have to do every single thing together.”

“Yeah, I know. I know.” Harry nods slowly, gaze trained on the ground as they finally reach their neighboring houses. They stop along the sidewalk, turning to face each other. “Wanna come over and listen to George Michael’s new album? Mum got me the LP as an early Christmas gift.”

Everyone under the sun keeps insisting that vinyl is completely dead and never ever coming back. It’s all about cassettes and CDs now. But Harry flat out refuses to accept that. He is always going on and on about how digital sound will never ever compare to the unique quality and acoustic measure of analog sound. And honestly he really does have a point.

“Bring it over to mine?” Louis suggests instead, pointing behind himself with his thumb towards his house. “I have to get a few things ready for tomorrow.” And by that he means, he unfortunately has to finish his teammates’ mountain of homework.

“Ok.” Harry agrees easily.

Louis and Harry still haven’t moved to go their separate ways and that’s because they have this thing about goodbyes. They aren’t really sure why it started, but it has everything to do with how they met. Neither of them remember it completely because they were so young, but when Louis’ family first moved in next door Louis’ mum had sent him to eat his afternoon snack outside while she finished unpacking boxes. So Louis sat down on the front porch by himself with a bowl of animal crackers in his lap.

Across the front yard, there was a little curly-headed boy playing around with a ball. He wasn’t very good with it, extremely uncoordinated, but he was having a good time nonetheless. Probably too much of a good time because he ended up accidentally kicking the ball way too hard, causing it to come soaring over to Louis’ front porch, knocking his crackers all over the pavement. The curly boy let out the most apologetic and sincere “Oops”, eyes impossibly wide with guilt and a shocked hand clamped over his mouth. But five-year-old Louis was just so excited that there was a boy his age right next door, that he wasn’t even mad about his spilled animal crackers. Instead he ran over as fast as he could and greeted Harry with an eager, “Hi!”
And they’ve been joined at the hip ever since. So much so that whenever they did part ways they got into the habit of saying their first words to each other as a goodbye. Call it sappy, call it lame or cheesy, Harry and Louis don’t really care. It’s their thing. Always has been, always will be.

As they got older they took to scribbling the words into each other’s palms with their fingers instead; creating their own odd take on a secret handshake. They both grew tired of curious people always asking them why they were always saying “Oops” and “Hi” to each other. But by quietly fingering the words on each other’s hands, it became more of a private thing between them.

Sometimes Harry likes to get really fancy with it. He’ll do a really loopy “Oops” in cursive or if they have loads of time he’ll finger it out in bubble letters. Sometimes he writes different words that are similar to “Oops” like “Poop” or “Hoop” to see if Louis will notice. And of course, Louis always notices.

But Louis is no better when it comes to getting creative. He’ll write “Hi” backwards or if he’s feeling especially clever, he’ll write it in different languages and make Harry guess which one it is. Louis also loves to draw little invisible doodles on Harry’s palm and frustrate him when he can’t figure it out. Then Harry tries to get back at Louis the next time, but everything Harry draws, Louis always guess right. Probably because Harry draws so neatly, it makes it too obvious.

It’s become more and more like a game between the two of them, as well as a goodbye. Goodbyes are always such a temporary thing for Harry and Louis anyway, never lasting very long, so they like to have as much fun with it as they can.

Without even thinking twice Louis offers his right hand out to Harry, standing toe to toe with each other.

Harry takes his hand, flipping it over to expose his palm. He carves the four letters easily against Louis’ skin, not bothering to add anything creative on to it this time as it’s a really short goodbye.

Oops…

Once Harry is done, Louis turns Harry’s hand over in his own and traces the answering phrase with his pointer finger, deciding at the last minute to add a little lopsided smiley face man to the end of it.

…Hi

Harry smiles warmly, closing his fingers around Louis’ and swinging their joined hands between them. “I’ll be over in an hour, leave your window open.”

“It’s always open for you.” Louis reminds.

Harry and Louis’ bedrooms face each other on the second floor with only about ten meters spacing between their neighboring houses. In between that space however, there lies a huge oak tree with the most beautiful sturdy branches, perfect for climbing or hanging out on.

Dear Old Martha Green is what they call her.

Or actually, it’s what Harry randomly named her when they were six years old, just learning how to climb. One day Harry just looked up at the lovely old tree and decided she was and could only ever be called Martha Green. And that was that. Louis never questioned it. In fact, he actually agreed, she does look like a Martha.

Martha not only serves as their most prized hangout spot, she’s also the perfect bridge between Harry and Louis’ bedrooms. They climb back and forth through each other’s windows all the time, even
without either of their parents knowing. Although Louis is pretty sure his mum is well aware of the situation. But she has never had a problem with it because she absolutely adores Harry, treating him just like another son. Anne does the same with Louis, fussing and doting over him as much as her other children.

Harry is one of the only constants in Louis’ life, the one person he can come to for anything at any time. Sometimes when his mum and Mark get into it, and the arguments get louder and louder, Louis sneaks out of bed and climbs across Martha’s branches to get to Harry’s room, silently sliding into bed with him. Harry would never question Louis, instead just opening his arms like a safe haven, always there for him. He snuggles up against Louis and holds him until he finally feels safe enough to fall asleep and if Louis needs to talk or even to cry, Harry is always there for that too.

There is a light tap on Louis’ bedroom window before Harry is climbing through the frame with practiced ease, 12” LP in hand. He’s got his signature camera hanging from his neck and Louis swears he never takes it off.

“That was definitely more than an hour, Harold.” Louis comments from his desk, across the room. It’s actually been more like three hours, not that Louis is complaining. He just barely finished up that tower of extra homework for Rusty and Brady.

“Yeah sorry, I forgot I had a few chores to do first.” Harry explains as he drops down on Louis’ bed, digging around in his back pocket. “But I brought us a FunDip as a consolation prize.”

Each FunDip packet comes with two Lik-A-Stix candy sticks to dip into the three powdered sugar pouches. It always works out because Harry loves the Purple Grape flavor and Louis likes the Red Cherry flavor. And then they always split the last one, Blue Raspberry, because it’s the coolest, best-tasting flavor and it changes color from blue to green when you lick it, which is totally sick because those are Harry and Louis’ favorite colors. Needless to say, it’s their absolute favorite candy and they hardly go a day without splitting a packet.

The only thing is, Harry takes an unnecessarily long time eating the white candy stick once all the powdered candy is gone. Instead of just biting it like Louis does and just being done with it, Harry drags it on and on and on, sucking on that thing for hours and it annoys Louis to no end.

“Oh whateveeer.” Louis rolls his eyes with a light laugh, casting his head back. “Just put the record on already.”

After listening to George Michael’s album, they just put on another one, going through all their
favorites. As usual, it turns into an all out karaoke night, with Louis and Harry putting on performance after performance, using hairbrushes and water bottles as microphones.

Harry’s favorite song to do is *Waterfalls* by TLC because he knows Left Eye’s entire rap by heart. It’s pretty impressive and Louis doesn’t know how he manages it but he loves to watch him do it every time.

On the other hand, Louis pulls off a clean Running Man and Hammer Dance, nearly perfecting his own high energy performance of *U Can’t Touch This* by MC Hammer. Which is sooo much harder than it looks. Both Louis and Harry can firmly attest that it is truly an aerobic workout trying to keep up with MC’s moves; they’re both easily winded by the time the song fades out.

They go on like that, bopping along to The Spice Girls and Wilson Phillips, jamming with DJ Jazzy Jeff and The Fresh Prince, and grooving to The Cardigans and Hanson. They dance around to Run DMC and Sir Mix-A-Lot and belt out the angsty lyrics of Green Day and Oasis.

They go through record after record, while in Harry’s case nibbling on the same piece of goddamn candy, until they finally tire themselves out, letting the record player sputter to a stop, as the room falls silent. Harry and Louis lay side by side on Louis’ twin bed, feet propped up against the wall as they stare up at the ceiling.

“So are you excited about your birthday tomorrow?” Harry wonders, lifting his arm up to his face to glance at his watch. “Not even tomorrow really, you’ve only got twenty more minutes of non-teenager life.”

“Yes and no.” Louis decides slowly, looking over his shoulder. “No, because being thirteen completely sucks and yes, because it’s one step to finally being older.”

“Older? Why do you want to be older?”

“So my life can start.” Louis explains easily with a half-shrug.

Harry’s eyebrows knit together, checking Louis’ pulse jokingly. “You’re alive right now as far as I can tell…”

“Shut up.” Louis laughs, tapping Harry’s knee playfully. “You know what I mean.”

“Nope. I really don’t get it.”

“Ok, let’s take my boy Beckham for example.” Louis points up to the giant seventeen-year-old David Beckham in his first ‘92 Manchester United jersey, plastered against his wall. “The man gets better and better every single year. He’s only twenty-one now and he is not only playing for ManU, but also for England at an international level. Just imagine when he’s thirty.”

“Thirty?” Harry scrunches up his nose a bit at the number. “That just seems so…old? Like…too old…”

“No, Haz it’s not. It’s the perfect age!” Louis defends, sitting up enthusiastically. “Everyone has their life together at thirty. You’ve got an established career going by then, you’ve earned respect—made a name for yourself. You’re financially sound at thirty, probably got your dream house. Your body is at peak physique—a total knockout. You’ve got a killer social life, never ever bored. Maybe you’ve even got a partner or summat…some people maybe have got a family going, if that’s their thing.” Louis lays back and sighs wistfully. “I dunno…it just sounds *perfect*.”

“Perfect…” Harry echoes, mulling over Louis’ words in consideration.
“Mhmm.” Louis hums, turning over on the bed to face Harry. “I want that, you know? I just wanna skip over everything—all the bullshit and awkwardness of being a stupid teenager and just…I dunno? Jump to the fun part where I’m thirty and cool and successful and have my life together.”

“And how do you specifically picture your life at thirty?” Harry wonders curiously, adjusting to his side and propping his head up with his arm. “Paint me a mental picture.”

“Um...well...I dunno really...” Louis thinks out loud, flopping backwards again. “I want to be a Rover obviously. You know that much already.”

“Yeah, of course. But what else?” Harry goads, watching Louis closely. “That can’t be your only goal out of life.”

“Right. Well...uh...I want to be proper well known and popular. Have a lot of people know me and love me. I want to be the guy that really puts the Doncaster Rovers on the map. Just loads and loads of fans.” Louis imagines with a growing grin. “Oh! And I want a collection of really nice cars. The more expensive the better. And clothes. God, I looove clothes. I want a huge walk-in closet full of clothes.”

“Hmm...” Harry hums deeply to himself in thought. “But...it sounds kinda lonely don’t you think?”

“What?” Louis frowns at Harry like he just shat on his dream. “How?”

“Well, yeah I mean, sure a lot of people who don’t know you love you, but who are you going to come home to? And you can’t well cozy up to nice cars and fancy clothes, as nice as all those things are. So it just seems lonely.”

“Come on, Curly. I’d obviously have a really hot, ridiculously attractive, breathtakingly beautiful boyfriend at home to keep me warm every night.” Louis grins cheekily. “That’s a given.”

Harry smacks his shoulder, giggling. “You’re absolutely ridiculous.”

“You wouldn’t love me if I wasn’t.” Louis jokes back.

Harry just smiles softly, peeking at his wristwatch. “Oh look, only two more minutes till your birthday.”

“Hooray.” Louis cheers flatly, showing little to no expression as he closes his eyes.

“You gotta get more enthusiastic than that, Lou.” Harry encourages, sitting up to grab his camera from the floor. “You only turn thirteen once.”

“Oh no, what are you doing with that?” Louis peeks an eye open, noting Harry’s camera wearily.

“Hmm what? Nothing.” Harry shrugs innocently, fiddling with the camera lens.

“No, we are not going to document this.” Louis starts to sit up, about ready to snatch the camera right out of Harry’s hands if he must.

Harry looks down at his watch excitedly, nearly bursting with energy. If Louis didn’t know any better he’d assume it was Harry’s birthday instead, with how ridiculously enthusiastic he is. “Five, four, three, two, one!” Harry lifts his camera and snaps a picture of Louis’ grumpy face once the clock strikes midnight. “Happy Birthday, Louis!”

“No! Don’t take pictures of me, that’s gonna come out horribly.” Louis groans, shielding his face as
the flash nearly blinds him.

“It’s your thirteenth! We have to capture the moment!” Harry grins happily, snapping a few more unnecessarily. “Smile!”

“Harry…” Louis whines, covering up his face, peeking behind his fingers. “Spare me, please!”

“Fine, fine.” Harry concedes, lowering the camera. “I guess that’s enough…for now.”

Louis lowers his hands cautiously, but Harry is already prepared, lifting the camera out and holding it in front of both of their faces, snapping another last minute surprise shot of them together.

“You idiot.” Louis shoves him without any real force.

Harry smiles back, lowering the camera. “You’re gonna want these pictures some day, you know.”

“Oh sure.” Louis nods sarcastically. “Of course, I’d want gross pictures of me from the moment I turned thirteen.”

“Never know.” Harry teases with a smirk, setting the camera down in his lap. “Well, I better get back. Mum will worry and wonder where I am since it’s so late.”

“Pssht, oh please.” Louis scoffs. “She’s hardly worried. She knows you’re with me. You’re always with me.”

“True. I’ve become very predictable it seems.”

“Hey, you wanna stay the night?” Louis offers. It’s almost rare for him to sleep alone. He’s always either in Harry’s bed or Harry is in his. “My bed is your bed after all.”

“That’s very tempting and you know I would…” Harry starts slowly, standing to his feet. “But I really can’t tonight.”

“Why?” Louis pouts, wrapping his arms around Harry’s waist, trying to pull him back down on the bed. “Don’t leave, I hate sleeping alone.”

“I can’t stay.” Harry giggles as he squirms out of Louis’ hold. “I have to wake up early and finish your birthday gift.”

“You mean to tell me it’s not already done!” Louis teases, instantly sitting up straight and tsking his tongue. “Haz, I’m a bit disappointed if I’m honest.”

“Oh gimme a break.” Harry laughs. “It’s almost done, but it needs one more thing. The best gifts take time.”

“Oooh, what is it?” Louis sits up on his knees, perched on the edge of the bed.

“It’s a surprise Lou, you’ll just have to be patient.”

“I’m not very good at that I’m afraid.”

“Tough luck.”

Louis smiles fondly, extending his hand out to Harry. Harry, in turn, takes his hand just like always, holding it gently as he flattens out Louis’ palm face up. And Louis just knows Harry is about to make his goodbye sentiment a bit more special this time. Harry pauses first, as though deciding what
Oops…

Louis frowns in concentration as he pays attention to the invisible strokes to his hand. Truthfully it all kind of feels the same if he isn’t paying careful attention. “Umm…was that a…smiley face guy winking with a…birthday hat on? Maybe?”

“You got it!” Harry cheers happily with a dimpled smile. “I knew you’d get it.”

“I was going to guess a circle with a triangle on top, but that wouldn’t make much sense I don’t think.” Louis laughs lightly to himself, turning his attention to Harry’s hand. And just like always Louis flips Harry’s warm palm over in his, penciling in his response.

…Hi

Louis takes his time invisibly doodling on Harry’s open palm, grinning every time he hears Harry sigh and scoff because he is taking too long. Teasing Harry is probably one of his all time favorite things to do.

“What was that?!” Harry questions once Louis is finally finished, staring down at his own hand incredulously.

“I’m gonna call it a reindeer on the roof of my house sipping on hot cocoa.” Louis answers with a decisive nod, looking down at Harry’s blank hand proudly. “You know what? Make that Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer, on the roof of my house, sipping hot cocoa in a snowstorm.”

Harry yanks his hand back crossly. “How was I ever supposed to guess that!? You were drawing on my hand for ages, I couldn’t tell what was what anymore.”

“Oh Harold, Harold, Harold, you’ve just got to pay better attention.” Louis teases with a knowing smirk as he shakes his head. “Didn’t you feel me draw the red nose. I made it really red. Like… really red.”

“How I am I supposed to feel you draw the color red!” Harry argues, hands raised incredulously.

Louis places his hand over Harry’s heart, biting his lip to keep himself from laughing. “With this.”

He holds his straight face for only three seconds before bursting with giggles.

“I’ve run out of ways to say how ridiculous you are.” Harry sighs in a fond kind of way, laughing along.

“And that is why you love me.” Louis declares with pride.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Harry exhales warmly, with a dimpled smile. “Maybe so.”

They stand in the middle of Louis’ bedroom smiling dumbly at each other, washed out by the only light streaming into the still room from the luminous moon. Louis reaches between them and grabs Harry’s hand again, walking him over to the window.

“Goodnight, Haz.” Louis grins bashfully, giving Harry’s hand a little squeeze before letting it go.

“Thanks for starting my birthday with me.”

“Of course, anytime. Happy birthday, Lou.” Harry whispers as he starts to climb out of the window to the old oak tree. “Sweet dreams.”
Everything is ready to go. Louis planned the setup down to the very last detail, double and triple checking everything to make sure it’s absolutely impeccable. The basement of his house is a pretty large open space. He’s got a full table of food and snacks set up in the corner. Louis tried to keep it minimal with the cheesy birthday decorations, thirteen ushers in an age of newfound maturity so the time for streamers and multicolored balloons is long past. And even though it’s also Christmas Eve, Louis didn’t want to go too overboard with the holiday decorations either. He decided to keep everything as neutral as possible. Besides, loving Christmas isn’t exactly a cool thing to do at his age, so why risk it?

As for the music, Louis made a custom ultimate hits cassette tape complete with all the classics. There is no way he’s gonna be caught dead playing any music that is in any way socially questionable. Even his outfit was picked out with the ultimate care, utilizing all his fashion consciousness. He went for a classic cool look, oversized vertical striped button down shirt with the sleeves rolled up a little, paired with his favorite light wash denim overalls, leaving one strap down asymmetrically. It’s safe to say all his bases are covered.

Louis just finished rearranging the furniture for the sixth time when Harry comes down the basement stairs holding a beautifully wrapped box in his arms.

“Happy Birthday, Lou!” Harry exclaims, momentarily setting the box down to throw his arms around Louis, pulling him in for a bone crushing hug.

“You’ve already wished me happy birthday, remember?” Louis giggles, body being squeezed so tightly by Harry’s arms that he can’t even move.

“Yeah, well it can’t hurt to do it again.” Harry says, pulling back and picking up the box he brought in. “I have something for you.”

“Can I shake it?” Louis wonders curiously, taking the box and holding the it up to his ear. “I really wanna shake it.”

“No! Don’t shake it!” Harry worries, steadying the gift in Louis’ hands. “Just open it.”

“That’s not nearly as fun, but alright.” Louis concedes, dropping down to sit cross-legged on the floor with the box perched in his lap. He pats the carpet next to him, urging Harry to join him on the ground.

Louis starts to carefully unwrapped the gift, using a lot of restraint. He would usually just tear the box open without a care, but Harry obviously put so much time into wrapping it perfectly. And it looks far too pretty to just rip it up.

With the exterior exposed, Louis lifts the lid of the box and pulls out a heavy book. Not just a book, a photo album; custom made and bound in a gorgeous chestnut leather.

“I call it The Dream Album because…well—” Harry cuts himself off nervously. “I guess you’ll see why when you go through it.”

Almost like an old story book, the album automatically falls open to the centerfold, causing a huge three dimensional tree to pop up from the middle. In glitter green letters, the inscription at the bottom
reads *Dear Old Martha*, circling around the base of the tree. But as Louis inspects it closer, he sees that the leaves of the paper tree are all made up of little pictures of them since the beginning.

Pictures of Harry and Louis learning how to ride a bike together. Louis’ cast from when he broke his arm at six years old, covered in Harry’s drawings and scribbles. Harry cheering Louis on at his first little league footie game at seven years old. Shared milkshakes at Lucille’s, both of them sporting creamy milk-stashes. All out karaoke nights, Harry and Louis jumping on beds while belting out their favorite songs. There’s pictures of first haircuts and first days of school, snow days and holidays, past birthdays and summer adventures, late night laughs and warm smiles. Each picture holds a little piece in telling the story of their lives.

Their whole lives have been entwined from the start, all of their fondest memories so far happened with each other. And between their doting mothers and Harry’s obsession with snapping pictures of everything, all the most treasured moments of their lives have been preserved, beautifully filling up the large symbolic tree.

“Some of the baby pictures I got from your mum…” Harry explains slowly, watching Louis’ reaction closely. “But a lot of them I had already…and uh…I just wanted to give you something you could always look back on.”

“Harry, you did all this for me?” Louis gasps softly, as he fondly touches over all the many pictures on the tree. This must have taken countless hours to finish. The amount of detail Harry put in this album is incredible, from the brilliant design itself to the many pictures he chose to collage together.

“Yeah.” Harry blushes bashfully, dimples poking out as his smile spreads slowly across his face. “Do you like it?”

“I absolutely love it, Hazza.” Louis gushes sincerely, nearly speechless. He can’t stop looking at it; it’s the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for him. “Thank you.”

Harry beams, entire face lighting up instantly. He slides a hand into the front pocket of his hoodie and pulls out a thin packet. “Oh! I almost forgot! So because it’s Christmas and everything, I got a special glitter to make Martha look a bit more festive.”

Louis giggles, eyes crinkling fondly at the corners. “I can’t believe you want to decorate a 3D replica of an oak tree with glitter.”

“Of course, I do. It matters. And anyways, it’s not just glitter, it’s a wishing glitter.”

“What does that even mean?” Louis questions in fascination.

“So basically—and don’t laugh, ok?” Harry warns with a small grin, glancing up at Louis.

“Oh, never.” Louis swears, crossing his heart. Although he is already biting his lower lip to keep from giggling. “I take wishing dust very, very seriously, Harold.”

“Just humor me, please.” Harry gives Louis’ shoulder a playful shove before reading from the back of the envelope. “So it says ‘wishing dust knows what’s in your heart of hearts. May all your dreams come true’.”

“It’s pixie dust!” Louis bursts dramatically, as he takes the packet from Harry’s grasp and holds it up triumphantly. “You’re Peter Pan!”

“No, that’s not—”
“When you wish upon a staaar, makes no difference who you aaare…” Louis sings theatrically, interrupting Harry to belt out the timeless Disney medley. “When you wish upon a star, your dreams come trueee!”

“That’s not even from Peter Pan, that’s Pinocchio.” Harry corrects, shaking his head.

“Ok, whatever.” Louis settles down again, flipping over the slim packet in his hands. “But it’s basically the all time classic Disney theme song, so I’m still kinda right.”

“Mmmm. No.”

“Ohh and it’s not just any glittery pixie dust, it’s pine scented glittery pixie dust!” Louis teases as he reads over the rest of the description. “How fancy is that??”

“Hush up, you.” Harry snatches the packet back, tearing the corner of it. “Can I just pour it now, please?”

“Yes, please. Be my guest!” Louis nods eagerly. “Or actually maybe I should say, be—”

“Don’t start singing Be Our Guest.” Harry cuts him off instantly, already catching on to where Louis’ brain was going next. “I think we’ve had quite enough Disney soundtrack performances for one day.”

“Your loss.” Louis shrugs with a regretful sigh. “My rendition is perfection.”

“Oh, I have no doubt about that.” Harry grins, shaking his head fondly. “But we’ve go to get on with this. Are you all ready now?”

“I’m ready, I’m ready!” Louis claps, focusing his attention back to the sweet little handmade model of Dear Old Martha in front of him. “Let the magic begin!”

Harry lifts the envelope over the top of the tree and gently begins to pour the glistening contents over it. The glitter falls gracefully over the replica oak tree, seeming to cover Martha in shimmery snow. The dust sparkles over her paper branches in a surprisingly breathtaking way, coating all the little pictures that make up the leaves like a fairytale. It truly is a beautiful sight, almost magical, pixie dust or not.

“Ohh, it’s so gorgeous, Harry.” Louis awes in almost a whisper, absolutely mesmerized by the twinkling glitter dust. Louis wraps his arm around Harry, resting his head down on his shoulder as he sighs contently. “Thank you so much, Haz.”

“You’re welcome, Lou.” Harry mumbles gently against Louis’ hair, voice soft. He pauses for a long moment before continuing. “Uh… there’s a few more pages in The Dream Album, the part where I actually got the name from…but um…before you see it…I just um…”

“Yeah?” Louis lifts his head slowly to meet Harry’s eyes encouragingly.

Harry chews on his lip and Louis can tell he’s a bit anxious about something. His green eyes can hardly stand to focus on one part of Louis’ face, instead bouncing about nervously. “Well…uh you know how we were talking about life when we’re older and stuff?”

“Mhmm.” Louis nods carefully, still searching Harry’s eyes.

Harry pauses again, expression growing more and more intense. “Yeah…so…I…well…”
The doorbell rings, interrupting Harry and bursting their little bubble.

“Oh shit…” Louis blinks, shaking his head as he registers exactly what the doorbell means. “They’re here.”

Louis jumps to his feet in an instant. He’d been so caught up with Harry he nearly forgot he has an important party to host. A party that, depending on how it goes, could make or break his life as he knows it.

Harry grabs Louis’ hand from the floor, looking up at him. “Wait, but Louis…you have to see the end of the album because I—”

“I’ll finish looking at it later Haz, I promise!” Louis scrambles out of Harry’s hold, closing up The Dream Album and quickly carrying it over to the far basement closet that houses a good portion of Louis’ old belongings. “I’m just gonna put it in the closet for now. But tonight, I promise. Really, I swear!”

“Erm…” Harry bites his lip anxiously, still sporting that slightly queasy look. “Ok, cool.”

Louis hurriedly stuffs the thick custom photo album onto an open shelf in the closet, closing the door on his way out. He jogs over to the stairs, spinning around to face Harry again. “How do I look?”

“Amazing.” Harry smiles genuinely, lifting his hand to give Louis an encouraging thumbs up. “You look perfect.”

“Thanks.” Louis grins, already climbing up the basement stairs two at a time. “I’ll be right back, put some music on. There’s a mixtape by the stereo.”

Louis reaches the top of the stairs, just as the doorbell rings again. He rushes towards the front door to answer it, when he is surprisingly derailed by the appearance of two little pigtailed girls standing directly in his way.

“Can I come to your party?” Lottie wonders, peering up at him with big blue pleading eyes. “Pleaaase! I’m big now! I’m seven!”

“No Lottie, go away!” Louis rushes out, hurriedly directing them towards the stairs. “You too, Fizzy. Go play in your room or something.”

Louis adores his little sisters to death, but they have no place at his birthday party. How embarrassing is it to have a bunch of little girls crash his teenage party? That’s definitely not happening, not over Louis’ dead body.

The doorbell rings again, the sound buzzing several more times throughout the house.

“Got!” Louis shoos at his younger sisters who are all curiously peeking behind the railings of the stairs. “Muuum! Mum, you promised they wouldn’t be around! It’s so embarrassing!”

“Alright alright, Louis. Calm down.” Jay soothes as she comes around to grab both of his sister’s hands, guiding them up the stairs. “Come on, girls. Off you go. It means a lot to your brother.”

“Thanks, mum.” Louis sighs appreciatively.

“If you need anything I’ll be upstairs, love.” Jay says just as the door bell rings again impatiently,
buzzing several more times in succession.

“Fuck.” Louis curses anxiously under his breath.

“Louis! Language!” Louis hears his mother hiss from the banister. How did she even hear that from up there anyway?

“Sorry! Sorry.” Louis apologizes distractedly as he rushes towards the front door. His teammates curse a lot, which Louis has picked up on quite a bit. Something his mum isn’t too happy about in the slightest. Actually, she isn’t a fan of any of Louis’ new friends. But she supports him regardless.

Louis straightens himself out in front of the door, fixing his fringe and making sure the asymmetrical straps of his overalls are placed just right. He takes a deep breath before unlocking the door and swinging it open. “Hi—hey guys.”

“What took you so long, mate?” Rusty questions, leaning into the doorway. “No lie, I was about to split. Anyway, where’s the food at?”

“Uh…downstairs.” Louis answers, pointing behind him to the basement door.

“Nice.” Rusty nods, shedding his team jacket and tossing it at Louis as he brushes past.

“Sup Tommo!” Brady follows after Rusty, pausing to give Louis a high five. “Happy birthday, mate.”

“Oh…t-thanks…” Louis stutters nervously as Brady hands him his jacket. Brady actually stopped to verbally tell him happy birthday and give him a high five. Louis’ basically just got to hold Brady’s hand, so if nothing else happens at this party at least he can still call it a mild success.

The rest of his teammates follow suit, decked out in their team jackets, each pausing to give Louis a high five on their way through the door.

The first hour or so of the party consists of mostly eating and chilling. Louis manages to get in another whole sentence with Brady, complimenting his mid cut Nike Air DT Max trainers, to which he responded with a solid “Thanks, bro.” Louis definitely counts that small exchange as another win, everything counts at this point.

And the party as a whole seems to be going pretty ok, that is until a universal break in dialogue causes the attention to shift back on the background music. The carefully chosen music mix of socially appropriate music that was once playing must have ended because now Mariah Carey’s *All I Want for Christmas Is You* is sounding through the speakers.

And the only one of Louis’ party guests completely unbothered by this is Harry, jamming out all by himself to the upbeat holiday song. Ordinarily Louis would probably find it kind of endearing and maybe even join him because the song is really, really catchy. But right now it is sooo not cool.

“What the fuck is this music?” Rusty complains with a scrunched up face, watching Harry in annoyance. “Christmas is for kids.”

“We are kids.” Harry points out obviously, putting his little dance party on hold.

“I’m not a fucking kid.” Rusty argues, walking over to the stereo and switching it off. “And Christmas sucks ass.”

“It’s the most wonderful time of the year. What do you have against happiness?” Harry frowns,
sounding genuinely offended.

“It’s lame.” Rusty bites, pressing a hard finger into Harry’s chest, looming over him. “Like you.”

“Yeah, you’re totally right.” Louis jumps to agree with Rusty, rushing over to the stereo to turn on a neutral pop radio station instead. It’s probably way safer than any other the CDs and cassettes Louis has lying around. “Christmas is mad overrated.”

Harry furrows his eyebrows. “But Lou, you love Christmas—”

“Shut up, no I don’t.” Louis hisses, cutting Harry off. Louis always finds himself becoming another person when he’s around his teammates versus when he’s around Harry. It’s hard for him to find a balance between what seems to be polar opposites.

“All right.” Harry rolls his eyes in disappointment. “I’m gonna go next door and get my camera.”

“Whatever, Harry. I don’t care what you do, it’s not like I need a play by play.” Louis sasses back, sounding scarily similar to one of his football captains.

Everyone in the room laughs, cackles echoing throughout the basement as Rusty lifts his hand to high five Louis. “Nice one, Tommo!”

Hurt flashes over Harry’s features, clouding his usually bright eyes. He stares at Louis for a moment, a flicker of hope in his eye as he waits for Louis to say something or apologize. And truthfully, part of Louis kinda wants to take it back, regret pitting in his stomach as he takes in his best mate’s saddened expression. But at the same time he has finally gained a bit of approval from Rusty and his teammates. Even Brady laughed along.

Harry slowly hangs his head, turning away from Louis like a wounded puppy as he starts to trudge over to the stairwell.

“Off you go, Shirley Temple.” Rusty goads in mocking, shooing Harry up the stairs.

Louis knows he really should go after Harry and apologize, but right as he makes up his mind to do it, Rusty drapes his arm around his shoulder, walking him to the far side of the room.

“Hey, so I think we should play a little game.” Rusty suggests with a mischievous grin, looking down at Louis.

“A game?” Louis wonders, straining to look up under the weight of Rusty’s arm.

“Mhmm.”

“What kind of game?”

“Seven minutes in heaven.”

“I’ve never played before.” Louis admits. Of course he is familiar with the game but playing it is a whole other story.

“What? Never?! Aw you’re gonna love it!” Rusty promises, ruffling up Louis’ hair messily before letting him go. “And since you’re the birthday boy, I think you should go first.”

“Yeah, sure. That sounds fun.” Louis agrees easily as he attempts to fix his recently ruffled fringe, sorting the disheveled strands back into place.
“With Brady.” Rusty finishes knowingly.

“Brady!?” Louis chokes, hands falling still in his hair as his eyes grow impossibly wide.

“Oh come on, everyooone knows you’re into Brady.” Rusty emphasizes, rubbing elbows with Louis teasingly.

Louis turns instantly red, cheeks inflamed and rapidly resembling a tomato. Is it that obvious? Everyone knows? Louis tries really hard not to act differently around him at practice. He tries to treat him just like anyone else, leaving the freaking out part to inside his own head. “No…no, I’m not…I __”

“Cut the shit, Tommo.” Rusty interrupts. “It’s plain as day. But the thing is…I think he might be kinda into you too…”

“What? Oh my god, really!?” Louis gasps excitedly in shock, already starting to freak out and not so much in his own head this time. If Brady Evans is even slightly into him, his whole year has just been made. Louis would be lying if he said that he hasn’t spent every period of Maths daydreaming about how they would make such a great power couple. They could rule the school together as the ultimate footie duo and then one day they’d both get signed to play for The Rovers and—now he is jumping way too far ahead of himself. Stay cool, Tomlinson stay cool.

Louis straightens himself out, schooling his face into a calm, mildly bored expression. “Uh I mean…that’s cool, I guess…” He shrugs casually for emphasis, driving home the fact that it’s no big deal for him. Internally, however Louis is totally still flipping shit though. Obviously. “But…I thought that he’s not really into boys?”

“Well, he’ll never really know for sure one way or the other until he tries.” Rusty explains easily. “He’s a bit nervous about it I think, but he seems to really like you.”

“You really think so?” Louis pipes up, unable to keep the giddy hopefulness from coating his voice.

“Oh yeah, yeah totally.” Rusty nods with a grin, pulling a bandana from his back pocket. “He even asked me to set it up for him.”

“No way!” Louis exclaims uncontrollably before clearing his throat, and shaking his head nonchalantly. “Umm…I mean. Cool. Yeah—Whatever.”

“Yeah, so you can’t make me look bad, alright?”

“No, yeah…of course. Totally yes—I’m down.” Louis is nodding and bobbing his head in all different ways, not knowing what else to say. He knows he is failing miserably at playing it cool, but he can’t help it. This is all so sudden. Louis is hardly prepared for this. He’s fantasized about it, sure. But actually doing it is completely different.

Rusty secures the bandana tightly over Louis’ eyes, tying the ends behind his head. He places his hands on either side of Louis’ shoulders, guiding him forward. “Ok, now in you go. And you better not come out or peek before Brady comes in. Got it?”

Louis nods his head blindly. “Ok, I won’t. I promise.”

“Good.” Rusty says and Louis can hear his smile through his voice as he pats Louis’ shoulder. “Oh and uh…before I forget, where is our homework assignment?”

“Oh right. It’s on the table by the stairs.”
“Sick, thanks.” Rusty grins, pushing Louis the rest of the way into the small closet. “Go get ‘em Tommo.”

Louis hears the closet door close, any slight traces of light peeking through the blindfold disappearing. He hops from foot to foot impatiently, tugging at his bottom lip with his teeth. Has he mentioned before that Brady Evans is the hottest guy at school? Because Brady is literally the hottest boy in school. It’s safe to say that the nerves are really setting in. Louis would say that right now he’s a healthy, verging on unhealthy, mix of solely nerves and excitement. Maybe even a splash of anxiety.

He is nearly about to pass out from the anticipation of it all, growing weak with eagerness. Louis has basically waited his whole entire life for this moment. It all leads up to this. This could very well be the moment that changes his life forever.

Finally, after what felt like eons, Louis hears the sound of the closet door click open. The music playing outside gets louder for a moment as it fills the closet, before the door closes again. Except this time with the addition of another person; the heat of their bodies radiating though the small, cramped space.

“I didn’t think you were going to come.” Louis mumbles unsurely. “I mean I’m…uh glad you did come but…I…”

Louis’ voice dies out in his throat as Brady cups a gentle hand to his cheek, moving in and closing the space between them until they are practically flush against each other. Louis keeps his hands at his sides, honestly too terrified to do much else. His heart is racing, beating at a ridiculous pace and he can feel the light huffs of Brady’s breath against his face getting closer and closer until their lips finally brush together.

His lips are soft, far softer than Louis had envisioned they’d be. Plush and sweet, gentle to the touch as they press timidly against Louis’ own. And he smells so floral. Light and airy so unlike the usual thick musk that typically shrouds him.

Actually, now that Louis thinks about it, Brady smells really familiar. Too familiar. So familiar that Louis could pinpoint that particular scent anywhere. He has grown up with that scent, he has slept in a bed filled with that scent, he has run his fingers through curls dripping with that exact scent. But that can’t be—no. That couldn’t possibly be? That would be weird, that would be mortifying. No. Impossible.

But as hard as he tries, Louis still can’t shake the startling feeling that the boy pressed against him smells just like…

“…Harry?” Louis questions uncertainly as he pulls back from the kiss, eyes still covered.

“Hi.” Louis hears Harry’s soft voice whisper back in the darkness.

“Oh my god!” Louis jumps away from him in absolute horror, yanking the blindfold from his face to see what his ears dare not believe. “Oh. My. God! What are you do— you…you kissed me!”

Harry looks back at him with terrified eyes, teeth digging into the flesh of his bottom lip so hard he might draw blood. His whole face is flushed in the brightest shade of red imaginable. “I just…I um…I… I didn’t mean it!” He blurts suddenly, expression growing more and more panicked as his voice wavers. “It…I…it was just a j-joke!”

“You’re not supposed to be here! Where is Brady?”
“What?” Harry’s eyebrows knit together in confusion. “Why—”

Louis pushes past Harry rudely, not even bothering to listen to anything he has to say, he can’t focus on that right now. He rushes out of the closet to find the entire area completely deserted. The snacks ransacked and the neat stack of homework gone. He spins back around looking accusatorily to Harry with narrowed eyes. “What did you do? Where did they go?”

Harry looks around the basement, just as confused. “I…I dunno, I d-didn’t do anything, Louis—”

“Yes, you did!” Louis shouts back, growing more agitated. “Obviously, you did or they would still be here!”

Harry shakes his head wildly, eyes wide and earnest. “Lou, I swear! I just got back and—”

“No! No, this can’t be happening!” Louis throws his head back and groans loudly. He really just wants to scream, blood boiling with rising anger and resentment. Harry knew how important this was to him and he went ahead and fucked it up anyway. Louis knew he shouldn’t have invited Harry, it was too much of a risk.

“Louis, I—”

“God, you’re so embarrassing!” Louis yells irately, hurrying back to the safety of the basement closet, Harry trailing worriedly behind him. “You ruin everything! I don’t know why I ever became friends with you. You’re such a loser!”

His words sound foreign and harsh even to his own ears, but the level of humiliation he feels overpowers him. Louis slams the closet door in Harry’s face, shutting him out completely. He just wants to be alone.

“Louis, Lou—I’m sorry!” Harry cries through the door. “I d-didn’t mean to—”

“Just go away! I hate you!” Louis bites, screaming angrily through the door. “I hate you! I hate me! I hate everything!”

This is the worst day of his life. Never has Louis ever been this humiliated. Willingly going into a closet blindfold waiting for his crush—who he knows is straight to come in and what? Suddenly turn gay for Louis? What a joke. How could he ever be so desperately foolish and naïve?

“Louis! Louis, let me explain!” Harry begs on the verge of tears. “Please Lou, I’m so sorry! It was an accident! Just talk to me…”

And to make it all worse, he ended up blindly kissing his lifelong best mate, whom he has absolutely no romantic feelings for whatsoever. How awkward and embarrassing and just downright horrifying. Louis could die. If he really did keel over and die at this moment, it’d probably be the universe’s way of having pity on him. He will never ever live this down, his life is completely and utterly over.

Louis curls up against himself, knees tucked tightly against his chest as he rocks back and forth. Tears start to trickle from his eyes as he cries into the material of his jean overalls. He starts to rock harder, back repeatedly banging against the tall storage shelves behind him.

God, if he were only older. If Louis could just somehow skip over all of this and get on with his real life. The life where he is successful and hot and adored and he can have whoever he wants and be whoever he wants and be friends with whoever he wants. The life where he never has to feel like this again. The life where he isn’t some embarrassing thirteen-year-old struggling to fit in and find a
place in the world, but a thriving thirty-year-old with a career and stability and a real reason to get up every morning.

Louis squeezes his eyes as tightly as he possibly can and completely shuts out the world. He shuts out the sounds of Harry repeatedly crying his name and the rhythm of the music playing from the radio through the door. He fully shuts out reality and allows himself to imagine his life, his future life. The only life that matters.

He continues rocking himself against the shelves, rhythmically moving back and forth. Louis feels things start to move and fall around him, old pictures, shoes, even the stray wishing dust from Harry’s Dream Album. But Louis doesn’t care. He doesn’t care about anything right now because he doesn’t want to be here. He wants to be far, far away from here and he is going to keep rocking himself until he finally is.

Slowly but surely Louis starts to drift off, forcing himself into a place where he can almost feel it… almost see it… almost live it…

…almost…

…almost….

…almost…

Louis flops onto his back, sleepy body rolling farther than he expected as the sheets twist and tangle around his lower half. Oddly, his body keeps on rolling, nothing to hinder him as his bed seems to stretch out wider than usual.

Wasn’t there a wall there before? Louis knows—swears that his bed has always been aligned next to the far wall of his bedroom. It’s the wall that proudly displays his prized David Beckham poster, the wall he props up against sometimes when he’s reading or playing Super Mario 64, the wall he tosses a ball at back and forth when he’s bored.

But curiously enough the wall isn’t there. Nothing is there.

And with no wall to stop him, the momentum of his sluggish body gets the better of Louis and he finds himself tumbling ceremoniously off the edge of the bed, hitting the floor face first with a heavy thud.

“Ow!” Louis groans lowly, sleepily rubbing his head as he tries to stand up in the dark. The jumbled sheets tighten around his legs as he tries to stand, landing him right back on his ass in a manner of seconds.

“Fuck!” Louis hisses in a daze, cheek pressed against the hardwood floor as his sleep-mussed hair flops over his face. Even in his groggy state, he quickly shuts his mouth, praying to god his mum didn’t hear that.

Wait? Hardwood floor? Louis’ bedroom is definitely carpeted. The only bedroom that isn’t carpeted is the guest room but—why would he fall asleep in there? Come to think of it, Louis doesn’t even remember going to sleep last night.
Weird.

Louis sits up again in the quiet darkness, scrambling to untangle his bare legs from the entrapment of the bed sheets. With much difficulty, he ends up half crawling, half walking, mostly tripping to the first door he finds, creaking it open slowly. He peeks his head out in confusion, blinking blearily at the light flooding the hallway.

“Mum?” Louis calls tentatively, immediately slapping a hand over his mouth, shocked by the vastly deeper and more mature sound coming out of his mouth. He hadn’t exactly registered it before in his drowsy haze, but there is no doubt that the voice he just heard is several octaves lower than usual. Louis takes a deep breath before timidly attempting to speak again. “Mum—No way! Is that my voice?!?”

“Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god…” Louis whispers repeatedly to himself as he stands fully to his feet. He shakes his body out a bit, trying to steady his rising heart rate and rid himself of the rising anxiety building up in his chest. “Ok. It’s ok, my voice finally dropped is all. This is fine—this is good…this is—Mum! Mum, where are you!?”

Louis turns down the first hall, not recognizing anything, not a single thing. This is definitely not his house. Where the hell is he? He doesn’t remember going over to anyone’s house last night. But he also doesn’t remember anything from last night. The last thing he remembers is sitting alone in his basement closet blindfolded and waiting for Brady.

Wait—did Brady ever come? What happened? Louis is pretty sure that if he finally kissed or did anything, even the slightest thing with Brady, he’d remember it. Right?

Of course, he’d remember it. It’d be the highlight of his entire life, the pinnacle of his existence thus far. But yet, Louis remembers absolutely nothing. One minute, Rusty was shoving him into the closet and the next, he’s…here?

Maybe he got drunk? Louis has only ever had one beer. Actually he split it with Harry two months ago; it was their first and only drink. They felt so smug and cool sneaking one of Mark’s beers from the fridge in the middle of the night, but truthfully they could hardly even stomach it. And that was only half of a bloody beer. He’s never drank enough to actually be drunk before.

But Louis imagines that if he were to ever get drunk it’d probably feel something like this? Maybe? Who knows. He’s only thirteen, what does he really know anyway?

Also, where is Harry? He said something about going home to get his camera but…did he ever come back? Louis guesses he would sorta understand if Harry hadn’t come back. Louis was kinda rude to him with that whole play-by-play comment, but Harry should’ve known that he was only joking. He didn’t really mean it of course, he just wanted to get Rusty to laugh and the guys to like him. He’ll have to do something later to make it up to Harry. That is if Louis can figure out where the hell he is right now.

“…Hello?” Louis mumbles timorously, taking his steps one at a time down the wide hall. “Is…is anyone t-there? Hellyyoo…” He slowly tiptoes down the hall, bare feet on cold hardwood floor; as far as he can tell there doesn’t seem to be anyone home.

Or that is until Louis casually turns his head to the right and nearly shits himself as he catches an unexpected glimpse of a man.

“Ahh! Oh my god!” Louis screams, piercing his own eardrums with the high pitch of his shriek. He clutches his naked chest, jumping in shock at what turns out to be the reflection of a mirror.
“Holy…” Louis uncertainly takes a few steps closer towards the mounted mirror, turning his head oddly in different directions as he stares back into his own blue eyes. He hesitantly lifts both of his hands up to touch his face, shocked by the presence of uniform facial hair growing over his cheeks and chin. His eyes slide down to his shirtless upper body, littered in tattoos and doodles that he doesn’t know the meaning of.

It’s quite confusing actually, because Louis’ never really loved the idea of tattoos. And yet…his body is scattered with them. He scans over his forearms noticing a handwritten ‘Oops’ tattooed in the midst of a mirage of random ink. He and Harry had always joked that one day they’d get their first words to each other tattooed on their bodies because they are that sappy. But Louis can’t believe he actually did it. Really, Louis can’t believe anything right now, and a few tattoos are probably the least of it.

“That’s me?” Louis wonders out loud in absolute shock, mouth hanging open. “How is that me?!” He can’t seem to stop staring at himself, scanning over the unfamiliar form looking back at him. Apart from all the tattoos, his body has changed immensely. He finally filled out in all the right places and his muscles are ridiculously developed. Louis flexes a little in the mirror to test them out, jaw dropping at how well defined his ab muscles are. He has real life abs—a legit six pack.

“I’m fucking hot…” Louis exhales in a rare combination of shock, awe and pride as he continues to check himself out.

He stares curiously at his boxer briefs in the mirror, a prominent bulge evident behind the only piece of fabric covering his body. Louis pulls at the waistband and peers down under the thin briefs.

“Nice.” Louis nods with a proud smirk. Good to know that when he grew up, he grew everywhere. Puberty was pretty good to him it seems.

Louis almost can’t believe that his own body is real. Honestly it feels more likely that the mirror is wrong and this is all just a whimsical Disney illusion. Maybe this is one of those magical mirrors, maybe Louis should be asking the mirror who is the fairest of them all, and maybe the mirror could shed some light on why he woke up as a full grown man with a hot ass body. It may be worth a shot.

Louis starts to stumble further down the huge hall in search of some kind of clue, reaching a living area. It’s absolute gorgeous, straight out of a magazine or something. High-beamed ceilings and a vast open floor plan, giving the luxurious space a modern feel.

As Louis briefly scans the apartment, he spots a stack of mail strewn upon the coffee table. Louis picks up a sample of the envelopes, flipping through them quickly.

Louis Tomlinson.

Louis Tomlinson.

Louis Tomlinson.

Louis Tomlinson.

Each and every one has his name and only his name on it. Different bills and statements, magazine subscriptions all addressed solely to him.

“I? I…live here?” Louis gasps looking around the house with his jaw hanging wide open, letting the remaining envelopes slip loosely from his fingers to the floor. His heart rate is skyrocketing to
frightening levels as his gaze flicks about the apartment again. He could never afford this, how could he possibly live here? This place looks so expensive, as though it should cost money just to be breathing in the filtered air.

One whole side of the massive penthouse is floor to ceiling windows, overlooking the city. Louis trips over to them, placing a hand on the pristine glass as he stares out of the window. The view in itself is absolutely breathtaking and Louis is immediately held captive by it. He can see everything from up here, like being on top of the world.

“London? I’m in…London?” Louis gapes, utterly breathless. He roughly scrubs his face with his hands, trailing them up into his hair. “Bloody hell…”

This can’t be where he lives? Right? That’s unreal. There has to be some kind of mistake. Maybe his mum would know. Of course, she would know. She knows everything.

Louis looks wildly around the apartment for a house phone, finding nothing he recognizes. He wanders into the kitchen and notices a sleek stationary phone propped up on the kitchen counter against the wall. Or at least he thinks it’s a phone. It’s got numbers on it at least, even though they aren’t even buttons? Just flat numbers. It’s not anything like a usual house phone, but Louis assumes it works all the same. He stares at it oddly before dialing his home phone number.

“Pick up…pick up…” Louis mumbles anxiously to himself, hopping back and forth on his bare toes. The line rings and rings and rings until finally going to voicemail.

“Hello there! We’re the Deakins!”

“The Deakins?” Louis blurs out loud in absolute confusion at the sound of a random man’s voice. “Who the hell are they?”

“…So sorry that we missed your call…”

“Why do they live in my house?” Louis groans agitatedly into the phone. “What is this!?”

“…please leave us a message and we will get back to you as soon as we can. Take care!”

“Mum moved without even telling me?” Louis sinks down in one of the lush couches, letting the phone slip from his grasp as he closes his eyes. “Oh, this is sooo massive.”

An anchored screen, Louis assumed was another mirror blinks on suddenly. He looks down at the couch cushion and realizes he sat on some kind of remote.

“It’s a…TV?” Louis sits up, tilting his head to one side in complete fascination. “But it’s so…flat? Where are all the wires?”

“…And now for this mornings’ Seven A.M. Hottie Round-up…”

Louis slides out of the recliner almost in a trance, investigating the television screen hanging on the wall over the fireplace. Never in his life has he ever seen a TV that thin and that clear.

“…French actor, Raphael Moreau, has been spotted getting cozy with footie star Louis Tomlinson in Downtown London. The loved up beaus started their on and off again romance two years ago and have been known not to shy away from ample PDA…”

Louis isn’t even paying the slightest bit of attention to what the announcer is saying, too fascinated by the extremely high definition pixels of the screen. It just looks so real? The closer he gets to it,
the more realistic it looks. Louis holds his face only centimeters away from the screen in absolute astonishment. Where is the static? The fuzz? Is this a dream?

It has to be a dream. But could Louis have really dreamed up something that futuristic?

It’s doubtful.

“…Sources close to the couple say Raphael is ready to drop down on one knee for Louis and pop the question. Could there be wedding bells in store for the Donny hunk? Or more importantly, is the notorious playboy even ready to settle down?…”

Louis blinks for a second, pulling back and slightly registering a few of the words being said by the TV host. Hold up—are they talking about him?

No, they couldn’t be—that’s impossible. Louis probably just misheard them or something. There are tons of people named Louis in the U.K. Besides, he was hardly even watching closely enough to be sure.

But just as Louis starts to pay any sort of attention to the celebrity gossip show, the screen blinks off by itself. He frowns at the blank display for a second, eyebrows knitted together in confusion with his head tilted.

“Oi, I hate gossip TV. Absolute garbage.” Someone says suddenly out of nowhere. “You’re up early this morning, babe.”

Louis let’s out the highest shriek he has ever heard out of his own mouth, nearly jumping out of his skin as spins around defensively at the sound of an unfamiliar male voice. He covers his arms over his body self-consciously even though from what he’s seen so far, he has nothing to really be self-conscious about. But still. Who is this man? And why is he in Louis’ apparent apartment?

“Oh mon Loulou, did I scare you?” The man says in a thick alluring accent, setting the remote down on the coffee table. “Je suis désolé, amour.”

What is that…French? What the actual fuck. Who the hell?

The man is only clothed by a tiny towel, draped lazily over his hips. Richly tanned, muscled skin on display like the epitome of perfection. Dark curls frame his sculpted face, falling over his warm hazel eyes in an oddly endearing kind of way. He is way too gorgeous to just be appearing indecently in people’s living rooms. In fact, he looks like he just stepped out of a swimwear catalog.

“So, I was just about to take a shower…and I was wondering if…” He smirks, winking at Louis before dropping the towel with a quick flick of his wrist. “You’d like to join me.”

It all happens so fast, Louis can hardly even react to it. His eyes widen and his mouth falls open in stunned shock at the entirely nude sight before him. He’s never done anything for real with a boy —man before. He’s never really done anything with anyone before to be honest. Maybe an innocent kiss or two, but that’s it! He’s only thirteen for god’s sake!

And yet, despite all that, there is a totally naked man standing right in front of him and Louis can’t do anything but stare. Just…stare.

It’s just so huge, it’s practically staring right back at Louis with a mind of its own. Thick and long and just…hung. Easily the biggest and most frightening monster of a penis he has ever seen. Louis stands frozen, mouth dry with his eyes glued to the monstrous dick in front of him with sudden tunnel vision. It truly feels as though his soul has completely dissociated from his own body, leaving
him utterly paralyzed and stupefied.

The already ridiculously sized cock seems to only be getting bigger and Louis soon realizes that it’s because the man it’s attached to is striding closer and closer, reaching out to him. “Come on baby boy, let’s get you wet.”

With that, Louis suddenly snaps out of it, coming back to life and screaming bloody murder as he jolts away from the man and leaps over the couch to get away and put much needed distance between them.

“Ooh! Are we playing a game, mamour?” He jeers mischievously, eyes watching Louis as if he is getting ready to pounce at any moment. “You know how much I loooove games.”

“No! No! No!” Louis shouts dashing around the living room with no real direction. He has no idea what to do. How is he supposed to handle this? A naked man is chasing him and calling him pet names in French and Louis has not the slightest inkling on what to do.

Except the obvious: run and scream.

“No! Noo! NOOO!” Louis screams on a loop, hands flailing about as he trips and slides across the hardwood floors of the penthouse apartment. He makes a beeline for what he assumes is the front door and he is just about to throw himself outside, when he remembers he isn’t wearing anything but underwear.

“Love, what is the matter? If you don’t want to shower with me that’s fine.” The man says, still 200% naked and tracking Louis’ every move.

“Stop following me!” Louis shrieks in panic, as he sprints back into the bedroom he unexplainably woke up in. He quickly scrambles to grab a pair of disregarded sweats from the floor and a random jumper strewn across the ottoman in front of the bed. “And put some clothes on for god’s sake!”

The nude Frenchman unsuspectingly jumps in front of Louis, backing him into a corner of the bedroom. His arms are outstretched towards Louis as he proceeds to get closer and closer. “Loulou? Are you ok? Tu a l’air malade.”

“Oh my god…” Louis pales, eyes wandering down uncontrollably again to the massive dick getting closer and closer to him, soon basically becoming all he can see. Nothing else seems to exist and the longer he stands frozen, the more he gets boxed in against the wall. Louis tears his stunned gaze away, frenziedly seeking out a quick escape. He drops to his knees and crawls around the man, clambering back to his feet. “No! No! I have to get out of here!”

Louis escapes the bedroom, flying down the hallway as fast as his legs will carry him. He runs out the front door and straight to the elevator, clicking repeatedly on the button for the first floor. “Come on, come on.”

The doors chime open and Louis practically tosses his body into the elevator just as he hears that same French accent calling him in the distance. He doesn’t have a plan, but he needs to get away from here and he figures fleeing the building is a pretty solid way to start. As Louis rides the lift he rushes to throw on the clothes he risked his life to grab. It probably wouldn’t be wise to walk the streets of London in only his pants.

When the elevator doors open finally, Louis sprints out of the lift, through the vast foyer and out of the building. His chest is heaving wildly as he stops to catch his breath right outside, bending over with his hands on his knees.
“Louis, seriously. What’s with the dramatics?” Louis hears a different person sigh heavily from behind him.

Louis spins around at the sound of his own name being called, again by an unfamiliar voice. There is another man standing next to a sleek, obviously very expensive, black car. He’s holding a drink carrier in one hand and a device or something in his other.

“There’s…t—there’s a naked French guy in my bedroom!” Louis shouts out of breath, pointing up towards the building he just barely escaped from. “He’s naked! And he’s getting in my shower and he wants me to join him!”

“Oh well, lucky you.” The guy flicks his gaze up to Louis again impatiently, smiling sarcastically behind his sunglasses. “It must be so hard for you to leave him and actually go to work.”

“He cornered me! And his…his…you know? His thingie—was just out! And it’s like?! Huge!” Louis eyes widen impossibly, scraping his hands through his messy hair. “Like the biggest dick ever in the history of big dicks! Seriously! I nearly died just now!”

“Must you brag about about everyone you sleep with? God Louis, have some fucking class.”

“What? No! I’m not—uh no! No! I… I just… I…” Louis pauses for a moment, eyeing the sunglasses dude speculatively. This guy must actually know him. He keeps calling Louis by his name, which is far more than anyone else has done so far. “Do I… um do I know you?”

“Ha. Ha. Funny.” Sunglasses deadpans, pursing his lips as he holds one of the cups out to Louis. “Here. Picked up cold brew for you.”

“What’s a cold brew? Like a beer? It’s 7 A.M. I think? Yeah…” Louis guesses. “And anyway beer tastes like cat piss.”

“You’re not funny. I hope you know that you are not at all funny.”

“I didn’t say that I was?” Louis frowns in honest confusion. Honestly, who are these people?

“I can’t keep up with you and your moods. One day you’re raving about cold brews, the next day you equate them to cat piss. Just drink the fucking coffee, ok? No one has time for your pretentious bullshit.”

“That’s a coffee?” Louis stares down at the dark iced cup in his hand suspiciously.

“Oh, for fucks sake.” He groans grabbing ahold of Louis’ arm and walking him towards the passenger side of the car. “Just shut up and get in the goddamn car! We’re late!”

“Late for what? Who are you? I can’t just go with you.” Louis protests adamantly, planting his feet down against the gravel. “People kidnap teenage boys like me, you know? It’s all over the news.”


“I am a teenager!” Louis argues, spinning around against the car to face the man. “I just turned 13 yesterday! This is me being real!”

“Your birthday is around Christmas or something isn’t it?”

“Yes! Yes, it was yesterday! I guess that makes today…Christmas?” Louis frowns looking around.
It’s oddy very, very warm for Christmas and there is not a single trace of holiday spirit anywhere. No decorations, no lights, no music. Is London always like this? Louis has never been, so he wouldn’t exactly know for sure. But this is a bit sad.

“Uh…what?” Sunglasses knits his eyebrows together in annoyed confusion. “It’s literally the middle of May.”

“No, no it’s not! It can’t be!” Louis shakes his head wildly in denial. “It’s December and I’m in the middle of winter break! School starts back in—”

“School!? Ok, enough—I’m so sick of your shit!” Sunglasses sighs heavily. He grabs Louis by his upper arm again and tries to force his unwilling body in the car. “Get in the car Louis, please! I’m saying please now. You hear me saying please, right?”

“Hey baby boy I didn’t even kiss you goodbye! Come back!” Louis jolts at the sound of that recently familiar accent, immediately seeking out the location of the voice. He looks up and finds the naked man wrapped in a towel again, standing out on the sundeck of the apartment, leaning over the gate.

“No! No! I’m not your baby boy! Leave me alone!” Louis squirms, completely freaked out and on edge. “That’s gross!”

“Oi, what’s wrong, mon amour?” The French man yells down, looking ready to hop over the gate and climb down to Louis at any moment. “Did I do something wrong?”

“Go away!” Louis hisses up at the balcony. “I don’t know you!”

“Ah you wound me, baby.” He clutches at his heart dramatically and pokes out his bottom lip in a pout. “What have I done, my love?”

“Can this lover’s quarrel wait?” Sunglasses groans impatiently, completely unamused. “You’re the most extra couple I know. Louis, come on we are late.”

“Oh mon Loulou, s’il vous plaît! Don’t leave, bébé! Let me make it right! Whatever it is, I’m sorry! I don’t want to fight! Tu es l’amour de ma vie!”

Louis isn’t the best at French, he probably should have paid more attention in class but as far as he can tell the naked man said something about love and life and honestly who the hell knows.

Right now, it’s either get in the car with a bitter but nonthreatening man who apparently knows him or fight off an invasive overly affectionate naked Frenchman. Louis will take his chances with the bitter one, at least he isn’t threatening to jump him. Louis quickly shoves his body into the front passenger seat as bitter sunglasses dude slides in on the driver’s side.

“God, finally!” Sunglasses huffs with all his ever present bitterness as he slides into the driver’s seat and prepares to start up the car. “That took way too much time and we have a long drive to Doncaster—”

“Yay! We’re going home!” Louis cheers excitedly. London is beautiful and all, but he has seen quite enough for one day. “Why are you taking me to Donny anyway? Not that I’m complaining, I’m ready to go.”

“The EFL Press Conference today? Do you not read the emails we get?” Sunglasses huffs as he navigates the car onto the street. He does a quick judgmental once over of Louis’ appearance, eyes
peeking over the lenses of his shades. “You look like shit, by the way. We have televised meetings all day and yet you’re wearing ratty sweats and a tattered jumper. Fantastic.”

Louis looks down at what he hurriedly put on while trying to preserve his own life. Surprisingly, he recognizes the jumper. It’s a lot more worn than the last time he saw it, but it’s his absolute favorite comfort sweater. It’s actually Harry’s, but Louis borrowed—stole it and Harry never minded. It’s nice to know that he still has it even now. Whenever now is. Louis hugs it tighter around his body, nuzzling his nose into the fabric around the collar to see if it still smells like home.

It doesn’t.

It smells more of rank alcohol and lingering smoke with a bit of musty sweat mixed in. Which is such a shame because it once smelled like lavender, sweet honey and soft flowerbeds just like Harry’s curls.

And again, where on earth is Harry? Why doesn’t he recognize any of the people he’s come in contact with so far? What is going on?

“I’m texting our stylist to bring you a few last minute outfit choices, ok? You’re an embarrassment going around looking like that. A fucking train wreck. I don’t care how good the sex is Tommo, you could at least put aside some time to get properly dressed.”

Louis doesn’t know that the hell is going on, but every minute that passes only makes him more confused. So instead of asking any more questions, Louis choses to sit back in the leather seat and nurse the ‘cold brew’ thing that whatever-his-name-is brought him.

He takes one sip and immediately scrunches up his face, spitting the black liquid back out and on to the pristine dashboard of the car.

“Louis! *Fuck!* I just had the interior detailed!” Sunglasses screams, narrowly avoiding a car accident as he swerves, totally distracted by the caffeinated mess Louis just made all over the upholstery.

“What is this!? Why do I drink this? Do I really drink this?” Louis sticks his tongue out in disgust, holding the cup away from him as if it personally offends him. “It tastes shit!”

“God, I’m so fucking done with you. You’re such a child! I’m this close to kicking your sorry ass out of my car and letting you walk to Donny. I should have never agreed to carpool with you, you’re too much.”

But Louis is actually confused. *Genuinely* confused. Somehow even more confused than he was only seconds ago. Since when does he not drink tea? Why on earth would he drink a bitter and black ‘cold brew’ when he could drink his usual cup of Yorkshire tea. No sugar, no cream. Just a splash of milk. Simple.

“You’re fucking paying for this.” Sunglasses demands angrily. “Don’t bullshit me about why you don’t want to or why you can’t. I don’t have the bloody patience! I should honestly make you buy me a whole new car.”

“I…? I know you right? Like…” Louis narrows his eyes, leaning in a bit closer to him. The rude, self-righteous way to which he talks sounds so familiar, Louis just can’t put his finger on it. He reaches over the center console and yanks the sunglasses off of his face to get a better look.

“You’re…”

“What the fuck, Louis!” The now sunglass-less man yells in absolute irritation. “Give me my sunglasses back, you asshole!”
“Would you consider us friends?” Louis wonders in concentration, trying to pinpoint it as he spins the sunglasses in his hand.

“Is this some kind of joke?” He lunges at Louis for his shades, trying to also maintain the wheel of the car. “Cut it out!”

He looks really familiar, but at the same time he doesn’t. But with his temperamental attitude and how often he curses and throws out insults…he has to be…

“I got it!” Louis claps his hands together, sitting up excitedly in his seat. “Rusty! Of course, it’s you! You’re Rusty!”

“Oh my god, let that die. It’s Russell, ok. You know I hate when people call me Rusty.”

“You didn’t mind it before—”

“Yeah, when I was like thirteen!”

“Hmm…but you look…different.” Louis sweeps over his face. Rusty looks older yeah, definitely a lot older, but at the same time something else is off about his facial structure. Unnaturally off.

“Please, don’t do this again. Yes, I know the haircut was a bad idea. You only tell me every second of every day.”

Louis shakes his head, still watching Rusty closely. “No, it’s not that—”

“I get it Louis, ok? Next time I get a haircut I’ll consult you first? God…” Rusty groans. “Will you quit?”

“Um…ok?” Louis shrugs, deciding to just let it go. Even though there really is something different, maybe he had work done or something. He’s definitely vain enough to do it. If Louis was putting money on it, he’d guess it was a nose job.

“So Payne wants each of us to tweet something about the championship. Positive press and all that before the cameras get in our faces.” Russell announces, sliding his sunglasses back over the bridge of his nose.

“Wait. We know someone named Payne?” Louis asks for clarification. “Or is that pain as in ‘ow, that really hurt’?”

Rusty exhales heavily with exasperation, hands gripping the steering wheel tightly. “You make me tired, you know that?! You make me so bloody tired! Will you stop with the goddamn jokes this morning! Just open up your twitter.”

“My…my what? What’s a tweet-er?”

“Are you really this hungover?” Rusty bursts in disbelief, neck veins practically bursting. “Twitter! Louis! Twitter? You’re one of the most followed people on the internet and you won’t let anyone forget it.”

Louis is still not getting it, why are people ‘following’ him? “Is that…is that good or…?”

“You know what…just give me your damn phone. I’ll tweet it myself.” Rusty looks to him expectantly, holding his hand out with the other still on the wheel. “Come on then, hand it over.”

Louis looks down at himself, patting down his pockets for whatever Rusty is asking for. A phone?
But…they’re driving? What would a phone be doing in a car? Well, they do have car phones in a lot of cars where Louis comes from, but those are bulky and attached to the car. And this car looks way to futuristic and modern for that and it also doesn’t seem to be what Rusty is after.

Louis pulls a rectangular device out his pocket, it looks a lot like the thing Rusty was staring at earlier when he first picked him up outside of the apartment. He stares at it for a moment, frowning. It looks like a little baby TV screen. “This thing?”

Rusty just sighs before snatching the shiny thing from Louis’ hand. Somehow he navigates through the small device, pressing repeatedly on what appears to actually be a screen, while still driving the car. Louis doubts that it’s really safe, but he choses not to say anything.

“Bae texted you by the way.” Rusty announces as he one-handedly drives the car and looks at the screen.

“Who is Bae?” Louis wonders curiously, eyebrows pulled. What an odd name, who on earth would willing name their child, Bae? “And how did he…’text’…me?”

“Well, let’s just see what he had to say, shall we?” He answers mischievously, as he taps away at the illuminated screen. “I still can’t believe you actually have his contact saved as ‘Laffy Taffy’.” Rusty lets out an amused laugh, shaking his head. “So is that because you call him Raphy and it rhymes or because he actually tastes like a Laffy Taffy? Either way, I hate you.”

“Uhh…?” Louis pauses for a moment, trying to seriously understand any of what Rusty just said and coming up with nothing. “I don’t get it…”

Rusty’s eyebrows raise instantly, jaw dropping as he stares at the screen. “God, Louis you really weren’t kidding about his ‘thingie’…wow. Now that’s a big dick.” He flips the screen over to Louis to reveal a naked picture of the same French man from this morning. “You can take all that? Damn… Laffy Taffy indeed.”

“Ahh! Not again!” Louis shrieks as soon as he sees it, slapping both of his hands over his eyes. “I don’t want to see it again! Why won’t he just leave me alone!!”

“You should send him a selfie back. A naughty one.” Rusty suggests, wiggling his eyebrows. “I’m sure you have tons ready to go on here, knowing you.”

“I don’t know what a selfie is, but I’m not sending Bae anything.” Louis answers defiantly. He has his knees curled up to his chest in his seat, chin resting on his legs. “He scares me and I want him to please go away.”

“Trouble in paradise? I thought you two were good now?”

“What do you mean? I just met Bae this morning…” Louis answers honestly, eyebrows pulled together.

“You obviously drank way too much last night. What were you drinking? 100% pure alcohol!? Goddammit Louis! I told you, you gotta slow it down! Training is starting up again and we can’t have you off your game.”

“Training?” Louis wonders, blinking back at Rusty blankly as he tries to put the increasing amount of missing pieces together. “Training for…”

“Ok, I’m about two seconds from smacking you upside the head.” Rusty bursts, right back to being royally annoyed. “I will not survive this car ride if you don’t stop with the obvious questions and
shut the hell the up! I can’t deal with your hangover! From now on I am evoking a strict vow of silence for us both, ok? Just no talking. I’ll turn on the radio and we will have a nice pleasant ride to the stadium.”

Rusty reaches over the the dashboard, fiddling with a few knobs and pressing a few times on an apparent touch screen before the radio starts sounding through the car speakers.

“Next up another hit single from the queen herself, Beyoncé…”

“Ooh Beyoncé? Like from Destiny’s Child?” Louis pipes up again, finally understanding something.

“Do you know any other Beyoncé?” Rusty asks sardonically. “Now stop talking.”

“I knew it!” Louis claps excitedly. “I always knew she would be a queen someday. Harry can kiss my ass, he said it was going to be Kelly…as if.” He rolls his eyes with pursed lips. “There is only one Beyoncé. Harry owes me a fiver for that.”

“Harry?” Russell pulls a face, expression surpassing sheer annoyance.

“Yeah, Harry. You know…my best friend?” Louis nods obviously. “Where is he anyway? I really need to talk to him. If anyone knows what’s going on with me, it’d be Harry.”

“What?! Louis—god! Just shut the fuck up!” Rusty smacks Louis’ knee and it actually kinda hurts. “The jokes have got to stop! You have to stop! No more talking!”

“But Harry—”

“I said no talking!” Rusty interjects irately, glaring at Louis seriously.

“Listen Rusty, all I want to know is if Har—”

“Shut up! Just shut your drunk ass up! No!”

“But I’m not drunk! I’ve never been drunk before! I’m thirteen and—”

“Louis, I swear to god, I will kill you!” Rusty threatens through his teeth, sounding every bit serious. “Shut. The. Fuck. Up.”

Louis sighs dramatically, sinking back into the leather seat and crossing his arms over his chest like a child. Maybe he really should just stop talking now, everything he says only gets him into more trouble and makes matters worse. Rusty never had a high patience level.

The only thing Louis can really do is sit tight until they reach Doncaster, maybe then things will start making more sense. That is if he can somehow find someone who can reasonably explain what is going on. Someone like his best mate. Ugh, what he wouldn’t give to have Harry calmly explain everything and catch him up. He’s probably missed so many classic inside jokes and timeless memories and iconic laughs.

Ok, new plan.

Step One: Get to Donny in one piece without Rusty strangling him.

Step Two: Find Harry (arguably the most important step in the plan).

And lastly, Step Three: Get some real answers.
It might be an extremely simple plan, but if Louis can at least do those things, maybe this whole new adult life thing can work out? It’s worth a shot.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

hi lovelies!

just want to say a huge thank you for all of your support whether through comments and kudos, or sweet tumblr messages or just by reading, i really appreciate it and i love you! :))

hope you all enjoy this chapter! :)

love lex .x

Chapter Two

After the most excruciatingly boring two-hour car ride Louis has ever had the displeasure of being a part of, they finally pull up to Keepmoat Stadium. The only victory is that he somehow managed to make it there mostly unscathed. It was a close call at times, especially after he tried to ask Rusty a few more innocent questions. For the record, that didn’t go over well and Rusty pulled over several times and told Louis to get the fuck out and walk.

But he’s here now, finally. Safe and sound at the home of the Doncaster Rovers. Even though Louis is still not completely sure why they are here, but it’s not worth getting his head cut off to find out.

Rusty quickly hops out of the car, slamming the door behind him and booking it to the back entrance of the stadium. Louis has to jog to catch up with him after he tumbles out of the car, trying to keep up with Rusty’s unnecessarily fast pace.

“We’re going in through the back?” Louis asks as he runs behind Rusty. “But isn’t it off limits?”

“How else do you suggest we get inside the building?” Rusty barks sardonically, tossing Louis an irritated look.

Louis has only ever been to the inner stadium portion of Keepmoat through the main entrance, but he’s never ventured into the perimeter offices and conference rooms that line the outside of it. Although Louis is quite mischievous and would have liked to explore and maybe even meet one of the players, that part of the stadium is always closed off and heavily guarded on game days.

“But Rusty—”

Rusty halts in his tracks as his body goes rigid. He turns completely around to face Louis, “Call me Rusty one more time and I’ll end you right here and now. I don’t give a fuck anymore.”

With that, he spins back around, pulling out some kind of badge from his pocket and swiping it over a padlock on the door. The heavy door beeps before unlocking and Rusty swings it open and rushes inside.

“So I told her to meet you in your office.” He tells Louis casually over his shoulder.
“My office? And—meet who?”

“Ugh, just come on.” Rusty groans, grabbing Louis by the upper arm and dragging him down the curved hallway. The hall is filled with commotion, rushed people running past them in suits yelling out orders, others carting random equipment and cameras.

“Good morning, Mr. Tomlinson!”

“Oh! Hi! Hello, how are you?” Louis smiles cheerfully before leaning in towards Rusty and whispering, “What’s her name?”

“Who cares? We gotta go. Come on.” Rusty yanks him down a separate hallway, not stopping for anyone or anything until he reaches a specific door. The pane is frosted glass and next to the frame of the door, mounted on the wall, is a plaque that reads: Louis Tomlinson, Doncaster Rovers F.C. Team Captain.

Louis gapes at the door in absolute wonderment, head tilted as he wonders if he is really reading that right.

Rusty turns to Louis expectantly, apparently waiting for him to do something. “Where is your badge?”

Louis blinks back at Rusty at a loss, eyes wide and confused.

“Oh please tell me you didn’t forget that too! So help me, god!” Rusty groans irately, exuding high levels of tension from his body. “No! Check your fucking pockets! All of them!”

Louis pats himself down, feeling around and pulling out all the many pockets of his sweats. And by some opportune miracle, Louis’ life is spared when he finds a little rectangular key card with his face and name on it buried in his thigh pocket.

Rusty snatches the badge from his grasp with a huff, swiping it over a black box by the door until the red light flashes green and the door clicks open.

“Is it safe to even leave you in here alone?” Rusty questions bitterly as they step into the office.

“Why wouldn’t it be?” Louis frowns as he looks around in a daze.

“Oh, I don’t know, Louis?” Rusty narrows his eyes sarcastically. “Maybe because you’re acting like you don’t even remember how to walk! You hardly know which way is up!”

“I’m fine, ok?” Louis actually wants Rusty to go, so he can find someone else more willing to answer his questions. Because the list of questions is only growing with each passing minute. He is standing in an office—his office apparently and the door is oddly engraved with his name right next to the title of team captain and Louis just doesn’t know what to do with that information yet. Mostly because he is still not entirely sure if this is real.

“I’m gonna go find, Payne.” Rusty grumbles, rolling his eyes as he heads for the door. “I can’t be your babysitter any more, I have things to do.”

The second Rusty leaves the office, Louis scrambles across the expansive office space to the far wall and he swears he needs to get his eyes checked, because there is no possible way that he is accurately seeing what’s before him.

“Fuck me…” Louis gasps, shaking his head disbelievingly as he stares at a framed Doncaster jersey
proudly scripted with his last name. “I’m a Rover!? No fucking way!” His mum would absolutely hate it if she heard him cursing like this, but Louis thinks she would agree that this is a very appropriate time.

When Rusty kept mentioning the stadium, Louis assumed that he worked there somehow, but he never dreamed he was an actual player. And he is not just a player, he is the fucking captain of the team. There are medals and trophies, plaques and pictures of all kinds decorating the walls, all of them engraved with his name.

It’s a ridiculously large office and as Louis continues stumbling through the room he repeatedly goes through the stages of shock. He nearly runs into a life size cut-out of himself in his uniform, smiling back at him while holding up a bottle of Gatorade with a thumbs up. The cut-out is propped up right against a full size Gatorade vending machine and it’s pretty safe to assume Louis is most likely sponsored by Gatorade. How trippy.

Another jersey hangs on the opposite wall, also adorned with his name but this one represents a whole other team—a national team. “I play for England too!?” Louis practically screams with excitement, jaw dropping.

“Holy fucking shit.” Louis gapes in amazement. Next to the jersey lies several framed pictures of himself at the FIFA World Cup representing his country. Never in his wildest dreams did Louis think he’d actually become an EFL player, let alone an international football player.

Louis continues gazing in awe at all the pictures until his eyes land on one in particular and he completely loses his shit. It’s a picture of him laughing with his all-time favorite football player, arms slung around each other, both wearing matching English uniforms. The bottom portion of the photograph is personally signed and autographed:

One-on-one. You and me. Anytime. Absolute legend! Love you, Tommo. -Becks x

“Oh my god! I’m friends with David Beckham!?” Louis nearly screams, mouth hanging open so far his jaw might detach from its socket. “The David Beckham!”

Louis feels faint. He truly feels like he could pass out at any given moment, knees practically buckling underneath him. Fuck, he needs to lie down. This is too much.

His dream came true. All Louis ever wanted was to make it in the football world. And now, he is actually a Rover; he gets to proudly wear the Doncaster Crest on his chest and play for his hometown. Furthermore, he gets to represent his whole country worldwide, something he never dared dream of becoming a reality. How sick is that?

A light knock at the door startles Louis and he spins around just as a platinum blonde head pokes in through the doorway. “Louis, I—”

“Lottie!” Louis recognizes her instantly despite her dyed hair. He runs over to his younger sister and pulls her in for a tight hug. “Lots, oh my god! You’re so grown up!”

“Louis, you’re s-squeezing me.” Lottie wheezes, wiggling around in Louis’ arms.

“Oh, sorry.” Louis loosens his hold on his younger sister, pulling back just to look at her again. “I just can’t believe—you’re all grown up now and you look so much like mum. You’re so beautiful, Lottie.” He drags her into another warm hug, feeling a bit sentimental as he nuzzles against his not so little, little sister. The last time Louis saw her she was missing a tooth and wore her hair in little pigtails tied up with yellow ribbons.
“Um…Lou? Are you…alright?” Lottie frowns.

“Yeah, I think! I’m pretty great actually!” Louis smiles enthusiastically, nodding his head. “What are you doing here anyway?”

“I work here…” Lottie answers obviously, narrowing her eyes at her brother. “As a stylist for the team. You got me this job…”

“Right…” Louis nods slowly like he remembers exactly what she is talking about. He doesn’t. Obviously. “So you’re my stylist…ooh…got it.”

“Yeah, so I brought you a few suit choices and—god, your hair needs help. Sit down, sit down.” She ushers him down into the wide leather chair, clearing a space on his desk for her kit.

Lottie sets about, turning Louis’ desk into a little pop up salon, pulling out hair product after hair product in order to tame Louis’ messy hair into something more presentable.

“Lottie, where is mum?” Louis questions, tilting his head behind his shoulder.

“Hold still.” Lottie guides Louis’ head back in place. “And uh…what do you mean? If I had to guess, I’d say she’s probably at home.”

“But I called home and it went to voicemail and then some Deakin person answered. And I just don’t get why she would ever sell our house…”

“Lou?” Lottie comes around to bend down in front of him, narrowing her eyes. “What are you on?”

“Lottie, seriously, just um…humor me? Please?” Louis begs unsurely. He knows how odd he must sound to her, but he has to get answers somehow.

“Dan Deakin.” Lottie explains slowly, watching as Louis looks back at her like she has two heads. “Her husband? Our step dad? The twin’s father? Ring any bells?”

“The twins?” Louis frowns. “Phoebe and Daisy?”

“No? Ernest and Doris.” Lottie corrects, a frown of her own starting to form.

“Who?” Louis blinks in total confusion.

“Louis, I get that you hardly see them but…don’t act like they don’t exist. Mum hates it enough that you never come home. She really misses you, you know?” Lottie stands to her full height again, going back to working on Louis’ hair. “It’s really not fair for you to do that.”

“I never…? What…” Louis doesn’t know where to start, he has so many questions. “But…? Where is Mark?”

“Louis, he left years ago. Do you really not remember?”

“He did?” Louis is positively reeling. His mother has apparently gotten divorced and remarried and he has siblings he didn't previously know existed. Louis always knew that his parents would eventually get divorced, he’d been expecting it to happen. That much is not a surprise. The arguments only got more and more regular and they never ended well. Mark would come home later and later, only further upsetting his mother which of course upset Louis. He hated to see his mum upset all the time and he always escaped to Harry’s, spending hours getting all his frustrations out. Harry’s arms were the safest place he had most nights.
Which come to think of it…Louis still hasn’t seen any signs of his best friend. Where is that curly kid?

“Lots, what about Harry?” Louis asks suddenly, while it’s fresh on his mind. If anyone should know where he is, it’s Lottie. She always adored him when she was little and Louis would assume they’d still be friends now. “Do you know where he is?”

“Harry?” Lottie looks extremely taken aback. “How the hell should I know Louis if you don’t?”

“Uh…right.” Louis nods to himself. No one seems to know anything about Harry which is very odd. Does he live far away? Louis can’t imagine Harry ever wanting to leave England. But he’ll apparently have to figure all that out on his own. “Well, um…do you have any pictures of mum and the girls?”

“Um…sure, yeah…I guess.” Lottie digs in her back pocket and pulls out her own mini TV phone thing that looks a lot like his, only hers is pink with a glittery case around it. She plays around with it for a minute until the screen lights up with a picture of his family. “This is all of us last Christmas.”

“Oh my god.” Louis gasps as he looks down at the picture. All of his sisters are grown women, graceful and lovely and just downright gorgeous. And his mother is just as beautiful; she hasn’t aged a single day. But she’s absolutely radiant and glowing standing next to a man Louis assumes is her new husband, Dan. They make a lovely couple and it warms Louis’ heart to see his mother so happy and in love. If anyone deserves it, it’s her.

There are also two little faces, Louis doesn’t at all recognize, but they’re so precious. It’s kind of weird to see his younger siblings and not know them personally. Family has always been so important to him, but it’s also nice to know that his family has expanded quite a bit over the years. And although his family has gained a few members, as Louis scans over the happy holiday picture, one thing is painfully obvious: Louis is not one of them.

“Where am I?” Louis wonders, looking up at his younger sister.

“You went on vacation to St. Bart’s, remember?” Lottie replies, running a mousse through Louis’ hair. “With your boyfriend…”

“My boyfriend…” Louis echoes, trying to make sense of all this. “I missed Christmas?”

“You always do. I don’t remember the last time you came home for the holidays.”

“Really?”

“Yeah…you like to get away as much as you can. And you spend most of your off-season and free time in London, so we don’t ever see you. Well, I do because I work for you, but that’s about it.” Lottie reaches down and clicks on the screen a few times until new pictures magically show up. “Here, look.”

It’s all digital pictures of Louis apparently having the time of his life. Partying, traveling, hanging out, going to events and concerts, and socializing. And in most of the pictures there are men, lots and lots of men. Louis dancing with men, giggling with men, draped over men’s laps, or sitting on their muscular shoulders, men dotting over him or carrying him, kissing his cheeks playfully or cuddling against him. Picture after picture of Louis just downright fraternizing with men, men and more men. He’s very much a flirt, it seems.

One man appears the most throughout the collection of images and he looks particularly familiar. Except it’s almost hard for Louis to be sure because in this picture he has clothes on.
“Oh…it’s the naked guy…I think his name is Bae?” Louis mumbles absently as he stares at the picture of them on what appears to be a yacht. “He won’t stop sending me pictures of himself. Naked pictures, Lottie. What am I supposed to do with that?”

Lottie cringes, scrunching up her nose. “Um? I don’t even want to know, Lou please.”

“So…How did I meet Bae, anyway?”

“Can you please just call him Raphael when you’re around me? Or at the very least Raphy.” Lottie squirms again. “He’s sweet and adorable and everything, but I told you, as your little sister it freaks me out when you overshare about the intimate details of your love life and call him affectionate names.”

“Is that his middle name or something?” Louis asks with a puzzled face.

“What?” Lottie pauses, holding the hairbrush midair in confusion.

“Erm…never mind.” Louis excuses himself, looking back down to the screen and clicking on a picture of them at a red carpet event. “Where is this?”

Lottie peeks over his shoulder, before going back to styling his fringe. “Oh, that’s the premiere of your boyfriend’s last movie. You don’t remember going? It was only two months ago.”

“My...my boyfriend is an actor...” Louis processes, testing out the words. He definitely has the face for it. And the body, if Louis remembers correctly, which of course he does and he has a growing collection of naked pictures to prove it.

“Hey Lou, are you ok? Seriously?” Lottie worries genuinely. “You just seem really off today.”

This is just…a lot to take in. In less than an hour Louis found out that he is a starting midfielder and team captain for The Doncaster Rovers, as well as internationally for England. He has two new younger siblings, but yet he hardly sees his family for some reason he doesn’t quite understand and he also has a hot actor boyfriend named Bae Raphael or Raphael Bae or some shit like that.

“Can I borrow this?” Louis asks instead, holding up the sparkly pink thing.

“Um no? You have a phone.” Lottie reminds, picking the disregarded black device up from Louis’ desk. “Here, use yours.”

“But it doesn’t have all the pictures like yours does.” Louis complains, eyebrows pulled together. “Well…it does have a gazillion pictures of Bae’s ass, but I didn’t ask for those.”

“Louis, what the fuck, just click on Insta. It’s your page. Just scroll through your own posts. Or my posts or anyone’s posts. It’s all right there for you.” Lottie explains like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “Are you sure you’re ok?”

Louis doesn’t even know what on earth Lottie just said, but who cares at this point. He’s seen enough already and none of it makes any sense.

Lottie goes back to fussing over Louis’ hair just as a heavy knock sounds from the door. Without waiting to be let in, a man dressed in a charcoal grey suit strolls in, phone held to his ear. There is a silver name plate pinned to the lapel of his suit, identifying him as: **Liam Payne, Doncaster Rovers F.C. Head Manager.**

“…No, I don’t care! That’s bullshit!” Liam yells heatedly into the phone, free arm raised in
exasperation. “Yeah, well…tell them to blacklist that topic completely. Only allow things strictly pertaining to the championship and the players. I’m serious, I don’t want to hear one word about it. If some reporter so much as breathes a hint of that rumor, I’m snapping some goddamn necks!”

Thank god Liam is wearing a name tag or Louis would have to try and go through a whole song and dance just to figure out who he is. He must be the ‘Payne’ Rusty was talking about earlier.

“Sorry about that.” Liam apologizes and he deposits the phone into the inside breast pocket of his jacket. “God, I fucking hate press days. It’s all just a giant headache.”

Louis nods blankly, not knowing what else to say.

“Anyway! Louis, my superstar midfielder! How are we this morning, everything good? All set to start fighting off the wolves out there?” Liam greets, arms outstretched as he smiles down at Louis. “Oh! I brought your name tag, by the way. Not that you need it, everyone knows who you are, but for uniformity’s sake you have to wear it.”

“Um, thanks…Liam.” Louis answers slowly, just trying to get a feel for the usual dynamics between him and his manager.

“He’ll be all set to go in a few minutes.” Lottie tells Liam, putting the finishing touches on Louis’ hair.

“Great!” Liam claps with approval, already heading out towards the door. “I’ll see you out there!”

“And what am I doing out there exactly?” Louis asks curiously. He keeps hearing about this press conference but to be honest, he has no idea what it’s about or how it directly pertains to him.

“Oh…” Lottie bites her lip, looking up at Liam with apologetic eyes. “I think he’s a bit hungover…”

“Right, riight…” Louis nods slowly, dragging out his words as he processes. “So I’m going to help with that by…?”

“By being your best self at this press conference! I need that award winning charm and wit center stage this morning! You’re the team captain and you hold the most social pull. We need sponsors and we need approval. You know a large portion of sports is political and if we want a real chance at winning The Premier we need all the big name sponsors we can get.”


“Yes, exactly. So you are up for this, right? Tell me I have nothing to worry about, Tommo. Tell me you’ll take care of it. Tell me what I like to hear.” Liam practically begs, rising anxiety evident behind his eyes.

Louis rocks his head side to side, thinking it over. It’s not like he has much choice, his manager is looking at him like his whole life depends on this, but at the same time Louis doesn’t like to make promises he can’t keep. And it’s uncertain how helpful he can actually be today under the unique circumstances. “Um I think so…I think uh—”

“No! No! Don’t give me ‘I think’, Louis!” Liam worries, lifting his hands up. “I need affirmatives! I
need confidence! This is **serious**!"

“I’m trying my best, I swear!” Louis promises sincerely. “It’s just…a lot, you know?”

“Lottie.” Liam calls suddenly, lifting his index finger and waving her closer. “Just how strong of a hangover is this?”

“I’m afraid it’s pretty bad, Mr. Payne.” Lottie confirms lowly as she’s glances over to Louis.

“Mmm…how bad is bad?” Liam narrows his eyes, also watching Louis closely. “Worse than the time we found him in only his pants, singing cartoon theme songs on the roof? Because that was **bad**.”

“I’d say so, yeah.” Lottie sighs, speaking in hushed tones. “It’s definitely worse.”

“I’m right here you know?” Louis scowls as they continue to talk over him like worried parents. Talking about him, but not at all talking to him. Louis crosses his arms over his chest petulantly and huffs out a heavy breath, he might as well not exist.

“He turns into such a little kid when he’s drunk. **Fuck.**” Liam groans, rubbing his temples with closed eyes. “I feel a migraine coming on.”

“Russell told me that he was completely unbearable on the car ride from London.” She leans in closer to him to whisper, “Going on and on about the most ridiculous of things. It’s like he doesn’t know what year it is. Maybe he took something last night? You know how hard he parties sometimes, especially when he’s in London with Raphael. Regardless, this is the worst hangover I’ve ever seen him get, like a total blackout in memory. I’m surprised he’s even conscious.”

“Oh **god.**” Liam pales, running his hands through his hair. “Fucking hell, we don’t need this today. Where is his assistant? Has anyone given him any ibuprofen?” He walks over to Louis and bends down in front of him. “Do you have a headache, Louis? Have you eaten anything? Have you thrown up? Is the room spinning? Am I talking too loud? We need to get him a hangover tonic like right the fuck now. Maybe we can sober him up a bit.”

Liam talks a mile a minute, riddling off question after question, but never pausing long enough for an answer. He just keeps going, going and **going.** Louis didn’t have a headache before, but Liam might just be giving him one.

Louis shakes his head repeatedly. “Um…but I’m not hungover, I’m just—”

Liam frenziedly yanks the office door open, sticking his head out to yell down the hall. “Hey! You! Yeah, you! Stop! Stop what you’re doing this instant, I need a handful ibuprofen capsules right now! And the strongest hangover tonic you can get your hands on! Come on, let’s go! Move!” He turns his body back inside of the office towards Louis. “Sit tight, Tommo. We’re gonna cure that hangover.”

“For the millionth time, I’m not bloody hungover!” Louis bursts in frustration. He decides to go for honesty this time and see where it takes him. “I just don’t know what’s going on…cuz I’ve never been here before—or I mean I have been here but not like? As a player, you know? And it’s also the first time I’m meeting you and…and…you’re talking so fast and…well…I’m not exactly sure what I’m meant to do and uh…it’s just a lot to get used to.”

Liam pauses to stare at Louis for a minute, before opening the door again and hollering down the hall again. “Make that a double tonic! And more ibuprofen please! Just bring me the damn whole bottle! **Now!**"
Louis sighs heavily, casting his head back and letting out a loud groan. This is so exasperating. No one understands. This is exactly why he needs to find Harry. Harry would understand. Or at least listen to him. Is that really asking too much?

“Hold on, Louis.” Liam says over his shoulder, probably assuming his groan has something to do with his nonexistent hangover. “I can’t believe you would take party drugs and drink yourself into oblivion the night before a big conference like this. Actually, I can believe you would do it and it makes me even more furious. You really do hate me don’t you?”

Louis can only continue to groan, staring up at the ceiling in defeat and praying for answers or Harry or divine intervention or something—anything.

“Oh, excuse me—sorry. Am I interrupting?” Another man walks in, this one with an Irish accent, carrying a glass of thick green liquid that looks like it might very well be alive.

“Oh, thank god!” Liam sighs in relief, taking the glass immediately and shoving it in Louis’ face. “Drink this now. All of it. Come on, let’s go. We don’t have time for this.”

It smells utterly putrid. Whatever is in that glass has absolutely no place in Louis’ body. It’s foul and disgusting and it screams healthy, and he doesn’t even want to look at it, in fact, Louis would rather die.

“No, I don’t want it!” Louis shakes his head, clamping his mouth shut and sucking in his bottom lip. “No! Eww! It’s so gross!”

“You’ve swallowed worse things, I’m sure! Drink it!” Liam demands, pressing the cup right up to Louis’ tightly sealed lips. “Don’t make me force it down your throat, cuz you know I will. Come on Tommo, you’ll feel so much better after. You need it, mate.”

“I promise, I really, really don’t!” Louis assures, ready to say just about anything. “I’m ok, Liam! Actually. I’m great—fantastic even. Really, I’m so ready for this conference—I’m totally prepared. It’s all good—I’m good!” He puts one finger on the cup in front of his face and slowly pushes it away. “So you can take that right back to wherever it came from.”

“Mmm, I don’t know, Louis.” Liam doubts, eyes narrowed. “I think you should still drink it to be safe.”

“Uh…I also have the ibuprofen you asked for.” The Irishman pipes up again, holding up a little pill bottle. Louis could kiss the man, whoever he is, for diverting Liam’s attention from trying to poison him.

Liam turns around to take the bottle from Louis’ Irish savior. “Are you Louis’ new personal assistant?”

“Well, I’m not actually that new…” Irish answers, pushing up his falling glasses.

“Oh, what happened to Rick?” Liam inquires.

“Who?” Louis asks, feeling once again left out of the conversation revolving around him.

“He fired Rick weeks ago. Where have you been?” Lottie answers, cleaning up her supplies from the desk.

“I did?” Louis wonders, looking to Lottie.
“Yeah. Didn’t you say that he breathed too loudly and it disturbed your peace or something like that?”

“I said that about someone?” Louis frowns at a loss. It seems dumb to fire someone over something so trivial, but he must have had a good reason.

“Shame. I really liked that one.” Liam sighs with a shake of his head. “Isn’t this, like, the 15th assistant you’ve had?”

“17th.” The Irish assistant corrects. “I’m number 17.”

“Hmm well, welcome to the team then.” Liam gives him a hurried handshake, handing over the glass of green goop. “I’ve gotta check on some things. Sort him out will you? Please. We can’t afford to fuck this up. Tommo, I’ll see you out there. Drink the tonic, ok? Please, love you, thanks.”

Louis nods obediently at Liam, but there is no way in hell he is touching that drink with a ten-foot pole.

“I’m all done too, Louis.” Lottie announces, picking up her kit. “Just change into one of the suits I brought you, ok? I think you should go with the blue one.”

“Ok bye Lottie, thanks!” Louis waves from his chair.

His manager and sister both exit his office, leaving Louis alone with his assistant. “So…um Mr. Tomlinson—”

“Oh, please call me Louis!” Louis corrects, standing up from the leather chair with a stretch.

“Oh um ok—Louis.” Irish adjusts, approaching him slowly. “Uh…I have your itinerary for the day. I’ve typed up a list of talking points for the press conference like you asked. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Anything, anything?” Louis lifts an eyebrow curiously. “Like you’ll do it no matter what?”

“Um yes? It’s my job…”

“So if right now, I told you to drink this god-awful tonic for me, you would do it? No questions asked?”

“I’d have no choice?” Irish admits, looking down cautiously at the glass in his hand. “So yes.”

“Oh ha sweet ok!” Louis breaks into a surprised smile. “Well, I’d never make anyone drink this. That was just a test to see if I could actually trust you.”

His assistant looks so unsure of what to do, a bit of fear lingering in his blue eyes. “So just to be clear, you won’t fire me if I don’t drink it?”

“No, of course not! Why would I fire you? Please don’t drink that, it looks like puke. I’d feel so awful about it.” Louis takes the glass back and sets it down on the table. “But I do actually need you to do something for me if you could?”

“Umm…ok.” Irish’s expression is still hopelessly uncertain, looking to Louis tentatively.

“So it’d be really cool if you could find this guy for me. He’s my best friend and I don’t know how to find him, but I really, really need to. It’s the most important thing ever.”
“Uh ok.” Irish takes out a pocket-sized black planner. “What’s his name?”

“Harry Styles. Um, I can write down his phone number…but that’s all I really know.” Irish offers the small book over and Louis scribbles Harry’s name, home phone number and old house address. “I don’t think he still lives there or I doubt he would—that’d be weird I guess…but um it might help, I don’t know.”

“Ok, I’ll get right on that, sir.”

“Thank you...um...” Louis realizes he doesn’t even know his assistant’s name, staring at him a bit awkwardly.

“Niall.” The Irish man sighs, as though he’s had to repeat his name several times recently.

“Thank you, Niall. It’s nice to meet you by the way. I love your accent, it’s totally bitchin’.” Louis compliments with a genuine smile.

Niall frowns deeply, sighing heavily again. “I’ve been your assistant for five weeks now…”

“Oh right, I so knew that.” Louis nods awkwardly, trying to play it off, but most likely failing.

Niall briefly narrows his eyes at him in absolute irritancy, before plastering on a fake smile. “I’ll get right on this for you.”

Louis gets the feeling that whoever he is now, he’s probably done something to piss Niall off a few times. Maybe he should apologize? But he doesn’t know what he is apologizing for, which could make matters worse. Anyway, Niall is already out the door and Louis needs to change into his suit and get ready for this conference meeting he is bound to screw up.

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Just as he prophesied, Louis barely survives the conference meeting.

They had him sat at a long table lined with his other teammates. His seat was specifically placed in the very middle as team captain, right next to Liam and the other associate Doncaster Rover managers and coaches.

There was a whole sea of people in front of him, journalists and photographers alike, all prepped with microphones and cameras, anxious to get their questions answered.

But Louis soon found that it’s completely impossible to answer questions about himself when he hardly knows who he is. In fact, the reporters and interviewers seemed to know way more than he did about his own life.

With questions like: “Doncaster was never pinned for the championship spot against Arsenal, and with countless allegations of foul play and misconduct, how do you respond to these claims?”

“Tomlinson, as you are the only one of your teammates to also play for England on an international level, you are very much under the spotlight. Do you find that your teammates ever get a bit jealous of you or your career? And how do you, as team captain, combat that jealousy and get your players to work as a team? There’s been talk of internal friction amongst the players.”
“Louis, as one of the most well known openly gay athletes, how do see the importance of your role in the LGBTQIA+ community and is there any advice you’d like to give to the up and coming generation?”

“Offensively, The Rovers have done well this season, but the overall defense has been lackluster at best. How do you plan on changing the strategy for the championship against Arsenal?”

Honestly, if it wasn’t for Rusty, Liam and his other teammates covering him, Louis would have completely failed. Louis spent most of his time asking the reporters to rephrase the question while sweating profusely and anxiously sipping on his water glass.

He has no idea who his teammates are, let alone their individual feelings for him or how they play on the pitch. Louis hasn’t seen a single one of the games from this season, so he couldn’t confirm or deny the quality of their defensive and offensive skills. He has not a single inkling of whether or not The Rovers fairly earned a spot in the championship. And as for advice, Louis would like some himself right about now. He is in no place to advise anyone in his current state.

In the end, all Louis could do was stare out at the rows and rows of hungry reporters and smile and nod awkwardly, as Liam essentially had a conniption right next to him.

The only question Louis could reasonably answer was: “Are you truly happy to be a Doncaster Rover? Because rumor has it that you’re secretly searching for a more high profile team to make you a better offer.”

Obviously Louis is beyond ecstatic about it and couldn’t dream of being on any other team. The idea alone is completely absurd and ridiculous. Louis has fantasized about being a Rover since he was a young lad. It’s not a showy team or the very best English team, but it has heart and integrity and he would never, ever want to represent another team.

Needless to say, Liam loved that answer and the press ate it right up. But Louis may have immediately ruined it when he announced that he had to go for a wee and proceeded to get up and leave in the middle of the next question.

But what was he supposed to do? He really had to go for a wee! He’d been holding it for hours and hard questions only make him nervous, further adding the strong urge to go pee.

“Well, that could have gone worse.” Liam huffs as they exit the conference room.

“Hardly.” Rusty groans, letting out a long, exhausted sigh. “I’d be surprised if we have any sponsors left after that.”

“We’ve still got the party tonight so Tommo you gotta get your head screwed on straight before then, alright?” Liam warns, eyeing Louis seriously. “I don’t care what you have to do or who you sell your soul to, just get it together. We can’t afford a repeat of that again.”

“Huh?” Louis blinks, pulling a face. “What’s tonight?”

“Oh my god.” Liam groans in agony, shaking his head. He throws his hands in the air and starts walking away.

“I fucking give up.” Rusty grumbles, following right behind Liam.

“Uh…Liam? Rusty?” Louis calls unsurely, following after them.

“Stop calling me, Rusty!” Rusty turns around to yell. “How many times do I have to tell you!”
“So is that it for today or…?” Louis calls down the hall, receiving no answer. “Um…Liam?”

“Go sleep it off!” Liam screams from down the hall, followed by the sound of a door slamming shut.

Louis sighs heavily, turning to go the opposite way in the hopes that he can somehow find his way back to his office. He doesn’t get very far before he bumps into someone as he turns the corner.

“Oh, there you are, I’ve been looking for you.”

“Niall!” Louis beams happily. He quite likes his assistant so far. “Hello, mate!”

“Ready to go?” Niall asks, looking down at his watch.

“Sure!” Louis smiles wide. “Wait—where are we going?”

“Your house…” Niall answers obviously. “I made sure the grounds were kept and cleaned and I picked up your dry cleaning and stocked the kitchen with your usual foods. Everything should be to standard and it’s all set for you.”


“No here…in Doncaster.” Niall clarifies.

“I have two homes?” Louis gasps in shock, he really has made it. He must only stay at the Doncaster one during training season. But why doesn’t he just always stay there all the time? Lottie said something about how he moved to London to be away, but that still doesn’t make any sense because Louis loves his family. Why would he ever want to be far from them, when he could always live near them?

“Um...I actually think you may also have a third summer home on an island somewhere, but I haven’t been working for you long enough to know.”

“Oh, I see.” Louis nods, feeling a bit overwhelmed. “Alright then. Well, where is it? My Donny house, I mean?”

“Oh! I have a car waiting outside to take you.”

They drive out to the far outskirts of South Yorkshire. It seems a bit distant from the main hub of the city, but as the car pulls closer to the house, Louis soon understands exactly why he’d want to live here. The mansion sits alone atop the gorgeous rolling hills of Doncaster, beautifully surrounded by bright flowers, manicured trees, and perfectly trimmed hedges.

As the car pushes past the front gates, Louis practically has his face smushed up against the window, just to get a better look at the stunning grounds of the property. He’s never seen this part of Doncaster before, and it truly takes his breath away.

The outside of the house itself is astoundingly beautiful as well. Tall and grand and once again impossibly expensive. The elegance of the structure stays true to the Victorian English style in many ways, but it's still constructed with an updated modern flare.
“Is it a new house?” Louis questions in amazement, as he gets out of the car. He walks forward towards the front door with his head looking straight up at the home, hardly watching where he is going.

“You had it custom built a few years back, I believe.” Niall informs as he follows behind Louis to unlock the wide double doors.

“Custom built?” Louis awes, voice echoing though the halls as they walk into the gorgeous opening foyer of the house. “Holy fuck…”

To put it simply, his house is fucking ginormous. It seems to go on and on for ages, spanning out in every direction. Double staircases lead to the multiple stories of the home, filled with room after room. Just while following Niall to the first living room, Louis notices a den, game room, office and minibar. And through the window Louis can see that he even has his own football pitch in his backyard, among other things.

“This is wicked.” Louis exhales, absolutely blown away.

“Um, in case you forgot or something I wrote down all the passcodes for the gates and alarms.” Niall explains, handing Louis a slip of paper as well as a set of house keys. “And here are your keys back. If there is anything else that you’d like for me to do, just let me know.”

Louis takes the keys and the note, stuffing them in his suit pocket distractedly. “Thanks Niall!”

“Oh! Also,” Niall slides his black planner from his own pocket. “I found your friend. He’s a photographer and he works at a local studio not too far, on the east side of town.”

“A photographer…” Louis nods, playing with the concept in his mind. Photography was always something Harry loved and he was so incredibly good at it. He was hardly ever seen without some kind of camera either in his arms or hanging from his neck. “How cool! I bet he’s amazing!”

“I took the liberty of calling the studio for you and he is actually in today if you wanted to go over there. I have the address.” Niall offers helpfully. “I also found his home address if you wanted that too. I wasn’t sure about how much information you wanted.”

“Yes! Thank you so much Niall, really! This is perfect! You’re the best!” Louis reaches over, taking Niall by surprise and giving him a warm hug, overwhelmed with excitement. “I like you so much already!”

“Oh um—yes well, y-you’re welcome, Louis.” Niall stutters in what sounds to be disbelief, standing still as Louis embraces him. Does he not say thank you very often, or something?

Louis releases Niall, a giddy smile dancing on his lips as he gets more and more excited about the prospect of finally seeing his best friend in the world. “Can we go now? I really wanna go now, if that’s ok?”

“Yeah, of course. Whatever you want.” Niall rushes to say with a nod. “I’ll drive you. Uh unless you wanted to drive yourself? I made sure all of your sports cars were serviced.”

“My sports cars!” Louis exclaims uncontrollably, practically bursting with excitement. He doesn’t even know how to drive properly, but there is ample comfort in knowing that he owns multiple luxury vehicles. How many exactly does he own? What models, what makes, what colors? Part of Louis really wants to run over to the garage and see them all in all their glory and lavishness. But it’s probably best that he doesn’t mess with those just yet, he really just needs to focus on one thing right now and that is getting to Harry. “Um…I’ll check ’em out later. You can drive me.”
“Ok, no problem.” Niall nods, already making moves towards the door. “I’ll bring the car around.”

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After a twenty-minute drive, Niall pulls the car up to a quaint little photography studio. It’s in a part of town that Louis remembers to be really old and outdated, but all the little shops, bakeries and cafés surrounding the studio have been completely remodeled and upgraded since then. All of the buildings have a clean and fresh look to them and it seems to be a pretty popular hangout spot.

Louis is barely containing his nervous and excited energy; he can hardly sit still in his seat. He already starts to unbuckle his seatbelt before Niall has stopped the car.

“Should I wait for you?” Niall questions, placing the gear in park.

“No, it’s ok!” Louis rushes, hand on the door, beyond ready to hop out of the car.

“Ok, well if you need me to pick you up or call you a car just—”

“Ok thanks, Niall! You’re so great!” Louis interrupts hurriedly, opening the door.

“Oh wait! Um…you might want to put these on.” Niall pops open the center console, pulling out a pair of Prada sunglasses and an Adidas cap. “You always hate when people come up to you.”

“What?” Louis pauses, looking to the items curiously. “Why?”

“You always hate when people recognize you or bother you for pictures.”

“I have that many fans?” Louis doubts, eyebrows raised.

“You’re a pretty big deal, especially around here.” Niall explains. “It’s not as bad in London, but it still happens a lot.”

“Hmm, ok.” Louis kind of thinks Niall is exaggerating, but he just wants to go see Harry already so he doesn’t even bother to argue. He slips on the hat and slides the glasses on his face before climbing out of the car. “Bye Niall, see ya later!”

As Louis walks the short way along the sidewalk, a few passerby people stare at him a bit too long. Maybe it’s because he looks stupid as hell wearing a sports hat and gaudy sunglasses, while also wearing an expensive three-piece suit. But, whatever.

Louis quickly pushes through the windowed doors into the white walled studio. It’s not very big, more on the quaint and simple side. But there’s a genuine charm about it, that makes the studio feel instantly homely.

Louis marches up to the front desk, offering the receptionist a smile. “Hi there, I’m here to see Harry—erm Harry Styles.”

“Oh, you must be his two-o-clock appointment.” She assumes, glancing at the outlined schedule in front of her. “You’re Norman James, correct?”

“Um right—yes.” Louis lies, nodding his head. He really doesn’t care who he has to be at this point in order to get to Harry. “That’s me!”
“Ok great. He’s right back there finishing up with a previous client.” The receptionist points down a hall. “You can wait for him back there, if you like.”

“Alright, cool. Thanks.”

Louis starts down the hallway, the all white, minimalist walls are lined with beautifully captured photographs defined by simple black frames. Each image is mesmerizing, instantly captivating the eye with such an overwhelming sense of inspired authenticity. Louis slowly rounds the first corner, entering the belly of the studio, when he hears someone laughing happily. And the laugh he hears is a laugh he knows. One so contagious and infectious that it easily stirs up a feeling of giddiness, causing an unsuspecting laugh to spill from his own lips.

“Hazza…” Louis exhales quietly, so relieved just to hear the familiar sound of his best friend’s giggles.

Louis follows the sound all the way to a side office attached to the main photography studio. A girl walks out of the office, waving cheerfully as she goes. Harry, or who Louis assumes is Harry, peeks his head out of the door after her.

“I’ll let you know when your prints are ready.” Harry promises sweetly, waving goodbye.

“Hopefully they turn out alright. Thanks for choosing me to do your wedding!”

“Oh no, thank you! I already know they’ll turn out beautifully knowing you!” The woman gushes, walking past Louis on her way out of the studio.

Louis paces the rest of the way to the office tentatively. “Harry?”

“Uh…Hi? You’re definitely not my two-o-clock. Unless you’re somehow an 80-year-old man celebrating his birthday, in which case congratulations on not aging. That’s very impressive.” Harry grins cheekily, leaning against the doorframe to the office. And Louis is already endeared, unable to keep the happy smile from spreading across his face.

Louis quickly sheds the hat and sunglasses that are disguising his face. “Harry! It’s me!” He bursts elatedly, not wasting another second by throwing his arms around his seemingly long lost best friend, hugging him close. Louis nuzzles his head in the crook of Harry’s neck, breathing him in. He smells exactly the same, but also somehow better. Like finally coming home. “You have no idea how happy I am to see you!”

“Louis…? Louis Tomlinson?” Harry pulls back and looks at Louis oddly, obviously shocked to see him. If the wide eyes and slightly ajar mouth are any indication. “Uh…hi…erm—come in, yeah…wow.”

“You look…so different…you’re so…fit—like really fit.” Louis awes, blatantly checking Harry out for the first time as he follows him into the office space.

Physically, almost nothing about Harry is the same. For one, his hair is long, curls grown out gracefully to his shoulders. Where there was once round cheeks and an adorably soft chin, there’s now sharp, strong edges and well defined cheekbones. Tattoos peek out of his billowy half-buttoned up top and his long legs are painted in the tightest fabric known to man. It’s all such a stark contrast to the ill-fitted baggy trousers and clunky shoes Louis is so used to him wearing. Louis can’t even imagine how he got those things on, but Harry looks so sleek in them, almost like he was made to wear them. It seems the most disappointing part of this is that Louis stayed just about the same height while Harry basically doubled in stature. Well, not really but it seems that way in Louis’ eyes.
“The long hair suits you I think, Curly. You’ve changed sooo much. All your baby fat is gone, and you’re so bloody tall. And look at that jawline. God, Harold—how did you get so hot? You’re unreal.”

Harry instantly blushes the brightest shade of red, turning his head to look down at the ground shyly. At least that much hasn’t changed, Louis could always make Harry blush no matter what.

Harry clears his throat bashfully, gesturing back to Louis. “Well, I mean—look at you. You’re literally an athlete.”

“I know! I’m really a Rover!” Louis exclaims ecstatically. He’s been practically bursting to flip out about it all day and leave it to Harry to finally give him the chance. “A real life Donny Rover! Can you believe?! It’s such a freaking trip!”

“I’ve uh…seen a few of your games…”

“Aw! You have!?” Louis enthuses, bouncing on his heels. “Do you come to my games a lot? Do you sit in the front row? With handmade signs and a blow horn like you did in secondary’s?”

“Uh no….Louis? You’ve never invited me to your games.” Harry answers, a deep frown forming on his features. “I saw them on telly…”

“Wait, what?” Now, it’s Louis’ turn to frown, dropping his feet flat on the floor. “Harry, you’re my best mate! Of course, I’d bring you to all of my games! I need you there. Who’s gonna cheer me on when I suck? Who’s gonna encourage me to keep trying my best when I wanna quit?”

Harry’s eyes turn stormy and distant, overall demeanor suddenly shifting to cold as he takes a few steps away from Louis. “Um Louis, it’s nice to see you in person…I guess, but what are you doing here? How do you know where I work?”

“Oh! Niall found you for me!” Louis answers easily, closing the gap between them once again. “He’s apparently my personal assistant. He’s Irish and he’s super, suppeerrr helpful. Do you know how much you can get done when someone else does it for you? Incredible. And he does whatever I say!”

Harry just blinks back at him, looking a bit unimpressed and even slightly irritated.

“So obviously the very first thing I had him do was find my best friend.” Louis rambles on, talking faster and faster. “Cuz I have sooo much to tell you. I’ve had a hell of day already and—”

“Louis? We aren’t…?” Harry interrupts, shaking his head in confusion. “I’m not your best friend. I haven’t spoken to you in years.”

“Harold, stop playing around.” Louis rolls his eyes, placing a hand on his waist in annoyance. “It’s not funny. You still have the worst jokes ever. And your new deep voice makes everything sound even more morbid.”

“I’m not playing around, Louis.” Harry responds seriously, looking him dead in the eye. He takes a slight step back, allowing more distance between them. “This isn’t a joke. I haven’t spoken to you since graduation. We aren’t friends.”

The look in Harry’s eye, startles Louis. First, because Harry is being completely serious, not a trace of his usual humor or a hint of that signature sarcasm. And second, because Harry has never once looked at Louis like that. Harry’s deep mossy green eyes have always been radiant with warmth and kindness, always welcoming and openhearted. But now it’s like there’s a sheet over them, an
impenetrable wall purposely keeping his distance.

“No…no, that can’t be right…” Louis shakes his head slowly, gradual panic building up in his voice. “Harry? It can’t be because you’ve always been my best mate! Since we were babies! And—and I need your help! I need you! That’s why I’m here. Everything has been so weird. Almost like a dream? Yesterday was my thirteenth birthday—or I’m starting to think maybe it wasn’t exactly yesterday? I don’t know, but last I remember I was in my basement closet and Donna Lewis was playing on the stereo outside and…I was waiting for Brady…and then I—I don’t know! It’s all blurry! And next thing I know, I’m waking up in a really really nice apartment in London looking like…this? And you!” He points hysterically to Harry, waving his hands over the general vicinity of his body. “You look like that! And nothing makes any sense! I don’t remember any of this! I don’t know how I got here! So I need you to help me remember my life!”

Harry pauses for a moment, expression utterly puzzled. He opens his mouth several times, but keeps closing it in favor of just staring at Louis in bewilderment. “Listen...uh...no judgment or anything Louis, but...um...are you on drugs? Are you high right now?”

“What!? No! Harry! No! I’m only thirteen years old!” Louis hisses, raising his hands above his head. Why does everyone keep assuming that he is either drunk off his ass or on heavy narcotics? “I’ve never done drugs! I don’t even know where to get drugs for goodness sake! I’m a minor!”

“Jesus...” Harry let’s out a heavy breath, eyebrows raised. “They must really be working you hard on the pitch for the championship. I know it must be a lot of pressure but—”

“Harry, listen to me!” Louis interrupts getting up in Harry’s face. Or as much up in his face as he can since Harry is a bloody giant now; he practically towers over Louis. “I just need you to tell me everything that’s happened since we were thirteen. Like everything, everything! How did I get here? Who am I, really?”

“I can’t! Even if I really wanted to, I couldn’t. I don’t know anything about your life.” Harry answers genuinely, looking down to meet Louis in the eye. “I don’t know you...”

“You don’t know me...” Louis staggers backwards a little, features pulled together in disbelief. It hurts to hear those words come from his best mate’s mouth, the person who has always known every single thing about him. Sometimes it even feels like Harry knows Louis better than he knows himself.

“Not…” Harry waves his hands randomly up and down over Louis’ pristine, suited up form. “This. You’re a celebrity. A brand name. All I know about you is whatever I happen to overhear in a gossip column. I don’t know anything about your real life.”

Louis is on the verge of completely passing out. Or crying. Or both. This can not be happening right now. It’s like he stepped into some alternate reality with freaky twilight zone level shit and the world is uncontrollably spinning on a parallel axis to reality.

“But...b-but...if we aren’t friends, how do you explain this?” Louis rolls up the sleeve of his suit jacket and shoves his forearm in Harry’s face, presenting his ‘Oops’ tattoo.

Harry shows little to no emotion or recognition, as he shrugs at the small piece of ink. “I can’t explain that. I have no idea what that tattoo means to you or why you got it, but I doubt it has anything to do with me.”

Louis stands dumbfounded as he looks back and forth from his tattooed arm to Harry, alternating between the two in disbelief. He heard what Harry said, but it doesn’t make any sense. ‘Oops’
doesn’t have any meaning or place on his body if it doesn’t involve Harry, it’s just a random assortment of letters at that point. There’s just no way this is right.

Also, it’s getting increasingly hot in this room, unnaturally hot. Louis feels as though the fury of a thousand suns is pelting down on his back. Or like in Terminator 2 when the little kids are playing on the playground and a nuclear bomb goes off and the whole world suddenly catches on fire and burns everyone to a crisp.

It’s just like that actually. And in this situation Louis is just an unsuspecting kid on the playground and the world really is on fire.

“Is…is it hot? Is it h-hot in here? Or…” Louis stutters uneasily, pulling at the neck of his collared button up shirt as he struggles to breathe. Louis isn’t someone who suffers from asthma, but an inhaler would be kind of nice right about now. There is hardly enough usable air in this room and it feels like the walls are caving in on him. This is all too much and right now, if he’s being totally honest, he just really, really wants his mum to hold him.

Harry must sense the building hysteria rising up in Louis because he steps forward carefully and places a comforting hand lightly on his shoulder. “Hey um, it’s ok. It’s ok, just breathe. How about you just sit down for a minute, yeah?” He gently guides Louis backwards to the couch along his office wall, settling him down on one cushion. “Good. Ok. Can I get you something? A glass of water maybe? Or we have—”

“Tea! Tea! I want tea!” Louis bursts out instantly, eyes impossibly wide as sweat begins to drip from his brow. “No one I apparently know drinks tea anymore! And I don’t know what’s happened to the world! And I’m stressed out! I need tea! Harry! I NEED tea!”

“Right. Ok. Yes. Tea. I can do that. Yes.” Harry scrambles, a bit off balance from Louis’ outburst. “It’s um…no sugar, no cream, just milk right?”

Louis nods anxiously, using the back of his hand to wipe at his sweating forehead as he strips off his suit jacket. “And I want a fluffy pillow!”

“A fluffy pillow?”

“Yes! I want a fluffy pillow!” Louis yelps urgently in panic. “A fluffy, fluffy pillow! Please, Harry! Please!”


Louis slumps down against the leather couch, closing his eyes and concentrating on his breathing. That and attempting to make his armpits stop sweating. Why is he so damn hot? Louis swipes his forehead again and loosens his tie, trying desperately to calm himself down a bit. But it’s nearly impossible because his mind keeps remembering the obvious.

The one person that Louis looks to for just about everything, is somehow completely void in his current life. And what’s even more outrageous is that it’s supposedly normal? He and Harry haven’t allegedly spoken since their school days and somehow his current self is just ok with that? Louis can’t possibly fathom how Harry is not his best friend. In what world does that make any sense?

This one apparently.

After ten or so minutes, Harry walks back into the room carrying a fresh cup of Yorkshire tea and a decently fluffed pillow. “Uh, so this is the best I can do on a fluffy pillow at the moment. There’s not
an abundance of pillows lying around the studio.”

Harry hands Louis the pillow, and he takes it eagerly, curled into himself on the couch. Louis takes the white teacup next, nursing the warm liquid quietly, trying to calm down. Oddly, it doesn’t make him feel hotter, in fact having the reverse effect.

“Feeling better?” Harry asks carefully after Louis has had a little time to adjust and drink his much needed tea.

Louis has his arms wrapped around the pillow, holding it tightly to his chest as he sips on his tea, cradling the teacup like it’s his lifeline. He peaks up at Harry, who is hovering over him, and it just hits Louis all over again that he is an adult. A real life, functioning adult. There is a grown man where his innocent baby-faced best friend once stood and it’s starting to freak Louis out a bit. This is too much. He has said it before and he’ll say it again: This has to be some kind of dream.

“Uh so, Louis…” Harry starts gently, kneeling down in front of him. “I think you should probably go back to your house.”

“I don’t even know how to get back there.” Louis answers pitifully, resting his head on the top of the pillow’s edge. He wasn’t really paying attention on the way over here, way too excited to see Harry at the time. And Donny has changed so much it’s hard to be certain how to get anywhere anymore.

“I’ll help you find it.” Harry offers, standing up again and walking over to his desk. “I’ll drive you.”

Louis nods slowly and Harry leans over his desk to pick up the phone, dialing a number. “Hi Lynn, would you mind rescheduling my two and three-o-clock appointments please? I have to um…” He glances over at Louis briefly. “Run an errand.”

Louis sets his empty teacup down on the end table by the couch, still clinging to the pillow.

“Thanks love, you’re a gem.” Harry finishes up, hanging up the phone. He shuffles back over to Louis briefly. “Ready to go? Um…you can take the pillow with you if you want?”

“It’s ok…” Louis sighs, unwrapping himself from the pillow practically melded to his body. “I’ll be ok, I think.”

Louis doesn’t bother to put the hat or the sunglasses back on this time and soon realizes that he must actually be very famous. Because just in the short walk to Harry’s car several people recognize him and ask for his autograph or a picture with him. It’s a bit strange to think about at first, the idea that people actually like him enough to track him down like this, but at the same time it’s kind of flattering. Although he’s not really in the mood right now, after the news he’s received.

Harry stands off to the side the whole time, waiting patiently for Louis to be done. “I’m parked over here.” He points across the lot, walking them over to a Jeep Wrangler. The exterior is colored a rich olive green, just a little darker than Harry’s eyes. And even though it seems kind of sporty and outdoorsy initially, Louis thinks the Jeep oddly suits Harry.

Louis opens the passenger door only to be met with camera stands, lens boxes, light fixtures and a whole litany of photography equipment.

“Oh shit—sorry.” Harry apologizes, reaching over the console to move his photography gear to the back. “Let me move all that out of your way. I keep a lot of equipment in Jalapeño for off site shoots.”

“Jalapeño?”
“My Jeep. That’s her name.” Harry answers obviously, like it’s the most normal thing in the world. And maybe it is as far as he’s concerned.

“You really named your car?” Louis tries not to, but a slow uncontrollable reflex smile spreads across his face. Why does Louis even bother asking, especially since this is coming from the same person that named a tree, Martha Green.

“‘Course. I mean, she looks just like a great, big jalapeño, so you can’t say it doesn’t make sense.” Harry laughs a little, mostly to himself. He runs his hand over the dashboard affectionately. “My lovely Jalapeño. We go everywhere together.”

Louis’ impossibly fond grin only grows, Harry is still such a loveable dork and he can’t help but smile at him. That is until Louis unfortunately remembers that he and Harry are no longer friends and his happy smile instantly fades. Moments like this probably never happen normally for them. Harry doesn’t give Louis rides in his accurately named car and Louis isn’t in any of the memories or adventures Harry has associated with his Jeep.

As they ride in silence, Louis can’t help himself from repeatedly looking over at Harry. His eyes keep wandering over to the driver’s side of the car, noticing all the many changes of Harry’s profile as well as the subtle similarities. The longer Louis watches him, the more it blows his mind that Harry is somehow exactly the same, but totally different.

“You’re staring.”

“Huh?” Louis startles, shaking his head a bit as he refocuses. “What?”

“You’re staring at me.” Harry repeats, glancing over to Louis’ briefly as he drives.

“Erm—sorry.” Louis shifts his gaze forward to the open road ahead, trying impossibly hard not to let his eyes wander back over to Harry. “It’s just…so…”

“What is?”

“More like, what isn’t?” Louis sighs heavily in defeat. It only takes a minute for him to lose resolve again and look back to Harry, twisting behind his seatbelt. “You’re sure we aren’t friends? 100% completely and totally positive? Cross your heart, hope to die, solemnly swear over a bible, sure?”

Harry looks at him oddly from the side. “Yeah…”

“But why, Harry? Didn’t you want to see me? Didn’t you ever want to…I dunno? Hang out or something? What about birthdays and holidays? We never even saw each other then?”

Harry sucks at his teeth as he takes his time thinking. “Uh…well…I think maybe I saw you through a window once at a restaurant seven years ago?”

“Seven years ago?!’” Louis reiterates incredulously, eyes wide.

“Yeah…I think. I’m not sure but…” Harry half shrugs noncommittally, as the car begins to slow down. “Anyways…this is it, right?”

Louis turns to glance out of the car window, recognizing the expansive property. “I guess. That’s what I’ve been led to believe, anyway. I woke up in an apartment in London, like I told you…but apparently I live here too sometimes? My name is on the mail at both of them so…”

“Well, that’s always a good sign I suppose.” Harry nods, parking the car along the curb at the base of
the estate. “Um… do you want me to walk you in or…?”

Louis turns away from the window towards Harry and just nods blankly. He really doesn’t want to be left alone in his huge mansion of a house, and he is already starting to feel a bit lonely as it is. Like the only person not in on a running joke. Except the joke is his life.

Louis uses the code Niall wrote out for him to buzz into the exterior front gate and he and Harry walk up the long driveway quietly. When they reach the grand doorway, Louis fiddles with his keys for way too long to be excusable, before slowly unlocking the door.

“Ok…well…” Harry claps his hands together, offering a weak smile. “Great seeing you. Good luck um...rediscovering yourself and everything. I wish you all the best.”

“Wait, no Harry don’t leave me yet.” Louis tries again, reaching out to grab Harry’s arm. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Just live your life, Louis.” Harry sighs, pushing his hair back with one hand. “It’s what you do best.”

“But I don’t know what my life is supposed to look like. I need your help.”

“Louis, I’ve told you a hundred times now, I really can’t help you. Sorry.” Harry says in exasperation. “Try googling yourself.”

“Oh, Ok!” Louis smiles hopefully at the suggestion, before frowning as he realizes he has no idea what that means. “Wait…what’s a ‘googling’? And how do I do it to myself?”

Harry narrows his eyes at Louis incredulously. “Honestly, where did you come from?”

“The 1990’s.” Louis answers literally with a serious face.

“Ugh, just come on.” Harry sighs heavily, brushing past Louis and through the wide double front doors of the house.

Louis follows after Harry, closing the doors behind him.

“Where is your computer?” Harry asks, looking around the spacious living room.

“I dunno. I haven’t seen one.” Louis answers, he hasn’t really done much exploring yet and he has no idea where anything is. There are countless rooms and spaces; it’s such a big house. Louis kind of wonders why he had it built if it’s just him and sometimes the naked French guy.

Harry walks over to the living room and picks up a flat silver thing. “Oh, I found it.”

“That’s a computer?” Louis questions, staring in disbelief at the slim device with a little white apple on the outside. “Where is the rest of it?”

“What?” Harry frowns, looking down at the laptop in his hands in confusion. “This is all of it…”

“Whoa…” Louis awes. He shouldn’t really be surprised; his TV is thinner than a canvas painting so of course his computer should be small enough to fit into an envelope. The future is too wild.

Harry eyes Louis curiously before moving to the kitchen island, settling down on a high seated barstool. He opens up the laptop and it stirs to life instantly and Harry only clicks on a few things before the screen is filled with a search engine thing named Google.
“Huh…” Louis hums to himself in fascination. “And it works just like that? There’s no like…wires to plug in? Or dial-up connection or anything anymore?”

“No…? What? Dial-up, are you being serious? Cuz I really can’t tell.” Harry laughs, shaking his head. “Um…it’s all wireless and instant with this.” He points to a little icon at the top of the screen that looks like an upside triangle made out of rainbow lines. And it has the weirdest name.

“Interesting…” Louis nods slowly, staring suspiciously at the computer before him. To be honest it seems like witchcraft. No wires? No wait time? Impossible. “So you’re saying anyone can just search anyone on the internet with this Google thing? As long as you have WeeFee?”

“Wi-Fi.” Harry corrects, biting back a laugh as he begins to type Louis’ name in the search bar. “But yeah…pretty much.”

“Wow. That’s…handy…” The internet is hardly a thing where Louis comes from, mostly just a tool business people use to monitor stocks and some shit. And it’s hardly worth it in Louis’ opinion because dial-up takes two million years to do anything substantial and it completely cuts off the phone lines just to make eerie whale noises and pretend like it’s about to do something. But nine times out of ten it’s not about to do anything at all, and it just ends up having to reboot which takes another two million years. And Louis, along with the rest of the world, did not have the patience.

“Alight, there you go. Have a blast.” Harry slides the laptop towards Louis before hopping off the barstool and up onto his feet.

There are millions of hits, articles, and videos that came up with just the search of his name. Louis doesn’t even know where to start so he just clicks on the first one called Wikipedia. Also a weird name, for the record.

Since there is no mouse, Louis mimics what Harry did on the silver touch square thing, but it’s not as easy as it looks. Scrolling down with his fingers, actually moves the screen up and sliding his fingers up, forces the screen all the way down. Why must this be so difficult?

In the end Louis moves the screen slowly by pressing on the black keyboard arrows. At least with the keys, down actually means down and up means up.

Louis William Tomlinson, 30, (born Louis Troy Austin; 24 December 1984) is a professional English football player for the Doncaster Rovers as well the England National Team. As a global ambassador for the sport, Tomlinson is regarded as a British cultural icon.

Tomlinson’s professional club career began with the Doncaster Rovers, where he made his first pro-team debut at the age of 18. By 24, he was named captain where he has led his team to the Premier League Championship and FA Cup several times, but never won either title.

In international football, Tomlinson made his England debut at the age of 22, appearing in three FIFA World Cup Tournaments 2006, 2010, and 2014 as well as two UEFA European Championships in 2008 and 2012. He has captained for England 51 times, fifth highest after David Beckham. And he has been nominated for FIFA World Player of the Year and named in the FIFA 100 List of the world’s greatest living players.

With his success on England’s National Team, Tomlinson has moved up the ranks to sit among the highest earners in football with a rising net worth of US$275 Million (UK £213 Million). Many feel that Doncaster has held Tomlinson back from reaching his ultimate potential, but he remains loyal to his hometown.
“Holy shit. I’m worth *that* much money?” Louis gasps, jaw falling open. “That’s ridiculous!”

“Apparently so.” Harry shrugs as he snoops around the kitchen, walking slowly around the long island as he surveys the home. But Louis doesn’t really mind or care, he has nothing to hide from Harry. Or at least he hopes he doesn’t. He really can’t be sure of anything.

Louis reads though the whole page, skimming through the different outlined sections on his *Early life, Career, Records, Awards, Honors, and Personal Life*. It’s all helpful in a sense, but it doesn’t help him understand much about himself as a person since it’s such a vague overview of his professional life.

“But…what about before this?” Louis questions once he gets to the bottom of the article. He flicks his eyes up over the laptop’s edge at Harry for answers.

“Before what?” Harry asks, staring at one of the giant murals on the wall.

“Before I was famous? Or whatever. Like in school and stuff.”

“Umm…” Harry suddenly disappears out of the kitchen, exploring further into the house. “Do you have any of our old yearbooks?” He yells from down the hall somewhere.

“I dunno? Do I? What do they look like?” Louis calls back, spinning around on his stool. “I don’t really know my way around yet—”

“Oh, here we go.” Louis hears Harry announce from another room down the hall. After a few minutes he returns to the kitchen, carting a few thick books in his arms. Harry deposits them ceremoniously on the marble countertop in front of Louis. “You’re in them so much, I’d be shocked if you threw them out.”

“What? I am?” Louis questions, tilting his head at the unfamiliar yearbooks before him.

“Mhmm. Here, see for yourself.” Harry flips one of the books open. It’s dated 1998 which would have been the year that they started Year 10.

Louis starts to flip through the glossy pages as Harry goes back to snooping and wandering around the house. As he goes through the years, one thing is for certain, Louis only grew in popularity as each year passed by. By the time Louis gets to the Year 12 yearbook, he’s practically on every possible page.

“Harry?!” Louis pops his head up excitedly, smiling wide. “I was varsity team captain? Over Rusty? And Brady?”

“Mhmm.” Harry hums absently as he moves his curious excursion on to the living room.

“And I was prom king?” Louis asks in disbelief, looking over a picture of a teenage version of himself with a crown resting on his head, captioned *King Tommo*.

“Yep, you really got it all. Congrats.” Harry drops himself down on one of the couches, stretching himself out as he plays with a mini football he must have found somewhere.

“Oh my god, I’m *sooo* cool.” Louis gasps, lifting his head up slowly from the book just to reflect on it.

“Yep…” Harry pops the ‘p’ sound loudly for the second time, tossing the plush ball up and down above his head.
“This is incredible, I really got everything I ever wanted.” Louis sighs happily, propping his head up against his hand dreamily. It’s all there, all the documented proof that this actually happened. That maybe this really isn’t a dream after all. Louis achieved just about everything he set out to achieve. His life underwent a severe uphill climb and it apparently hasn’t stopped since.

“Like I said…congratulations.” Harry forces a strained smile.

Louis spins around on his barstool to face the open living area. “But um, Harry? Where were you?”

“What? What do you mean?” Harry stops throwing the ball and sits up on the couch.

“You’re hardly in any of these yearbooks.” Louis points out with a confused frown. “I think I saw maybe three pictures of you in total.”

“Um…that wasn’t a good time for me.” Harry answers slowly, looking down in his lap. “The most depressing years of my life actually. So I spent most of the time taking all the pictures in there. That’s why I’m not in them.”

“But…why? You said we aren’t friends now, but didn’t we hang out at least up until sixth form?”

Harry narrows his eyes a bit, another scowl passing over his features. “No, Louis, we didn’t. You had your crew and I had—well I actually was more of a loner. I didn’t really come into myself until uni and even then…” He sighs dismissing himself as he lays back down on the couch. “It’s whatever.”

“Wait, but…but what happened to us?” Louis asks, the more he asks, the less he makes sense of. “I don’t get it. You were my very best friend, how could that have stopped? Why did we stop being friends, Haz?”

“Well, who really knows?” Harry shrugs a bit sarcastically, avoiding the question as he starts throwing the ball around in his hands again. Obviously something happened between them and with the distant way Harry is acting, Louis knows that Harry remembers exactly what it is. “Our lives went in separate directions.”

“Yeah, but Harry—” Louis’ phone starts ringing and vibrating in his pocket, cutting him off and averting his attention. He wedges it out of his pocket and frowns at the screen as though it personally offends him. “Ugh, not again. How do I do this?”

“What’s wrong with you now?”

“The little mini TV phone thing keeps buzzing.” Louis complains, watching it ring in his hands. “It vibrates all day long and I don’t know what to do with it. And it has no buttons.”

“Mini TV?” Harry questions, standing up and strolling towards Louis. “You mean your iPhone?”

“I guess? Is that what it’s called? It’s annoying. And no one will show me what to do with it. They just look at me like…” Louis looks up and gestures to Harry’s puzzled face. “Like that. Just like that.”

“Um…ok, it’s really simple. It’s a smartphone so it can do a lot, but to answer a call you just click the green circle. It’s a touch screen, you don’t need buttons,” Harry explains slowly, looking down at the contact buzzing on the screen. “So it looks like…uh…Number 17 is calling you.”

“Number 17?” Louis frowns looking at the screen in confusion. “That’s not a name? Who is that?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.” Harry shrugs, walking right back over to the couch and dropping
himself down at the end.

“Right.” Louis nods, pressing on the green touch icon, like Harry said. “Hello?”

“Hi, Mr. Tomlinson—erm, Louis.”

“Oh, Niall! It’s you! How are you, mate?” Louis greets, recognizing the voice and vaguely remembering that Niall is his seventeenth assistant. But why didn’t he just save his number as Niall? That’s a bit rude. He should probably figure out how to change that.

“Um I’m good, yeah I guess…” Niall answers sounding surprised by the conversation tone. “And uh…how are you?”

“I’m alright, yeah!” Louis enthuses, plopping down on the long couch with his legs crisscrossed, a few spaces from Harry.

“So I was calling about your limo reservation for tonight. Is seven ok for pick up? I know you don’t like to arrive too early but—”

“My limo?” Louis interrupts, sitting up.

“Yeah…you specifically told me to book you a limo for the event.”

“Uhh…”

“Did you not want it? Cuz I can cancel it right away, it’s not a problem.” Niall rushes to say. “Please don’t get mad at me, it was an accident and—”

“Oh no, I’m not mad, Niall! It’s not your fault at all.” Louis reassures. “I’m just um…confused I guess? Where am I meant to be going exactly?”


“Oh…so it’s a party?” Louis asks for clarification sake.

“Yeah…” Niall answers slowly in an unsure voice.

“Oh gotcha! Great, yes, seven is perfect! Thank you, Niall!”

“Yeah…um…you’re welcome.”

“I’m going to a party in a limo!” Louis announces enthusiastically as he hangs up the phone.

“How lovely.” Harry responds, nearly void of emotion.

“Harry! You should come with me!” Louis jumps up, kneeling on the couch cushion next to Harry.

“To a posh party?” Harry questions, raising a brow as he looks up at Louis kneeling over him. “Uh, pass.”

“Why not?” Louis pouts with disappointment, sitting back on his heels.

“It’s above my pay grade.” Harry answers, standing to his feet. “I’m not sure if you've noticed, but I’m not exactly in the same tax bracket as you.”

Louis frowns as Harry starts to walk away. “Wait! But Harry it’ll be fun! And we could hang out!
You said we don’t really hang out much anymore and I think—”

“Yeah…no. Um I should probably just go.” Harry interrupts, scratching the back of his neck standoffishly. “You seem to getting back to your old self and I need to get back to work anyway so…”

“Right, yeah. You have a job now…I forgot.” Louis realizes, conceptualizing the fact that they really are fully grown adults. It’s a bit daunting in some regards, but also wildly exciting.

“Some of us do actually work for a living.” Harry reminds, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

“Ok, well if you change your mind, it’s at The Rossington Hall.” Louis tells him anyway, deep down praying that Harry will somehow change his mind.

“’Mk thanks.” Harry nods concisely, pushing towards the front door.

“Harry?” Louis scrambles off of the chair, rushing over to him before he leaves. “What if it’s not just a dream? What if what I wished for actually happened?”

“Then it looks like you got everything you ever wanted.” Harry answers, hand on the knob, turning to walk out of the door. “Might as well enjoy it.”

“Hmm.” Louis nods, mulling it over. He has it all, really he does. The dream job, the dream house—two houses, he has the complete dream life and then some. Even down to the insanely hot dream boyfriend, who still kinda freaks him out come to think of it, but that’s beside the point.

Harry is already outside and stepping down the wide stairs of the front porch, when Louis realizes he forgot something.

“Harry!” Louis calls again, standing in the doorframe.

“Hmm?” Harry pauses his steps briefly, but hardly turns around.

Louis abandons the front door, carelessly leaving it wide open and runs over to him. He quickly hops down the paved stair steps and plants himself right in front of Harry. Louis extends his palm out, looking to Harry expectantly.

Harry looks taken aback, blinking at him with unamused eyes, lips pursed. “Louis…what are you doing?”

“Saying goodbye to you.” Louis answers obviously.

“Louis.” Harry says flatly with not a hint of the warmth it should, it actually sounds more like a warning. He moves to walk around Louis, trying to bypass him to get to his car.

“Hazza.” Louis pouts back adorably, sidestepping to block Harry’s way as best he can. “You can’t just leave without doing it. It’s bad luck.”

Harry silently flicks his gaze down to Louis’ hand placed in front of him. His brooding eyes trail back up to Louis’ face slowly, eyebrows furrowed together deeply.

“Please…” Louis begs softly, giving his fingers a little enticing wiggle.

Harry sighs heavily, rolling his eyes as he reluctantly takes Louis’ palm in his. He presses his index finger against Louis’ hand, drawing out the simple word.
Oops…

It’s messy and it’s rushed and it’s not at all as precise and calculated as it usually is. Harry doesn’t add anything extra to it, just leaving it as a plain, muddled and completely uncoordinated, ‘Oops’.

Louis grins up at Harry anyway, because messy or not he still did it and sometimes the classic, no frills route is refreshing. He flips Harry’s larger hand over in his, slowly fingering the answering letters against the palm of his skin.

...Hi

Louis attaches a sideways smiley face to the end of his ‘Hi’, making the eyes into tiny x’s.

“Goodbye, Louis.” Harry mumbles finally, taking his hand back instantly and stuffing it into his back pocket. And with that, he’s off, briskly walking down the long driveway to his Jeep.

“Bye, Haz!” Louis smiles, waving him off. “Thanks for taking me home!”

“Mhmm, yeah.” Harry nods fleetingly over his shoulder. “I’ll see you.”

Louis watches Harry drive away from the top porch step, leaning against one of the front pillars. It’s so weird that at this age they aren’t best friends, not even regular friends. And as much as that news terrified Louis at first, maybe it’s about time that they grew up a little bit anyway. Ever since they met they’ve been sooo impossibly codependent on each other, together more than they were ever apart. It couldn’t have been totally healthy. In fact, it might just be time for Louis to spread his freshly sprouted wings a bit and embrace his brand new life.
The party starts in about four hours and Louis should probably start figuring out what he’s going to wear tonight, but curiosity is still getting the best of him. Since it is his house after all, Louis has every right to be nosey. Looking around a bit can’t hurt.

It’s quite strange for him to try and get to know himself without ever meeting himself at this age. Louis can only take the clues and people around him for context and it is sooo much harder than it looks. Louis needs all the help he can get and maybe if he learns the layout of his home a little better he might come to understand a few more things about himself.

Louis decides to start in the kitchen, partially because he’s curious, but mostly because he’s hungry. He bypasses the cabinets, logically assuming that he’ll only find boring things like silverware, plates, and bowls in there. Instead he heads straight to the massive pantry, praying that he hasn’t transformed into some kind of health nut in the last 17 years. His worries dissipate completely as he opens the pantry door and finds the shelves stockpiled with only his favorite foods. Junk foods.

“Sick!” Louis fist pumps in victory, going straight for the bag of crisps. There is an obscene amount of junk food stocking his kitchen and absolutely no one to stop him from eating all of it or annoyingly suggesting a healthier alternative. Fuck that. Louis is grown now so he can do whatever the hell he wants. And what he wants is to eat junk food and only junk food.

Although Louis probably does eat a more balanced diet as an athlete. There’s no way that his body can sustain the training of a football player on a diet of Cheese Puffs and Skittles. But he can’t be bothered to worry about that right now.

Louis ventures further into the house, carting a bag of Cool Ranch Doritos and a can of Sour Cream and Onion Pringles, leaving a trail of food wherever he goes. As he travels through his little excursion, he discovers a handful of guest bedrooms, an in-home theater, a game room with a huge pool table, and a personal gym.

He makes his way outside and stumbles upon a breathtaking flower garden. Louis gets caught up in the splendor of the garden for a while, captivated by how peaceful and beautiful it is. There’s a pleasant stillness about it that almost makes Louis feel like he’s been transported to another world. Flowerbeds of all sorts bloom and flourish in astounding colors all around him, filling up his senses with a wonderfully sweet aroma. A stone fountain rests in the center, surrounded by marble benches.
The trickling of the soft water only adds to the cherished serenity of the garden. It’s stunning and Louis could easily spend the rest of his day here and not even notice that time has passed.

“Harry would love this.” Louis finds himself saying, thinking out loud. His best friend—or not so much right now, would appreciate this calm, beautiful space more than anyone. Louis can imagine all the amazing shots Harry could capture in a garden like this, he’d probably lose himself the more time he spent surround by all the blossoming flowers.

Friends or not, Louis has to bring Harry over to his house again so he can see it. The soft, dimpled smile on his surprised face alone, would be worth it.

Louis drags himself away from the enchanting garden, walking on the stone steps until he reaches a much smaller building, constructed in the same style as his house. The side door requires a passcode so Louis pulls out the crumpled piece of paper Niall gave him earlier. He punches in the code and the wide door clicks open.

The light flickers on and Louis squeals with delight as several rows of pristinely maintained cars are illuminated. He owns such a wide variety of vehicles from Maserati to Range Rover to Lamborghini to Bentley to Porsche to Jaguar and the impressive list just keeps on going. Louis doesn’t even know what to do with himself, barely containing his excitement.

Louis slides inside the closest one to him, which happens to be a jet black Ferrari 458 Spider. The interior is sleek and modern with blacked out finish and Louis is almost too in shock to even touch it. He tentatively runs his hand over the yellow Ferrari insignia on the center of the steering wheel, gasping at how expensive it feels. It’s a gorgeous car and as Louis grips the wheel, his mind, body, and soul are practically pleading to drive it.

Off the record, Louis has driven before. He and Harry took his mum’s minivan out on a little illegal joy ride. It was probably the stupidest thing Louis has ever done and oddly Harry had encouraged him to do it. Well, he jokingly dared Louis to do it on a whim and Louis never backs down from a challenge, so of course he had to do it. Anyway, he was surprisingly pretty good at it and they made it safely from Louis’ driveway to Lucille’s diner and back again. Even though Harry was screaming and begging Louis to pull over the entire time.

The keys are sitting temptingly in the center console, but they don’t look like normal keys. And that’s probably because there isn’t an actual key. It’s just a slender black fob and Louis is so confused by it. He leans over to look at the ignition, but it’s not an ignition, it’s just a button. Curiously, Louis presses down on the glowing button and nothing really happens. The built in screen blinks on and elaborately welcomes him, but that’s about it; so Louis shrugs and carelessly shifts the gear down.

But what he wasn’t expecting was for the car to start moving, which it does. He didn’t even put the keys in anywhere, how is that possible?! Regardless the sports car roars to life, ramming right into the garage wall.

“Oh shit...” Louis stutters with stunned eyes and frozen hands. He shifts the car back up to park and slowly gets out to survey the damage. The front bumper of the Spider melds with the wall, the once sleek and shiny metal crumpled like a tin can. The damage is not at all pretty.

Louis places his hands on top of his head, closing his eyes as he walks around in little stressed out circles. “Fuuuuuuuuuccccccccch...fuckity, fuck, fuck, fuck!”

With that Louis flees the garage, locking the door behind him and scurrying back to the house, deciding to deal with that later. Maybe he can just pretend that never happened. From this point on Louis decides he has absolutely no recollection of the sports car’s existence. Ferrari? What Ferrari?
Louis doesn’t own a Ferrari. He’s never even seen a Ferrari in his entire life.

Once he gets back inside his house, he quickly climbs the first set of stairs, heading towards the master bedroom. But on the way, Louis finds an entertainment room with a sick stereo system and a ton of music to choose from. So Louis decides to turn on some music to help clear his mind from that wee little mishap while he gets ready for the party.

He has a huge collection of both vinyl and CDs and it’s kind of comforting to know that even in the digital age, he still owns music in a physical form. He finds House of Pain’s self-titled album and pops it into the CD player. The sound system apparently runs through the entire house and soon the heavy, hyped up beats of *Jump Around* are blaring through every single available speaker.

“Wicked!” Louis awes at the overwhelming sound. Good thing he doesn’t have any neighbors, otherwise he’d definitely have irritated people banging on his front door telling him to turn it down.

Louis dances himself down the hall towards his master bathroom, twirling and hopping around as though he has not a care in the world. He jumps up on the massive king size bed, energetically bouncing along to the catchy song.

Once the pristinely made bed is completely ruined, Louis flops down to spread out on his back, sighing contently. With his arms and legs spread as wide as possible, he still doesn’t come close to reaching either side of the bed. Sleeping in a bed this big, by himself has got to feel a bit lonely. It makes the fact that there is no one else in it, even more obvious. But Louis does have a hot boyfriend to cuddle up to somewhere, wherever he may be.

Louis sits up remembering once again that he was supposed to be getting dressed this whole time. He slides off the bed and skips over to what he assumes is his closet. But nothing could prepare him for the sight he sees when he flicks on the light.

Louis’ jaw nearly falls to the floor as he stumbles into the closet space. It shouldn’t even be classified as a closet since it’s practically the size of his actual master bedroom. It’s so big that there are couches, a full size TV and a mini bar *inside* of it. As if Louis spends his spare time just lounging in his closet. Well, maybe he does? Louis wouldn’t blame his older self at all, it’s remarkable in here.

One whole wall is just suits, pressed, dry-cleaned and color-coordinated impeccably. Louis is 100% certain that he didn’t do that himself, he’s never been too good at organization. He runs his hand along the lavish fabrics and expensive materials and as he rounds the corner Louis finds himself gasping again. The next wall of clothes is all casualwear; hoodies, jumpers, trackies, jeans, sweats, jackets, joggers, and anything else Louis could ever dream of wearing.

“I’m in heaven...” Louis gapes, stumbling backwards to sit on one of the plush benches. He has always adored clothes and he hoped that his 30-year-old self still did but he was in no way expecting all *this*.

Louis picks up the remote to his left, assuming it was for the TV and clicks the green button. But instead of the TV turning on, two walls of his closet magically split apart, revealing an enormous, hidden built-in rack. “What the fuck!”

Shoes. Row upon row of *shoes*. All colors, all styles, all the brands he adores and loves. There are collector’s edition pairs, regular everyday pairs, fancy dress shoes, classic sneakers, and athletic footie trainers. He could open up a shoe store in his closet if he felt like it.

“I could die, right here, right now in this spot, and I would have died happy.” Louis gasps, having still not found the strength to close his mouth from gaping open. The wide array of fashion choices
nearly puts Louis into a coma and he could really use a nap before he even thinks about deciding what he should wear tonight.

It takes Louis two whole hours to get himself dressed and ready to go. Yes, a good portion of that was spent trying on a chunk of the clothes in his closet. There are so many cool things in there, Louis got a bit overwhelmed and carried away. The other portion of his time however, was spent figuring out how to shave his face, compelled to do something about the massive beard growing along his features.

It turns out shaving is a lot harder and scarier than it looks, and Louis was so afraid that he’d cut himself that he ended up spending an embarrassing amount of time psyching himself out in the mirror. After he’d talked himself through it a few times, he finally mustered up the guts to put the razor to his skin and now his face is beautifully soft and smooth once again. Well, except for the one spot he nicked himself under his chin. But he’s convinced himself that no one will be able to tell and it’s hardly visible.

Just as Louis moves the last few stands of his hair in place, someone knocks on his bathroom door and nearly startles the shit out of him. Then he hears Niall’s voice on the outside coming from his bedroom and he remembers that Niall also has keys to his house.

“All set to go, Louis?” Niall calls through the bathroom door. “The limo is waiting outside.”

“Hi Niall!” Louis swings the door open, smiling brightly at his personal assistant. “I’m ready!”

“Oh wow, you shaved.” Niall blinks in surprise.

“Mhmm. I figured it was time and it felt weird to have facial hair, I dunno.” Louis shrugs, lightly touching his face.

“It’s a nice change I think.” Niall compliments.

“Aww! Thanks, mate.” Louis beams, throwing an arm around Niall as they walk through the halls of the house.

They head outside to the driveway where the limo driver awaits. Louis glances over at the garage and instantly winces at the memory of his earlier stupidity.

“Ugh, I just can’t believe…” Louis mumbles inaudibly under his breath, huffing to himself.

“Uh? Are you ok, Louis?” Niall wonders as they approach the limousine.

“Hmm yeah—yes.” Louis nods weakly.

Niall narrows his eyes curiously, turning to face Louis in front of the limo.

“Ok, ok. No, I’m not.” Louis gives in instantly, hanging his head. “Niall, I have to tell you something.”

“Alright?”
"Ok, so funny story…ha ha… I may have accidentally—maybe, not on purpose…kinda…sorrrtaaa…um…crashed the bumper on the Ferrari.” Louis rushes out the last bit, avoiding eye contact with Niall.

“Oh, ok.” Niall shrugs without so much as blinking an eye, sliding his phone out of his pocket.

“That’s bad right? I’m really, reaaallyyyy sorry! It was a complete accident and I probably shouldn’t have—”

“Wait, are you apologizing to me? Louis…it’s your car…” Niall reminds gently, flicking his eyes up from his phone.

“Oh. Right.” Louis realizes slowly. It’s so weird that there is no one around to reprimand him when he messes up or does something a little too reckless.

“Ok, so I just scheduled a service for tomorrow.” Niall informs, tucking his phone away again. “It’ll be fixed right away, ok?”

“Oh, that’s it? Wow, ok!”

“Um…anything else happen while I was away that you want me to know about for some reason?” Niall asks, looking to Louis expectantly.

“Well…I kinda made a mess…a big mess…” Louis admits slowly, biting his lip apologetically. “Especially while I was getting ready. There are clothes everywhere. Oh! And after I ate, yeah. I think I left food in every room. It wasn’t on purpose or anything, I’m just a bit messy sometimes.”

“That’s not news.” Niall says flatly. “The housecleaners will be over in the morning to clean the whole house while you’re at practice as usual.”

“Oh.” Louis nods impressively. Wow, being thirty is really not that hard at all.

“Any more confessions?” Niall teases lightly, starting to get more comfortable with joking around with Louis. “Comments? Concerns? Questions?”

Louis laughs a little, finding himself liking Niall more and more. “Um…I think I’m ok for now, yeah thanks. I can’t promise about later though.”

Niall smiles back and it’s probably the warmest smile Louis has ever gotten from his assistant.

The limo pulls up to the circled driveway of the elegant Rossington Hall. The driver rounds the car and opens the rear door for Louis and he is instantly met with cameras and reporters in his face. They’re all calling his name and talking over each other, shouting out question after question. This time, Louis is slightly more prepared to handle all the attention, but his strategy remains the same: smile and wave. But once he gets halfway to the entrance, he ducks his head and books it the rest of the way to the door.

When Louis finally makes it safely inside the vast multistory building, he takes a moment to look around and gather his bearings. The design is classic and elegant, with shining marble flooring and
crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. Along the walls, the hall is decorated with long red banners bearing the Doncaster Rover’s crest. Waiters and waitresses bustle around the large space, carrying platters of hors d’oeuvres and extravagant appetizers. There are people everywhere Louis looks, some chatting near the walls, others socializing at the tables to the side, while some dance on the huge dance floor in the center of the hall.

He spots Rusty and Liam leaning up against the bar, talking casually over drinks.

“Hey Liam! Hi Rusty—ssell…” Louis catches himself awkwardly. It’s so hard to remember to call him Russell, it just doesn’t sound natural. As far as Louis is concerned, his god-given name is Rusty.

Rusty narrows his eyes at Louis’ almost mistake, but chooses not to say anything, instead lifting his glass to his lips.

“Tommo, holy shit you look so young.” Liam gasps as he notices Louis’ newly clean shaven face. “You’ve hardly aged under all that scruff.”

“The wooly mammoth look did need to stop.” Rusty comments over his glass.

“To be honest, my face was itchy.” Louis admits. He’s not at all used to having the ability to grow facial hair.

“And that outfit…” Rusty flicks his eyes over the ensemble Louis is sporting. “You look like you just stepped out of a Vanilla Ice music video.”

“I think you’re really pulling it off though! I like it!” Liam compliments, applauding Louis. “It’s very…vintage and clean. I could never pull off the old school street wear look like that.”

Louis looks down at his meticulously planned outfit. He’s rocking a limited edition ‘92 Hugo BOSS crewneck, overlaid with a color-blocked Fila windbreaker and matching track pants, and topped of with a fresh pair of white out Reebok Classics.

In all honesty, Louis couldn’t be more proud with how it came out, considering that a good portion of his closet is extremely tight and form fitting. Who invented skinny jeans and how the hell is he supposed to fit his entire ass in them? Louis would much rather go for something a bit more comfortable and lucky for him, the other portion of his closet is filled with classic sportswear and tracksuits. It’s very similar to the clothes he’d wear in the 90’s, but now it’s apparently dubbed as vintage.

“Ice, ice, baby.” Rusty teases, leaning down to sing the familiar Vanilla Ice lyrics in Louis’ ear.

“I love that song!” Louis beams excitedly.

“Oh my god, you’re like a poster child for the 90’s.” Rusty laughs to himself, finishing off his brown liquor drink. “20-year-old Will Smith is so proud. You’re a little Fresh Prince prodigy.”

“Sick! You really think so?” Louis awes thankfully, looking down at his outfit again. Will Smith is a fashion legend, especially when it comes to fly athletic wear. Being compared to him in any way is basically the highest form of praise.

“Alright enough about Vanilla Ice and Will Smith.” Liam interrupts, expression growing serious. “So this may be a party, but it’s not all fun and games tonight, boys. I need you to go out there and score us some hefty sponsorships. Mix, mingle, flirt, kiss ass—whatever. Just get it done.”

“Ease up, Payne.” Rusty drapes an arm over Liam. “We got this. Or actually—I got this. I can’t
speak for The Fresh Prince over here.” He gestures to Louis with a smirk.

Liam smiles, placing a warm hand on each of their shoulders. “Make me proud, boys.” He gives them a quick encouraging squeeze before sliding his phone from his pocket to answer a call. “Excuse me, sorry—Hello?...No, that’s not—are you serious? Bloody hell.” He sighs into the speaker, walking off as he starts arguing with whoever is on the line.

“Can I get you both a drink?” A passerby waiter asks, holding a serving tray.

“Single malt scotch.” Rusty requests easily, placing his empty glass down on the waiter’s platter.

“A coke, please.” Louis answers before suddenly remembering his new, cooler age. “Oh! Wait, no! I’ll have um...the same thing as him.”

“Ok, no problem—”

“I have ID! Do you wanna see it? Cuz I totally have it!” Louis offers, already digging into his back pocket.

“Oh no. That’s ok, sir. Really.” The waiter replies, already walking away to place the order.

“You’re too much.” Rusty sighs, shaking his head as he begins to wander off to socialize, leaving Louis to fend for himself.

Lesson learned, single malt scotch is the grossest thing to ever exist.

Basically, Louis quickly figures out that anything brown equals nasty. Whiskey, scotch, bourbon, all of it: nasty. And everything clear is even worse. Louis hasn’t even ingested any of them because he always ends up spitting the disgusting liquid out the second he tastes it. The only good drinks are the ones that are colored like a rainbow and taste like fruit, with as many mini umbrellas as possible sticking out of the top.

The one Louis likes the most is colored electric blue with a bright pink swirly straw looping out of the top. The rim of the glass is adorned with a flower garnish, a pineapple, a cherry and a tiny purple umbrella. Louis doesn’t know how they fit all that in the glass, but he doesn’t care because it’s pretty and it tastes like a tropical smoothie.

Even though he is supposed to be “working” or whatever, Louis mostly spends his time going around the hall sampling food and sipping on his extremely colorful drink. He’s not exactly sure which party guests he is supposed to be targeting, they all sort of blend together. And even if he did know, he wouldn’t know what to say to them or where to start the conversation. So Louis decides to leave that all up to Rusty since he’s so confident in himself anyway.

People who he assumes are fans of some kind, come up to him a lot though, which is still so weird to get used to. They all seem to desperately want to impress him in some way. Or ask him for something. Or flirt.

Which is kind of odd, because isn’t it common knowledge that Louis has a boyfriend? It seems to be widely known information. And yet people—men in particular, insist on fawning over him.
Constantly leaving lingering touches and sharing heated looks, waiting for Louis to react. But Louis doesn’t know exactly how to react so he pretty much just sucks on his favorite blue drink through his hot pink loopy straw and observes.

After a few hours of wandering about aimlessly, Louis spots Niall coming down the stairs, so he, of course, immediately runs over to greet him.

“Niall!” Louis grins cheerfully, giving him the biggest hug as if he didn’t just see him at the loo, a mere twenty minutes ago.

Niall isn’t nearly as surprised by Louis’ affectionate greeting this time. “Hi Louis, how’s it going?”

“I’m buzzin’!” Louis bursts. “It’s eleven-o-clock on a school night and I’m at a party! How fucking rad is that?!”

“Um? Totally rad—erm I guess?” Niall tries with a small laugh, sounding a bit confused, but going along with it anyways.

“Although this party is kind of dead. And a little uneventful. Are all grown up parties like this? It’s kinda making me tired.”

“Well, um no. I don’t think so. I’d say this one is particularly dry.”

“Ooh.” Louis winces, pulling a yikes face. “I bet Liam is bursting an aneurysm somewhere. I know this party was supposed to be important.”

“That’s got to be the fucking fruitiest drink I’ve ever seen, Tommo!” Rusty wheezes, cackling hard as he meets up with Louis and Niall. “It’s got the little frilly umbrellas and everything. And what is that, a swirly straw?! How fucking fruity!”

“It does have a lot of fruit in it actually.” Louis agrees seriously. “It’s kinda like a smoothie?”

“That’s not what I meant.” Rusty sighs heavily in discouragement like Louis just stole his joy.

Louis frowns in confusion, blinking and looking down at his neon blue cocktail. “I don’t get it… what did you mean? It is a fruit drink. And the swirly straw is fun. And it bends! You can move it around and everything, it’s totally awesome.”

“No—god! Stop being so literal!” Rusty bursts in frustration. “Forget it!”

“Ok, but…it’s really, really good! You can’t taste anything nasty! You’d never know there was booze in here!” Louis explains enthusiastically, stirring his brightly colored drink with his equally bright loopy straw. “You wanna try it?”

Rusty blinks back at him blankly, looking dead inside. “No.”

“Are you sure?” Louis forces the glass right up to Rusty’s face. “I think you’ll like it. It’s tropical!”

“Please. Stop.”

Louis sighs and takes the drink back, choosing to enjoy its beauty and splendor all by himself.

Harry would taste his drink; Louis thinks to himself. If he were here right now, Harry would absolutely taste the fuck out of his drink. And he’d love the twisty straw and the baby umbrellas and Harry basically lives for fruit so he’d love that too. If he were here, they’d probably have a race to see who could drink theirs the fastest and not get a brain freeze. And Harry would probably lose
because he’s so slow and meticulous when he eats.

Louis can’t help but smile at the thought. Not to bring up Harry again, or anything. Louis knows they aren’t exactly friends like they were before. Although Louis can’t deny that Harry would definitely make this party a million times more interesting. Louis isn’t quite bored out of his mind, but he also isn’t exactly having the time of his life at this party. All the people are boring, the music is whack and frankly, Louis has better food in his pantry at home.

The only real positive at this point is his prized flamboyant, fruity umbrella-adorned drink.

“Ugh, no.” Rusty growls, nodding his chin over to the far entrance. “Look who’s here.”

“Who?” Louis follows Rusty’s line of sight to a couple walking towards them with linked hands. One is blonde and the other has dark brown hair, each attractive in their own merit. They’re both impeccably dressed in suits, subtly matching each other with the coordination of their accent colors.

“It’s Jack and Marcelo.” Rusty groans, already sounding annoyed. Or more annoyed than he already does. “What the fuck are they doing here?”

“Do we know them?” Louis leans over and whispers to Niall curiously. Louis has quickly come to rely on Niall for any and all quick references. The more people Louis meets at this party, the more help he needs figuring out who they are. His personal assistant never fails to fill him in without awkwardly asking why Louis doesn’t already know this most likely basic information. In a sense, he and Niall are a much needed team.

“Yeah, so Jack, the blonde one, is the head manager for Arsenal and his husband, Marcelo, is Arsenal’s team captain and most prized star or…he was in his glory days at least.” Niall explains easily, sorting out the couple. “He’s pushing 45 now so he’s supposed to be retiring after this season.”

“Hmm ok…” Louis nods slowly, sizing up the couple from across the room as he slurps on his straw. “So how exactly do we feel about these people, Niall? Do we hate them? Do we love them?”

“Well, Marcelo is your sworn rival…”

“Naturally. I’d assume that since we are playing each other for The Premier Title.” Louis surmises before turning to fully face Niall seriously. “But how do we really feel, Niall? Give me the dirty dirt. If I wasn’t your boss and we were just causally talking right now, what would you say about them?”

“Um…honestly?” Niall questions uncertainly, biting his lip.

“Yes. Totally unfiltered opinion. Go.” Louis nods, pointing at Niall expectantly.

“Ok, well uh in my opinion…Jack should be short for jackass and Marcelo is a jealous irritating fuck, who needs to shut up, sit down and bloody retire already.”

“Got it, so we hate them. Cool.” Louis summarizes Niall’s sentiment with a decisive nod. He may have only known Niall for a day, but he kind of trusts him with his whole life. If Niall doesn’t approve then it’s law in Louis’ book.

Marcelo and Jack make their way over, taking their sweet time as they approach Rusty and Louis.

“How’s it goin, Gramps? Surprised you made it over here without your walker.” Rusty taunts with a smirk. “Must be the new hip replacement putting a little more pep in your step.”
Marcelo rolls his honey colored eyes irately. “Russell. Always such a pleasure to see you.”

“Aww Marcy, I wish I could say the same, mate.” Rusty pouts with mock affection. “What are you doing here? You’re a long way from home and last I checked we didn’t invite Arsenal. Here to steal our sponsors?”

“We couldn’t if we tried. It’s not like you have any notable sponsors to steal.” Jack quips, scoffing unimpressively as he looks around the party.

“Well at least we have players that aren’t already getting their senior citizen discount.” Rusty bites back easily, nodding his chin towards Marcelo. “You’re just about ready to check into a nursing home, aye Marcy boy?”

“It’s Mar-cel-o. Don’t call me Marcy.” Marcelo corrects, raising a challenging brow to Rusty. “And please do remember that I play better than you at my ‘old’ age than you do in your prime.”

Honestly Louis would never guess the man in front of him is fifteen years older than him, he looks incredible. And he and Rusty are unsettlingly similar in personality, Marcelo is just an older version. No wonder Rusty is so bitter. Actually scratch that, he’s always bitter.

“You look really good for your age…” Louis mindlessly says out loud.

Rusty turns his head to the side, giving Louis a look that painfully screams, ‘shut the hell up, how fucking dare you.’

“Erm—I mean…you’re old! Go home, I don’t like you!” Louis tries weakly, not the best at trash talking.

“I can’t take you anywhere.” Rusty mumbles under his breath, sighing heavily. He pinches the bridge of his nose in exasperation and maybe even embarrassment.

Jack chuckles in surprise, eyeing Louis oddly. “Not quite the usual wit I’d expect from you, Louis. Not feeling too hot tonight?”

“He’s suffering from something unfortunate that we don’t understand. Don’t mind him.” Rusty moves to stand in front of Louis, facing head to head with Jack, eyes narrowed. “Anyway, I’m gonna need you and your ancient ass fossil of a husband to get the fuck out of Donny and don’t come back until it’s time for us to wipe the ground with your asses at the championship match.”

Rusty stares them down in challenge, not backing down until Marcelo smiles devilishly.

“Babe?” Marcelo calls his husband sweetly, eyes still trained on Rusty.

“Yes, dear?” Jack answers back in the same sickeningly sweet tone.

“Have you seen my three championship rings?” Marcelo asks pointedly. “I seem to have somehow misplaced them.”

“Oh, you mean the three rings representing the three championships that you, yourself have won?” Jack wonders dramatically with a knowing smirk.

“Ugh, here we go again. I swear I’m going to fucking vomit.” Rusty gags, rolling his eyes. “How many times must I endure this self-righteous routine?”

“I really can’t seem to find my three, gold plated Premier rings.” Marcelo ponders theatrically,
holding his knuckles to his chin which proudly display his rings. “I did say there were three, didn’t I?”

“I don’t think that you did, actually?” Jack encourages exaggeratedly. “Are there really three of them?”

“Yes, I have three championship rings and I can’t seem to find any of them. Not even one of the three.” Marcelo holds up the three fingers that have the rings on them. “How odd.”

“Oh god, please save me from this bullshit.” Rusty complains, throwing his head back.

“Oh…they’re right there on your hand.” Louis points out obviously, not getting it at all. “Literally right in front of your face. I mean, I know you’re in your forties, but like? I didn’t think you were that blind—”

“Shut up!” Rusty hisses over his shoulder, smacking Louis in the balls.

“Oof—fuck!” Louis curses on impact, nearly dropping his cocktail glass. That was totally uncalled for, he hardly said anything but the obvious. “What did I say?”

Rusty ignores him, in favor of groaning. So Louis goes back to drinking his fruity blue drink in order to hopefully distract himself from his throbbing groin.

“Oh, look at that! There they are, wow.” Marcelo gasps in shock, admiring his jeweled fingers. “I’ve had them on for so long I almost forgot they were there.”

“Makes sense considering you’re old as fuck.” Rusty grumbles bitterly.

“You probably don’t even know what winning rings look like.” Marcelo taunts, waving his hand in front of Rusty and Louis’ faces.

“Um…I’m confused…” Louis pipes up again, peeking over Rusty’s shoulder. “Don’t you have a home or something where you can safely store those? Why are you wearing them all at once? It looks dumb.” He observes disapprovingly as he continues to suck on his loopy straw. “Like really dumb. And it also reads a little narcissistic and obnoxious to me. But whatever.”

Marcelo rests his attention solely on Louis this time. “And remind me again how many rings you have, Louis?”

Louis remembers from his Wikipedia bio that he has never lead his team to Premier victory despite coming close several times. He still doesn’t understand why that is exactly, but he does know it means that he doesn’t have any rings. Louis’ facial expression remains unchanged as he continues to drink his cocktail and blink back silently at his rival.

“Right, so none.” Marcelo answers for him haughtily.

“Yet.” Louis argues in challenge. “The way I see it, I’ve still got plenty of years to pass you up. You’re done.”

“Yeah, we’ll be racking up rings and titles while you’re sitting on the sidelines hooked up to a respirator.” Rusty adds.

“We’ll see about that.”

“You bet your antique ass we will.” Rusty promises.
Marcelo smiles disingenuously, eyes squinted. “Enjoy your flop of a party.”

“See you around, boys.” Jack winks pointedly at Louis as he links arms with his husband to leave.

“You’re so right, Niall. Total jackass.” Louis frowns, watching the rival couple walk away. “And Marcelo really needs to pull the stick out.”

Niall nods wisely, adjusting his glasses. “Told you.”

“I wish they would choke.” Rusty grumbles bitterly, downing the remaining liquid in his tumbler.

Liam does a double take over his shoulder as he approaches, noting the uninvited company. “Who invited them?”

“My point exactly.” Rusty narrows his eyes at the Arsenal duo one more time. “Fucking dickheads.”

“Ugh, well it doesn’t even matter. This whole thing is a fucking disaster.” Liam sighs dejectedly. “We aren’t getting any sponsors! In fact, I think we are losing them the longer this party goes on.”

“Yeah, I mean I wasn’t going to say anything, but…this party pretty much blows.” Louis announces, biting on his straw as he surveys the dying space. “I wouldn’t sponsor us either.”

“Oh thank you, Louis, always a beacon of positivity you are.” Liam huffs sarcastically. “I don’t know what to do! People are actually leaving. It’s like watching money walk right out the door.”

“Well, why don’t you do something about it?” Louis wonders curiously.

“Oh, like what Tommo?” Rusty questions, turning to face him. “Since you’re such a smart ass. What do you suggest we do about it?”

“Uh well…” Louis looks around the vast hall and frowns, scrunching up his nose with distaste at the sound of the insufferable techno beats echoing off the walls. “It’s the music that sucks the most, I think. Who would ever dance to this? It’s straight up trash.”

Liam groans, not at all disagreeing with Louis, more at a loss of what to do. “Well, what would you recommend then, DJ Tommo, my sudden music expert?”

Louis scans the room again, noting all of the seemingly half-awake party guests and embarrassingly empty dance floor. He singles out the source of the irritating music, coming from a DJ booth along the back wall. He nods decisively with a knowing grin, turning back to face Liam.

“Hold my fruity drink.” Louis hands his treasured glass over to Liam. “Make sure you don’t lose any of the mini umbrellas. I really like those.”

Liam frowns, holding Louis’ drink awkwardly in his hand. Rusty stands next to him appearing just as confused.

Louis stands up straight, rolling his shoulders back to his optimum height. He lifts his head up, chin held high as he marches chest first across the wide and empty dance floor over to the DJ booth. The booth is hiked up on a podium riser and when Louis approaches it, he realizes how much taller it is than him. He doesn’t let it deter him though, perching up on his tippy toes just to talk to the DJ on top.

After haggling with the DJ for a few moments, Louis returns back to his normal height and turns around to face the dance floor. The confidence he just had begins to evaporate as he inches back out
on the floor tentatively. As he makes his way to the very center, it’s suddenly very apparent that the attention of the entire room is directly on him. Every eye seems to be watching him, waiting on baited breath to find out what he is about to do.

The DJ drops the needle on the turntable and soon the timeless introductory beats of MC Hammer’s *U Can’t Touch This* are bumping through the speakers of Rossington Hall.

*Can’t touch this! Oh-oh oh oh oh-ooh oh…*

Most people instantly recognize the 90’s classic, causing them to widen their eyes even more at little ole Louis in expectation as he continues to stand all by himself, center stage. The attention on him continues to grow and Louis kind of wants to back out now. This was a bad idea, a very bad idea. Instantly topping Louis’ ever-growing greatest hits list of horribly bad ideas.

Why on earth would he willingly sign himself up to be embarrassed like this? What was Louis thinking? Maybe he can slowly sidestep his way to the exit and call a quits. Maybe he can even try to laugh it off as a dumb joke later and hopefully everyone will forget this ever happened.

*…Can’t touch this! Oh-oh oh oh oh-ooh oh…*

Along the sidelines, Liam is watching Louis while biting his nails nervously and radiating anxiety. To his left, Rusty shakes his head and face palms, turning away like he can’t even watch for fear of copious amounts of second hand embarrassment. Although on the more positive side, Niall offers a small encouraging smile, waving a little.

Louis is starting to like his idea of escaping more and more, until a giant spotlight sparks to life, singling him out specifically on the empty floor. Not that there is anyone else to offset some of the attention anyway. Everyone is paying him and *solely* him ample attention and it seems like more and more people are starting to gain interest, gathering around the open floor and eyeing Louis inquisitively.

*…Can’t touch this! Oh-oh oh oh oh-ooh oh!*

Louis closes his eyes, resigning to his fate. He takes a deep breath, shaking out his shoulders as he prepares to put on the performance of his life.

It’s now or never.

*My-my-my-my music hits me so hard, makes me say, oh my lord! Thank you for blessing me with a mind to rhyme and two hype feet…*

Across the floor, out of the corner of his eye Louis spots a familiar flash of long chestnut colored curly hair. He almost thinks he imagined it, hallucinated it out of nervous desperation but then, like a miracle, Harry materializes out of the crowd of onlookers.

“Harry!” Louis whisper shouts across the dance floor, face immediately lighting up. His best friend has the *best* timing; Louis couldn’t name a more opportune time for him to show up. “Harry! Come here!”

“Hey.” Harry mouths, waving subtly and avoiding eye contact from the far end of the room.

“Haaarrryyy!” Louis beckons excitedly, jumping up and waving animatedly as though Harry really can’t see him in the middle of the floor. “Harry! It’s MC Hammer! It’s our *thing*!”

“No…” Harry shakes his head, keeping to his little corner. “I’m good.”
“It feels good, when you know you’re down. A super dope homeboy from the Oaktown…”

“Harry! Haaaarryyyy, come on! Hammer dance!” Louis enthuses, bouncing on his toes eagerly.

With all the attention Louis is giving Harry’s corner of the room, a second spotlight suddenly shines on him, illuminating his face. His eyes widen and his skin pales, color draining from his face like a baby deer caught in the headlights.

“What!” Harry points to himself, shaking his head defiantly at an even more rapid pace. “No, no, no, no—”

Louis waves his hands, urging him onto the floor. “Harry, come on! Dance with me!”

“No, Louis.” Harry hisses, standing off to the side. “No way, I’m not—”

And I’m known as such. And this is a beat uh…U can’t touch!

Louis smiles mischievously before hopping and shimmying his way over to Harry. He grabs Harry by the shoulders, turning his body out towards the dance floor. “Come on, Hazza! It’ll be fun!”

“Go ‘head, mate. Let loose a little.” Someone in the crowd encourages as Louis begins forcing Harry out of his safety corner.

Oh-oh oh oh oh-oh oh! Oh-oh oh oh oh-oh oh…

“Yes, Harry! Let loose!” Louis agrees enthusiastically. “Bust a move!”

“What!? No! I don’t remember those moves, Louis! Are you serious!?” Harry protests under his breath as Louis determinedly pushes him backwards onto the dance floor. “I can’t—”

“Oh, please, it’s like riding a bike! You can’t forget!” Louis reassures, hands gripping Harry by his opposing shoulders.

…U Can’t touch this!

“I haven’t done this in 17 years!” Harry reminds, stumbling backwards with Louis’ adamant guidance.

“You can do it! I know you can!” Louis places Harry directly at his side in the middle of the dance floor, somehow trusting that Harry won’t bolt when he lets him go.

Yo, let me bust the funky lyrics!

The gathered crowd begins to cheer them on, clapping along to the tempo as they line up around the perimeter of the dance floor to get a good view.

Fresh new kicks and pants, you got it like that, now you know you wanna dance!

Louis glances over at Harry one last time before jumping right inline to the music, starting the iconic Hammer Dance. He spreads his legs out into a V, bending down to stomp from one side to the other as he raises his arms.

…So move, outta your seat, and get a fly girl and catch this beat!

Harry only watches Louis silently, looking impossibly overwhelmed. The footwork is a bit challenging at first, especially at the incredibly fast pace the song demands. This dance is nothing
short of athletically challenging and it took Louis and Harry months to perfect it, putting in hours at a
time just to get it right. Typically, when they’d perform the dance their only audience was themselves
and occasionally their sisters or mums would volunteer to watch them dance, always eager to cheer
them on.

But never, ever have Harry and Louis done anything of this magnitude before. It’s definitely a bit
nerve-wracking, to say the least, but the hype of the song is always so infectious and energetic. If
they can only manage to get out of their heads, the moves will come easily.

While it’s rollin’, hold on! Pump a little bit and let ‘em know it’s goin’ on…

It doesn’t take Louis long to find his headspace, soon getting totally into the grove of the song. He
bops around enthusiastically, channeling his inner MC Hammer, while Harry continues to shake his
head apprehensively. Harry slowly starts to move his feet, but his movements are halfhearted,
mimicking Louis’ spirited motions with increasing uncertainty. His legs are unsteady and his
expression is unsure.

…Like that, like that! Cold on a mission, so fall on back…

“Come on, Harry!” Louis smiles encouragingly as he quickly crisscrosses his feet, spinning around
in a circle on time to the quick thump of the melody. “Don’t overthink it, just do it!”

“Ok, ok.” Harry concedes, taking a deep breath before hopping in step with Louis. Louis can feel the
exact moment Harry finally lets go of his inhibitions and embraces the rhythm of the song. Because
as soon as he finally does, it’s like it’s 1996 all over again.

…Let ‘em, know that you’re too much! And this is a beat uh…U can’t touch!

Harry twists around, landing in time with Louis as they rapidly crisscross their feet again and use the
momentum of their arms to pump their bodies faster.

“Yes, Harry!” Louis cheers, arms in the air as he kicks out his legs, hopping alternatively from one
foot to the other.

Oh-oh oh oh oh-oh oh…

Their movements effortlessly begin to align, bodies mirroring. Together they jump to the left and
then bring it on back to the right, tossing their arms up on either side as they go along to the beat.

Can’t touch this!

Louis doesn’t even have to check up on Harry after a while, because he is always right there in tune
with his every move. Harry never misses a step, keeping up with every piece of the iconic
chorography. Louis thinks the only thing really missing is their matching set of parachute pants.

…Oh-oh oh oh oh-oh oh!

Harry and Louis bunny hop backwards, bending down to back that ass up across the floor. When
they reach one side, they vault up, essentially doing a jumping jack before putting their bums in
reverse and backing up towards the opposite side of the dance floor.

Yo, I told you, homeboy! U can’t touch this! Why you standing there, man? U can’t touch this! Yo,
sound the bell! School is in, sucker! U can’t touch this!

Other partygoers start to join in on the fun, breaking off from the surrounding crowd; but they are
nowhere near as good as Louis and Harry. No one can really hold a candle to them as they dance around, feeding off of each other’s energy. Fellow teammates and coaches can’t help but dance along to the contagiously energetic tune. Even Niall and Liam jump in, starting up right behind Harry and Louis.

“Say what, Harry?!” Louis hypes up, arms up and swinging as he springs up on either foot along to the beat. “Let ’em know!”

“U can’t touch this!” Harry hollers back easily, proving just how flexible he still is as he bends his knees to drop backwards to the ground, propelling himself back up with one hand.

...Oh-oh oh oh oh-oh oh!

Louis rolls his shoulders, hands on his knees as he bounces from one side to the next. And Harry mirrors him perfectly, alternating hiking his knee up to his abs and clapping under the lifted leg on the upbeat.

“Break it down!” Louis yells as loud as he can, hands cupped over his mouth.

The beat breaks down and everyone skids in unison across the dance floor, scuffling side to side at Harry and Louis’ lead. The people standing along the sidelines eagerly chant along to the rhythmic “Oh’s”, clapping and dancing in place. Their moves are contagious and soon there isn’t a single person standing still in the room, instead jamming along to the iconic 90’s anthem.

Stop! Hammer Time!

They pump their arms back and forth while running in place, moving in long, full strides. The Running Man part of the dance was always their favorite part and Harry and Louis never failed to have fun with it. Harry always does this weird thing were he combines the Running Man with the Chicken Dance. He calls it the Chicken Run and it never ceases to entertain Louis immensely.

Wave your hands! Oh-oh oh oh oh-oh oh! Wave your hands!

All the people on the dance floor bend their knees, raising their arms above their heads and whipping them around in a full body circle. With the exception of Harry, who continues to ridiculously flap and flail his arms around while also sprinting in place like a goof. It almost throws Louis’ concentration as he tries to keep from doubling over with laughter.

Go with the flow in a spin. If you can’t move to this, then you probably are dead. So wave your hands in the air! Bust a few moves, run your fingers through your hair...

Harry slides both of his hands through his flowing hair dramatically, body rolling along to the downbeat. This time Louis’ concentration is shot to shit, and he bursts into a fit of giggles, eyes crinkled with amusement.

Move! Slide your rump! Just for a minute, let’s all do the bump!

They pivot around in a slight circle in time to the tempo, hips thrusting from side to side. Harry and Louis pump their arms back and forth at their sides as they roll their pelvises rhythmically.

...Bump, bump, bump, yeah!

Louis knocks his hip against Harry’s cheekily, and now it’s Harry’s turn to break into an amused cackle, face splitting with laughter. They jump around each other in a small circle, alternating hips as they bump against each other playfully.
Every time you see me, that Hammer’s just so hype. I’m dope on the floor and I’m magic on the mic…

Louis and Harry can’t help but make ridiculously goofy faces at each other while they dance, falling right into step with their teenage selves. Louis is all high energy and loud, calculated movements, while Harry is silly and playful with wild moves and random interpretations. They’ve made the dance their own and they compliment each other seamlessly.

I toured around the world from London to the Bay. It’s Hammer! Go Hammer! MC Hammer, yo Hammer! And the rest can go and play!

And Louis can’t seem to stop watching Harry, unable to tear his gaze away. He looks so incredibly young, and carefree. Just like how he did when they would perform this same dance in Louis’ bedroom. His free-spirited curls flop down in front of his beaming face as he bops along in time with Louis. And he lets out cute little laughs every so often, like he can’t believe he’s really doing this. But his eyes are so, so bright and unclouded, and his dimples are adorably deep and Louis can’t help but be a bit in awe of him.

U can’t touch this! Oh-oh oh oh oh-oh oh…

“Tell them again, Harry!” Louis calls, leaning up against Harry with a practiced serious expression. “What can’t they do?!?”

“Can’t touch this!” Harry giggles, unable to keep a straight face, before they both go back to shuffling around each other, romping to and fro across the dance floor.

…Oh-oh oh oh oh-oh oh! Oh-oh oh oh oh-oh oh!

“Stop!” Louis and Harry shout at the same time, pausing momentarily to face each other with panting chests and arms raised high above their heads. “Hammer Time!”

They fall right back into the Running Man routine, lifting their knees in sync to leap about in place, popping their shoulders back and forth.

Oh-oh oh oh oh-oh oh! Can’t touch this! Oh-oh oh oh oh-oh oh!

Louis’ Running Man starts resembling more of a skiing man as he straightens out his legs and arms, sliding and gliding around in circles. He’s obviously having a bit too much fun with it, exercising the liberty of free interpretation.

Oh-oh oh oh oh-oh oh! Can’t touch this! Oh-oh oh oh oh-oh oh!

Harry looks over to Louis and something flashes over his eyes. It’s eerily similar to how he first looked at him earlier today at the studio. There’s a sadness laced throughout his expression, a sudden darkness shrouding his features. The bubbly dimpled smile that was just glowing on his face starts to fade away as his movements also begin to cease, until he is simply standing alongside Louis motionless.

…Yeah, u can’t touch this…

Louis glances over at him in confusion and Harry starts shaking his head slowly, taking a few steps back. His eyes convey so much that he isn’t saying, so much that he most likely can’t begin to express with words. And even without understanding why, Louis can feel what is about to happen before it’s even said.
“Oh-oh oh oh oh oh oh!”

“Louis—I can’t…I’m sorry…”

Louis frowns at a loss, stopping his own movements to give Harry his full attention. He reaches over to grab Harry’s arm, trying to offer any sort of comfort. “Haz, what’s wrong? Are you ok?”

Harry avoids eye contact, gaze dropping down to his booted feet. “I just—I have to go.”

“What are you—wait, don’t…” Louis tries to hold onto him, tries to stop him from slipping from his grasp, but Harry is already moving away.

“Sorry.” Harry mumbles softly, completely unlatching himself from Louis’ gentle hold.

“Haz! Wait! Don’t leave…” Louis calls, standing stationary in the center of the dance floor as the music continues to pump around him. “Harry!”

Harry doesn’t turn around or even pause at the sound of his name, instead disappearing into the throng of dancing people around the outskirts of the floor.

“Harry! Harry?” Louis starts to go after him immediately, already walking off when he feels an urgent tug at his arm.

“Tommo, you’re absolutely brilliant!” Liam gushes, pulling him in for a surprise embrace. “I could kiss you!”

“Uh huh…yeah.” Louis hums distractedly, eyes still trained on where Harry just vanished into the crowd. Louis unwraps himself from Liam’s arms and stands up on his tiptoes in the hopes of seeing any indication of Harry, but he’s long gone. Harry is gone and Louis doesn’t understand what just happened.

They were having such a good time and everything felt so familiar and so…right. Just in that moment, that one fleeting moment, Harry and Louis were best friends again. They were laughing and joking, smiling and dancing like not a single minute had passed, like nothing had changed between them.

But Louis can tell that so much has changed in the many years that he has no recollection of. So much has shifted in their dynamic, to the point were it’s essentially unrecognizable. The Harry he knows has never acted like this. He’s never been distant or closed off, he’s always been an open book, so much so that Louis never had to wonder or guess what Harry was feeling inside. All his questions could be answered with one deep look into Harry’s eyes; but now Harry’s eyes are guarded and Louis feels hopelessly out of his element. And unfortunately there is not much he can do about it now.

“Well, come on, come on! You can’t stop now.” Liam wraps his arm around Louis’ shoulders, guiding him back onto the dance floor. “You’re the life of the party!”

“Right, yeah…” Louis nods, looking over his shoulder one last time.

And as he looks around the exultant partygoers and eager schmoozers praising his name, Louis tries not to let the feeling of disappointment wash over him as he finds the crowd around him just as Harry-less as before.
Chapter Four

So practice is hell on earth.

Niall woke Louis up bright and early at 6 A.M., with a cup of horridly bitter cold brew coffee and a protein shake that tasted more like dirt than a shake. But Louis was so exhausted, he hardly paid any mind to it as he swallowed it down.

It felt like Louis slept for only seven minutes. It couldn’t have been any longer than that because he was at the gala so late the night before. He somehow became the life of the party and it wasn’t until the early hours of the morning that Louis crawled into bed. And as if getting up early wasn’t enough, Louis woke up with the worst headache imaginable. It’s unlike any headache or migraine he’s ever experienced, so he figures this must be what a hangover really feels like. He did indulge in his fair share of exotically colored fruity drinks after all.

At the stadium, despite Louis’ incessant moaning and groaning over his first hangover, no one showed a single ounce of mercy or a pardoning glance. And as soon as his geared up feet hit the green of the pitch the real suffering began.

He’s the team captain, which along with other responsibilities basically means that Louis runs most of the drills during practice. That would be great and cool and all, if he actually knew what the drills were. Everyone looks to him to call out formations and bark orders and lead the structure of the team, but Louis hasn’t a clue. Thankfully, one of the coaches observing along the sidelines steps in to give the lads some direction. But even after Louis gains a vague understanding of what he is meant to be doing, he still keeps falling behind.

It’s hard, infinitely harder than any of the practice sessions he’s ever done at school. Like going from zero to a million in the blink of an eye. It’s not that he doesn’t understand the game, or that he doesn’t have foundational skills, because he does of course. It’s just that his current skill level doesn’t nearly match the level of his fellow teammates nor the superstar level that everyone expects him to be playing at. Also combined with the lovely fact that Louis feels utterly nauseous and queasy the entire time.

It doesn’t get any better when the Rovers split into two mock teams for a scrimmage game. Louis puts forth as valiant of an effort as he can muster, but the harder he tries the more nauseated he feels. The ground is spinning and flip-flopping so much, Louis can hardly dribble the ball across the field in a straight line, let alone pass it to his teammates or god forbid attempt to score a goal. He feels like he is on a tilt-a-whirl and he can only imagine how dumb he must look blundering about the pitch like his bloody head’s been chopped off.

Louis misses every single goal he attempts to score by a longshot, he trips and stumbles more than he
dribbles and the ball is easily stolen from his dawdling feet. Everyone is just so fast and so talented, it’s too much to keep up with. It gets so horrendous that his fellow teammates stop passing the ball to him altogether, essentially pretending like he doesn’t exist, which to be honest is a wise decision on their part, Louis thinks. He fucking sucks so bad no one would ever believe he was a professional player, let alone the damn captain of the team.

As Louis’ ass roughly hits the grassy pitch for the 27th time today—but who’s counting—he decides to make his permanent home on the ground, spreading out his limbs and giving up. At least down here everything isn’t spinning out of control.

The scrimmage game continues on around him and as Louis makes no signs of getting up and returning to his position, the coaches blow their whistles from the sidelines ending the game.

Rusty jogs up to Louis in the middle of the field. “Get off your ass, Tommo! What’s up with you? Have you never played footie before??”

Louis moans miserably, lying flat on his back with his eyes closed. Everything hurts.

“No seriously, what is going on with you?” Rusty asks, sounding surprisingly a bit concerned. “Ever since I picked you up in London you’ve been an absolute mess. You’re not even yourself.”

His head. His stomach. His legs. His arms. Hell, even his ass hurts from all the knee squats and lunges. And, of course, the falling. Can’t forget the falling.

“We have a championship title on the line here.” Rusty reminds seriously. “This is not the time for you to start fucking shit up. Or start going through an identity crisis.”

“Louis, are you sick? Should I be worried?” Liam questions with high amounts of concern, joining Rusty’s side while balancing a note filled clipboard and his phone. “I don’t know what I just watched, but I’m gonna need way more from you than that. You play better than this, Tommo.”

“I mean, if you could even call that playing.” Rusty adds with a discouraged shake of his head. “I’ve seen dogs pass a fucking ball better than that.”

“A dog, really?” Liam frowns disapprovingly, scowling at Rusty. “He wasn’t all that bad.”

“Oh, no? Come on, let’s bring AirBud out here and prove how easily a dog could take his place right now.”

Liam and Rusty might as well be speaking in Latin as they bicker back and forth to themselves, because all Louis can possibly comprehend or think about is how his stomach is churning and his head is pounding. Even though he thought he was safe from the motion sickness while lying perfectly still on the field, everything starts spinning once again and Louis feels like he’s going to be sick.

“Louis?” Liam calls again, squatting down to get a better look at him. “Maybe you should hit the steam room before your next session. You’ve got weight training in the gym in thirty.”

With only the slight concept of possibly commanding his body to move again, Louis sits up and promptly pukes into the grass, spewing his insides all over the grass. It’s unsurprisingly tinged bright blue just like his favorite fruit filled drink, contrasting with the green of the pitch. Naturally, it doesn’t taste half as good coming up as it did going down.

“Ugh god! What the fuck!” Rusty shouts, jumping back to avoid the neon colored spew. “That’s disgusting!”
Liam on the other hand seems completely unfazed, most likely having seen worse as Louis’ manager. “Well, now that you got that out of your system, are you feeling any better?”

Louis looks up at Liam blearily, hair flopped over his eyes and matted to his forehead with sweat. With the aftertaste of sick in his mouth and the incessant roaring of his internal organs, Louis feels like he’s been run over by a freight train. He doesn’t even have the strength to answer Liam properly, afraid of what might come pouring from his mouth if he opens it again, so he can only hope the look of sheer defeat in his eyes conveys the message.

Liam walks around and squats down next to Louis on the side of the grass not covered in vomit. “Listen, I get that maybe you’re having an off day—”

“An off week, more like.” Rusty corrects pointedly, standing above Liam.

Liam flicks his eyes over his shoulder to glare at Rusty, before resettling his attention on Louis. “As I was saying, you might be having an off day today but this is The Premier, Louis. We don’t have time to fuck around. You’re the captain of the team, you set the tone for everyone else. You’ve just gotta find the strength to suck it up and be a good example to your teammates. We can’t win this without you at your best.” Liam emboldens, giving his best pick-me-up speech. “So take a moment and get your mind right and I’ll see you in the gym, ok?”

Liam claps a hand on Louis’ shoulder encouragingly as he rights himself back up to his feet. “You can complain all you want, but you’ll thank me later. If I didn’t work you hard, you wouldn’t be here. No pain, no gain. Or should I say Payne.” Liam emphasizes, chuckling lightly to himself.

“They sound exactly the same, you know?” Rusty feels the need to say. “It’s like you just said pain twice. There is virtually no difference.”

“Oh shut the fuck up.” Liam growls, heading back towards the sidelines as Rusty follows after him. “I’ve had enough of you, Russell.”

Louis whimpers pitifully and collapses himself back down on the ground, folding his arms over his face as he fights the urge to burst into tears. Liam is right of course and Louis’ mind completely agrees with his sentiment, but the problem lies in getting his unwilling body to cooperate when all he wants to do is curl up into a little ball and cry.

So yeah, practicing with The Doncaster Rovers is pure hell.

By the time Louis gets home, his house is absolutely spotless, restored once again to its immaculate glory by his housekeeping staff. Coming home to a clean house marginally brightens Louis’ shattered mood. It’s almost hard to tell Louis ever wreaked havoc on this place, not a single thing is out of place. If only his housecleaners were around when Louis didn’t feel like doing his chores back home. That’d be sick.

Louis trudges slowly towards the stairs, legs groaning their protests with each step. One full day of training and Louis already feels like dying. Every single muscle in his body hates him, Louis is certain. How does his current self put up with this day in and day out? Well, perhaps he is used to it
because he was eased into it over time. Seventeen years’ worth of time.

Although his thirty-year-old body may be somewhat accustomed to this level of activity, his thirteen-year-old mind is sure as hell not. Mind over matter is complete bullshit and Louis has no idea how to zone in on whatever skills his body might possess. So instead he suffers with strained achy limbs and dreadfully sore muscles.

“Ow…ow…ow.” Louis winces with each step up the evil, merciless stairs. What he really should have put in this house is a goddamn elevator. Climbing the stairs feels scarily similar to reliving the pain of training at the gym, as he spent an hour jogging up stairs on the Stairmaster. If he concentrates hard enough, Louis can practically still hear Liam and his coaches screaming at him to move faster and pick up the pace as the sweat pouring down his face mixed with the exhausted tears pricking his eyes. He might very well be scarred for life.

“Fuck these stairs…actually fuck all stairs…fuck that stair and fuck you too…” He groans bitterly at the steps beneath him. He grips the railing like a lifeline, heavily relying on his upper body to alleviate his legs a bit. The stairs seem never ending, just like they had on that malicious contraption of an exercise machine and each one feels like a personal attack on his will to live. For the love of god, all he wants to do is just lay down.

It may have taken him ten minutes and a stream of profanities, but Louis finally makes it to the second floor. With his exhausted eyes half open, Louis plods down the hall, pushing the door open to his master bedroom and nearly shitting himself as he stumbles upon the sight before him.

“Oh my god!” Louis startles, nearly falling over on his weakened legs, clutching his heart in shock. “It’s you!”

Louis is suddenly very much awake as he gawks at the unexpected sight of a very hot and very sweaty man doing what appears to be some kind of yoga pose on his bedroom floor. How this naked French man continues to give Louis heart attacks is beyond him. Although he isn’t exactly naked this time, shirtless and glistening, yes, but not naked.

Also, on a side note, Louis really needs to stop referring to him as the naked French man. His name is Bae. Or is it Raphael? Or it might be Raphy? Fucking hell, Louis is too tired for this.

“Ah mon amour, you’re home.” Raphael smiles warmly at him, untangling himself from his flexible position on the floor. He stands to his feet and greets Louis properly with an affectionate kiss to his cheek. “I’ve missed you so much, it’s wonderful to see you.”

“Um…yes, I am home, but what are you doing here?” Louis wonders, glad to see that his supposed boyfriend at least has some clothes on this time. “I thought I left you in London.”

“Yeah, remember we planned for me to meet you here tonight? Once my shoot was over?” Raphael explains with a slight unsure frown to his features, accent heavily coating his words. “But I almost didn’t come after you walked out on me yesterday. And you didn’t answer any of my texts. Are you mad at me? I don’t know what I did, but I’m so sorry, Loulou.” He throws his arms around Louis, hunching down to bury his head in the crook of Louis’ neck. “We argue so much, but we were doing so well before. I don’t want to fight. I’m so sorry.”

Louis stands still, not knowing how else to react as his boyfriend’s arms synching around him, heat radiating from his body. Raphael holds him tight as he starts rambling what Louis assumes are incessant apologies in French.

“Je suis désolé, mon amour. Pardonnez-moi s’il vous plaît. Je déteste quand tu es en colère contre
moi. Ça me brise le cœur. Je suis désolé, je suis désolé! Je t’aime.”

“Uhh…”

“Please forgive me, mon amoureux. I didn’t mean to upset you.” Raphael begs, desperately clinging to Louis. Any minute now Louis almost expects him to start crying. He seems like he’d be a very emotional and sensitive man. But it’s kind of endearing that he cares so much.

“Ok listen…Raphy? You do go by Raphy, right?” Louis tests uncertainly, gently holding Raphael out at arms length by his much larger shoulders. “That’s what I usually call you?”

“You can call me anything you want, baby.” Raphael mumbles lowly as he presses closer. He’s quite a bit bigger than Louis and when he looks down at him, the heat of his gaze takes Louis completely by surprise.

Louis immediately blushes, breaking eye contact. He kinda forgot how ridiculously gorgeous his boyfriend is and it’s a bit nerve-wracking if he’s honest. Especially all up close and personal like this. “Ok um Raphy, well first of all, my French is shit.”

“Oh no, but we speak Français all the time.” Raphael reminds, sounding genuinely confused as he runs his hands up and down Louis’ arms. “You’ve gotten so good at it. What happened?”

Louis is not about to go through this whole ordeal again. Telling the truth only sets him back and brings about more confusion than necessary. And if it wasn’t already said, Louis is too fucking tired for this. “I um…bumped my head? Yeah—really reaaally hard.” He lies, holding a hand to his temple and wincing dramatically for emphasis. “Everything is kinda fuzzy, so…yeah…”

“Aww, my poor baby.” Raphael worries instantly, cupping both his hands to the sides of Louis’ head. “Are you ok? Does it hurt? Do you need to lay down? Or I could—”

“Uh…I’m fine, I’m fine. Really.” Louis nods slowly, once again endeared by how much of a sweetheart Raphy is. “It’s just that because of my…um head…I probably won’t be the same as I uh…usually am? And I might forget things or ask dumb questions, you know…”

An amused smile spreads across Raphael’s face. “It’s normally me asking dumb questions that annoy you. We’re switching places.”

Louis can’t imagine himself ever getting annoyed by Raphy, but whatever. “Yeah…so basically I have no idea what you’re saying to me in French, but I do think it’s quite lovely.” He tries with a small apologetic smile. “And I’m not mad at you. Although you did give me a heart attack—again. But I don’t think you meant to do it either time.”

“So I am forgiven then?”

“I don’t see why not.” Louis shrugs.

With that, Raphael leans forward and presses a hot kiss to Louis’ lips, taking him completely by surprise. His large hands roam the curves of Louis’ waist with well established ease. “Baby, I missed you. So much.” He whipsers against Louis’ skin, as his lips travel down to his neck. “I know it’s only been a day but—”

“Whoa, wait!” Louis jumps away, once his startled, slow mind catches up to his tired body. It’s all so fast, too fast.

“What’s wrong, Loulou?” Raphael pouts, wasting no time in once again closing the gap between
them, pressing their chests together. He leans down to nibble on Louis’ ear and the feel of his lips really tickles so Louis can’t help but giggle as he squirms out of Raphy’s hold.

First of all, Louis hardly knows this man, insanely hot and adorable boyfriend or not. And second, Louis is nowhere near ready to do any of the things he and his boyfriend probably do together. And considering how Louis’ very first encounter with Raphy played out, it’s pretty safe to say they probably do *It* quite a lot. So Raphy is probably not going to stop bothering him about doing *It*, so boundaries must be set.

“Um…my head hurts?” Louis starts as he puts ample distance between them, which isn’t a lie exactly, his head is still aching from his hangover. He racks his brain to think of any other believable excuse to keep their relationship physically platonic. “And uh I just…I have to be really focused for The Premier? Right…yeah? And um…I’m training really hard for this so I can’t have uh…distractions. Yeah.”

“You mean I’m a distraction, yes?” Raphael grins mischievously, slowly moving in closer yet again. He is just so unreasonably attractive, but still somehow so sweet and cute. And his thick accent doesn’t help at all, it only makes him even more attractive. Louis kinda just wants to stare at him, but at the same time he can hardly look at Raphy without having his face flush red. “Sure, y-yeah—yes.” Louis stutters shyly, peeking up at him.

“So…no sex?”

Louis chokes on nothing but air, somehow simultaneously paling like a ghost while also once again blushing scarlet red. His eyes widen and his mouth goes dry, and he definitely did not just imagine the sudden spike in his heart rate. “Absolutely not.”

“Ooh, but how am I supposed to keep my hands off you.” Raphael mopes sadly, a look of tragic longing in his eye.

Louis’ brightly flourished cheeks only deepen with that; he probably looks like a freshly ripe tomato. “I…um—well if you can’t then um…you can’t stay here with…w-with uh me.”

“You’re kicking me out now?” Raphael pines dreadfully, hand over his heart like he’s been stabbed.

Louis shrugs awkwardly, opening and closing his mouth. He never stutters this much but Louis just isn’t used to all this attention. “I—uh I mean…maybe? I dunno.”

“But if I can do it, and I promise not to distract you, I can stay?”

“Oh mon petit amour, je t’adore. Please let me stay.” Raphael begs, pouting his perfectly formed lips and batting his long eyelashes that gently line his sincere hazel eyes. He’s like an adorable overgrown French puppy and it’s very manipulative, but it’s also very hard to say no to. “Please, I’ll be very good. I won’t even tempt you, I swear it. Je jure sur mon cœur.”

Louis looks up at him and narrows his eyes. “You can’t walk around naked, it’s…too much.”

“You definitely can’t do that.”
“What?” He asks innocently, blinking those goddamn long lashes slowly at Louis again. “What did I do?”

“That!” Louis points at his face. “Look at me like that—like heated and…it’s also…too much.”

“This is my face! You don’t like my face?”

“No…no, I didn’t say t-that.” Louis stumbles, he happens to be a growing fan of his face, to be honest. “But your face is too much! I think it’s the look in your eyes.”

“I’ll wear sunglasses.” Raphael teases, holding both of his hands over his pretty hazel eyes dramatically. “Or a bag over my head. Anything for you, mon amour.”

Louis giggles, biting his lower lip with amusement. “You’re kind of funny.”

“I do try.” Raphael bends down for an overly-exaggerated proper bow, peeking up at Louis through his lashes. “Does that mean I can stay?”

“Ok, fine.” Louis concedes slowly with a grin. He has to admit it would be nice to have some company in this giant house.

Raphael squeals with excitement and pulls Louis tightly against him before releasing him suddenly as though he has made a huge mistake. He holds his palms up, expression outpouring innocence. “Oh! I’m sorry! Is that bad? Is that too much? Did I distract you? I’m sorry, Loulou. I didn’t mean to, you’re just hard to stay away from.”

“It’s ok, Raphy.” Louis giggles bashfully. He really is adorable; Louis wouldn’t mind keeping him. He’s already made Louis feel a little less like shit since coming home from practice.

“I love you, baby.” Raphael kisses his hand ever so lightly, as though Louis is made of glass. And Louis swoons a bit at the idea of this gorgeous and impossibly sweet man loving him. “Let me take a shower and then I’ll cook you dinner. You must be so hungry.”

Louis is kind of hungry now that he mentioned it. But he hadn’t felt like making anything with exhaustion overpowering the need to eat. It’s a nice feeling having a boyfriend who is willing to do it for him, just because he cares about him.

“You’re very much of a romantic aren’t you?”

“Eh, I’m French.” Raphael shrugs casually with a knowing smile. “Romance is my native tongue.”

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The next day at practice isn’t nearly as bad. It’s still horribly bad, but not as bad, and that’s what matters. Louis feels as though he has a tiny leg up this time because he thankfully lacks a hangover and a headache.

But he is still in no way living up to the All Star Louis Tomlinson brand name by any means yet. At the very least, however, Louis remained standing on his feet the entire time and didn’t fall down on his ass once.

It’s the small victories.
When Louis gets home, Raphy greets him cheerfully at the door. “Bonjour, mon amant!” He pecks both of his cheeks lightly. “How was practice today? Any better?”

Over the dinner that Raphy cooked for him last night, which was incredible by the way, Louis told his boyfriend all about how he nearly died during practice. And Raphy listened quietly, nodding and reacting at all the right times as Louis told his tale. After he was done, Raphy even went on about how he’s proud of Louis anyway and that he loves him regardless. It was all very supportive and encouraging and Louis really needed it. He misses having someone to talk to.

“A little better, yeah. I’m still a disaster though really.”

“Loulou, as long as I’ve known you, you have never been a disaster at anything.” Raphael comforts. “Just give it time, you’ll get it right again.”

“Thanks, Raphy.” Louis sighs, smiling weakly and wishing that were the truth.

“How about we go out tonight and take your mind off things. We could go dancing!” He places his right hand lightly on Louis’ waist and laces his left with Louis’ fingers, leading him right into an impromptu waltz. Although Louis is hardly moving himself on his own accord, more so just tiredly leaning against Raphael as he sways him around.

Louis yawns as exhaustion waves over him, resting his head down on Raphy’s shoulder. “I’m pretty sure my legs would snap in half if I even attempted to dance.”

“Ok, no dancing.” Raphael stops swaying but keeps holding Louis upright, otherwise he’d probably fall over. “How about Italian?”

“You’re French.” Louis quips with his eyes closed.

“Oui, but I love Italian food.” Raphael impassions. “Truly, I just adore food. All types of food. I have no prejudice towards food. Eating is one of my main joys in life. Food makes the world go round.”

“I like your accent.” Louis tells him sleepily, hardly listening to what he is saying more so how he says it. He speaks in such an elegant manner, a regal and romantic air to how he forms words, only intensified by the deepness of his voice.

Louis is slowly becoming a bit infatuated with his boyfriend. Raphael is so genuinely sweet and warmhearted. He’s very down to earth and respectful for someone so famous and good looking. And he still manages to be quite fun, he sort of reminds Louis of Harry in some ways.

Raphael chuckles, rubbing soothing circles against Louis’ upper back. “I can do yours as well.”

“No, you can not, French boy.” Louis disbelieves, standing up straight and tapping his chest.

“I’m an actor, chéri. I can impersonate most accents.”

Louis raises an eyebrow curiously. “Alright then, do it.”

Raphael mirrors Louis’ cocked eyebrow, narrowing his eyes in challenge before speaking in an impeccable South Yorkshire accent. “I think you sound a bit like this, right love? Yeah, yeah a bit more stressed about it on the front of your tongue, innit?”

“No way…” Louis gasps in shock, gaping up at his no longer French sounding boyfriend. If Louis didn’t know him, he could easily pass for a native and Louis wouldn’t even bat an eyelash. “Raphy!
You actually sound proper British!”

“I’m really quite talented, you know?” Raphael continues in the same accent, grinning proudly.

“Ok, you can stop now. I mean, I’m impressed, but I want the French voice back.”

“What are you goin’ on about, mate?” Raphael frowns as though genuinely confused. “I’m from Donny, just there on the south side, yeah.”

“Quit it!” Louis pouts. “It’s creeping me out!”

Raphael bursts into laughter, cracking himself up. “Ok, ok! C’est fini. I will stop since it disturbs you so. And because I’m starving. I know the perfect place to go.”

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Raphael takes Louis to a posh little Italian restaurant on the far side of town and they sit in a sectioned off booth in the back so they won’t be disturbed. It’s still so weird to think that Louis is a celebrity who is also dating a celebrity. It must be impossible for them to do anything public without being noticed.

The menu is completely in Italian and as a man of many gifts, Raphy apparently speaks Italian as well, claiming his grandmother lives in Italy and he spent every summer with her as a kid. Since Louis can’t understand anything on the menu, Raphy orders for him, something he apparently does a lot anyways. Louis sticks to water this time drink wise, even though Raphy insists that the Merlot pairs well with the Rigatoni con la Pajata he ordered. It’s not worth it when Louis knows very well that the Merlot will certainly not pair well with his footie training in the morning.

They enjoy their dinner together and Raphy covers the bill without question, tipping the staff graciously. They only make it a few steps outside of the building before Raphy stops suddenly, remembering something.

“Oh, merde…” Raphael curses under his breath, turning around towards the restaurant. “I forgot my jacket inside. Wait for me? I’ll be right back.”

Louis nods as Raphael lets go of his hand to go back inside. He stands alone on the sidewalk, kicking his feet around and humming to himself as he waits.

“Louis?”

Louis lifts his head up at the sound of his name being called and immediately recognizes the face walking towards him. “Harry! Oh my god! Hi!”

Harry’s lengthy hair is half tossed up in a messy bun while the rest falls to his shoulders. He pushes up his clear framed glasses and offers Louis a small wave. “Hey…I thought that was you. Um—how are you?”

“I’m good!” Louis beams brightly, surprising Harry by wrapping him up in a warm hug. “It’s so good to see you again, Harry!”

“Yeah…I’m um…sorry for the other night.” Harry apologizes as he straightens back out, adjusting
his glasses on his nose. “Leaving like that…”

“No, it’s ok! I’m just happy that you came at all. I don’t know what I would have done without you. You were brilliant!” Louis enthuses, touching Harry’s arm lightly. “I had a lot of fun dancing with you again.”

“Yeah…” Harry smiles weakly, tearing his gaze away in favor of looking down at his feet.

Louis can sort of tell that Harry doesn’t really want to talk about this for some reason, so he decides to change the subject. “So Harry, what are you doing here by yourself?”

Harry stuffs his hands in his front jean pockets, looking back up. “Oh, I was actually doing a bit of shopping with—”

“Babe! You won’t believe what I just bought!”

A dark haired man melds himself to Harry’s side, draping one arm around Harry’s neck affectionately. He’s very pretty, almost too pretty with sun-kissed olive skin and honey brown eyes. He flutters his long eyelashes at Harry, entangling his fingers into his hair as he pecks the corner of his mouth.

Louis blinks in confusion, completely taken aback by the interaction. He frowns at Harry, looking for some kind of explanation for all this.

“Oh…uh Louis, this is Zayn, my fiancé.” Harry answers Louis’ wordless question, gesturing towards the man glued to his side. “Zayn, this is Louis, my um…childhood friend.”

“Fiancé!” Louis questions dubiously with wide eyes and a slack jaw. “Harry, you’re engaged?”

“I see you’ve spent so much time talking about me.” Zayn teases, bumping his hip against Harry’s. Harry leans into him in return, giving Zayn a small private smile.

But Louis hardly even registers the exchange between them, still trying to wrap his mind around what this all means. Harry is engaged? Like? To be married? Since when? Who is this pretty, long-eyedelashed man and why is he marrying his Harry? Sure, Harry is allegedly a grown man now and he can do what he wants but…still. Who is this guy? And why does him being all over Harry bother Louis so much?

“Oh my god, I couldn’t believe when Harry told me that you guys grew up together.” Zayn starts up again, smiling enthusiastically at Louis. “How unreal! You’re a fucking legend, man. It’s so nice to meet you.” He extends his free arm out for a shake.

“Oh…wow uh—yes. It’s nice to meet you too…” Louis takes his hand slowly in a daze.

“I’m rubbish at anything sport related, but I truly admire what you do.” Zayn says genuinely, rubbing circles in Harry’s back. “Congratulations on making it to the championship.”

“Erm thanks.” Louis nods dismissively, more interested in learning anything he can about Harry’s surprise love interest. “So Zayn, are you a photographer like Harry?”

“Oh no, Zayn is a journalist actually.” Harry replies, glancing at Zayn. “He writes for the South Yorkshire Times.”

“Well, soon the be the New York Times.” Zayn amends proudly.
Louis looks between them in confusion, obviously missing something. “…What?”

“I got an offer to join the news staff in New York.” Zayn explains, hardly containing his excitement. “We’re moving next month after the wedding!”

“You’re moving to America?” Louis asks in disbelief, more directed at Harry than Zayn. His mouth falls slack for the second time in the last ten minutes. Is there any more life changing news Harry wants to drop on him? Honestly, what the fuck? “But Harry…you love England.”

“Yeah well, we’re still discussing it—we haven’t quite—”

“Yes, we are!” Zayn enthuses, answering for Harry. “That’s the plan!”

What the hell is going on? Louis has hardly known this Harry for more than a few short days and he is already making plans to move to a completely new country with his soon to be husband. And Louis would have been none the wiser. This is starting to get quite out of control.

Louis is so distracted by blatantly staring at the engaged couple in front of him, that he hardly notices the return of his own significant other.

“Hey baby, are you ready to go?” Raphael slips his arm around Louis’ waist, chastely kissing his temple before noticing the present company. “Oh, hello!”

“Oh, um…this is Raphy.” Louis introduces, blinking back to reality.

“He is the only person to ever call me that.” Raphael giggles fondly as he extends his hand out. “Most just call me Raphael.”

“Oh my god, you’re Raphael Moreau.” Harry smiles in recognition, shaking his hand as though he is utterly star struck. “I love your movies, big fan. You inspire me to speak better French.”

“Ah merci, merci! Thank you so much, that warms my heart.” Raphael beams appreciatively, before looking down expectantly at Louis. “Loulou, my love, who are your lovely friends?”

“Right—sorry.” Louis fumbles, realizing he didn’t finish introducing them. “Um…this is Harry, my…um yeah—and this is his friend, Zayn.”

“Fiancé.” Zayn corrects as he reaches to shake Raphael’s hand. “Wonderful to meet you, Raphael.”

“Oh right—shit. Sorry. It’s just so…weird…” Louis tries. Truthfully, he doesn’t even want to get used to the idea. Not that Harry being engaged is a bad thing, it’s just that Louis doesn’t particularly like the idea of his once best mate completely moving on without him. Although Louis supposes it’s not much his place to have an opinion on that anymore.

“You know, we should all do dinner together sometime?” Zayn proposes lightly.

Harry immediately starts shaking his head at the suggestion, body going stiff. “Uh…I’m sure they’re very busy people and—”

“Ahh, that would be perfect!” Raphael gushes, face lighting up. “Come over! I’ll cook for you!”

“We wouldn’t want to impose—”

“No! We would love to have you over! Right, baby?” Raphael looks down at Louis, squeezing his hip.
“Yeah, sure.” Louis agrees, deciding to seize any possible opportunity to hang out with Harry again. Even though it unfortunately won’t be just the two of them. But regardless he needs to learn more about the man Harry might leave the country for. “And, Raphy is a really good cook. Like a little French chef, you’ll love whatever he makes. He’s great.”

“You’re so sweet, mon amour.” Raphael preens under Louis’ praise, leaning down to gently kiss the crown of his head.

“You really don’t have to do that.” Harry strongly insists again, still shaking his head.

“Oh, no please I really want to! If you’re a friend of mon Loulou, you’re a friend to me.” Raphael pledges in sincerity, pulling Louis closer to his side, nestling him like he’s his favorite treasure.

“Aww, that is so adorable.” Zayn coos, resting his head down on Harry’s shoulder and snuggling against him. “Aren’t they cute, H?”

“Ha yeah…the cutest.” Harry mumbles briefly, with a strained smile.

“Oh no, you two are picture perfect.” Raphael compliments, causing Louis to nearly flat-out roll his eyes. They aren’t really that perfect. Louis is sure they have plenty of problems; he just doesn’t know what they are—yet. “Please allow me to cook for you beautiful people. I insist!”

“That would be great, we can’t wait.” Zayn accepts the offer before nudging Harry’s side. “Babe, don’t be rude. Give Louis’ your number so you can make dinner plans.”

Harry looks like he wants to protest again, opening his mouth to say something, but ultimately deciding against it. Instead he quickly exchanges numbers with Louis, typing out his number as a new contact on Louis’ phone and calling himself so he’ll have Louis’.

“Well, we should probably be going.” Harry decides after he has handed Louis back his phone. He slips his hand into Zayn’s, tugging on him urgently.

“Bye! See you soon!” Raphael waves gingerly with one arm still secured around Louis. “Lovely meeting you!”

Louis has an urge to grab Harry’s hand before he goes, like a muscle memory, like second nature. It feels odd not to scribble his invisible goodbyes against Harry’s palm. It feels unnatural and even a bit uncomfortable to just let him run off like that without a proper farewell. But as much as it confounds Louis, maybe times really have changed and maybe it’s not as appropriate as it once was, all things considered.

“I just don’t know, Niall.” Louis sighs heavily, leaning against the passenger side car window. He’s got his feet kicked up on the dashboard, seat lowered back as far as possible.

“What don’t you know today, Louis?” Niall empathizes, looking over from the driver’s side.

There are a million things Louis doesn’t know, and a million more things he needs to learn, but the most pertinent of these right now are his footie skills or lack thereof. “Frankly Niall, I fucking suck. I’m off my game. Actually, I don’t think I ever even had my game to begin with? But I reaaally need
it. I’m embarrassing myself.”

Louis must admit that the news of Harry’s engagement definitely affected his training session today, not that he was doing exceedingly well before or anything. Obviously. But combined with this new distraction, Louis took several extra footballs to the face today. He just couldn’t get his mind to snap out of it. Or back into it, rather. Or…something.

And it certainly doesn’t help that Harry and Zayn are supposed to come over later this evening. Louis still doesn’t know how to act around them. It was hard enough inviting him over on the phone. Louis wants to be happy for Harry, he wants to support him and congratulate him, but it feels wrong somehow. Something inside of him feels unsettled every time he thinks about it and Louis can’t understand why.

But what he does understand right now is that he needs to get his football skills in order. It’s not like he can magically obtain the skills of a world renown athlete overnight, but he can at least try to do right by the sport. And with no better guide than Niall, Louis can only hope his personal assistant has any helpful suggestions. He’ll take anything he can get right now.

“What should I do, Ni?” Louis groans, head cast back.

“Hmm.” Niall hums to himself for a moment, turning the car into the long driveway. “Have you tried watching your old games back to learn from your old moves?”

“I can do that?” Louis wonders, sitting up with the slightest fraction of hope in his voice.

Niall laughs, sounding endeared by Louis’ genuine naivety. “Yes. That’s what a lot of players do when they need to up their game.”

“Huh…” Louis contemplates to himself. “And how exactly would I do that?”

“Come on, I’ll show you.” Niall offers, hopping out of the car.

Heading to Louis’ first floor study, Niall sets it all up for him on Louis’ laptop, pulling up multiple tabs for Louis to switch between, including ESPN’s Doncaster FC video bank and a YouTube search of Louis’ name. And just like that, all of Louis’ best career moments are at his instant disposal. Before he leaves, Niall even takes the time to explain how to pause, play, rewind and fast forward the videos and Louis loves him for it because he would without a doubt become easily confused again.

It’s kind of weird watching himself on a screen at first, but as Louis continues to observe himself play, he must admit that he’s incredibly impressed by his own skills. It may sound a bit narcissistic, but Louis would easily be a huge fan of himself. He is really good. Like, really, really good. And it seems so natural and almost effortless. There’s an instinctual confidence about him that’s so much unlike how he plays now.

Although he’s almost cocky about it at times. Louis can tell he’s showing off and to be completely honest he is not always a team player. There are many times when Louis should have passed the ball to a teammate who was in a much better position to score a goal, but instead Louis would weave his way across the field on his own, utilizing some pretty impressive footwork.

Luckily, it always seems to work out for him and he’s able to score goal after goal. And what’s even more wild is that he is met with hardly any resistance or backlash for his actions, instead the crowd praises him, which only seems to fuel Louis even more. The only people that don’t look to pleased are his fellow teammates.
Louis wonders when he became such a hotshot. When he plays back at school he would never dream of pulling a bigheaded stunt like that. Louis always tries his very best to be a team player and rely on the collective skills of his team instead of showing off his own. And it seems that his adult self relies on a completely opposite mentality, which is utterly baffling to Louis to say the least. Nonetheless, although his sportsmanship skills could use some work, there is still loads that Louis can learn from himself on the pitch as far as technical skills go.

Along the side corner of the YouTube screen window Louis notices a suggested video that catches his eye. ‘Louis Tomlinson Talks Tattoos and More!’ Intrigued, Louis clicks on the clip which places him in a casual one-on-one interview, lounging in an armchair across from a male interviewer.

“Louis, I gotta ask, mate…you have a lot of tats.”

“Yeah, yeah I've got a few, yeah.” Louis laughs lightly, holding out his bare arms and looking them over. “Quite a little collection going on, yeah.”

“Do they mean anything?” The interview questions further. “Are they for anyone in particular? I mean, like you said, you’ve got such an interesting collection. There’s a few drawings and quotes; I see you’ve got an ‘Oops’ there as well.”

“Oh yeah, it’s just one of the stupid ones, I suppose. I’ve got a lot of stupid ones to be perfectly honest. The ‘Oops’ is kinda like my justification for all of ‘em, you know what I mean?” Louis laughs it off with a dismissive shrug. “It’s quite a mess on my arm, you know? I felt like I kinda had to apologize to myself.”

“He’s lying—I’m lying.” Louis realizes, frowning a bit at himself on the screen.

Louis always makes the same face when he’s not being 100% truthful. And seventeen years have done nothing to alter his telling facial expressions, if anything it made them even more obvious. Judging by the forced laughter and shifty eyes, his ‘Oops’ tattoo is anything, but random. He may not know for sure, but Louis is fairly certain his older self got it for Harry in some way. That’s the only thing that would make sense, especially considering how tied to Harry that phrase is. Louis would be lying to himself if he ever tried to brush it off as mere coincidence. And since Harry apparently didn’t know anything about it and they aren’t friends, Louis got that tattoo all on his own.

Which leads Louis to believe that on some level, whether conscious or unconscious, his thirty-year-old self must really miss Harry. The tattoo isn’t the only clue either, Louis still has and apparently frequently wears Harry’s old jumper and he can’t pretend not to notice that even his boyfriend vaguely resembles Harry in an odd way.

All signs point to secretly missing his best mate. And truthfully, how could Louis not miss him? There is absolutely no one like Harry to him and it still doesn’t make sense why Louis would ever part with him in his life.

Louis slaps his laptop closed, sliding the computer off of his lap. He can’t think about this now, it’s too much to process and take in and he has tons of new moves to learn and skills to practice. He’s got a few hours before he needs to get ready for dinner, so Louis heads outside to practice on his backyard pitch.
When Louis strolls into the kitchen, freshly showered and clean after his progressive training session, he is shocked to find that Raphy is cooking enough food to feed an entire army. Louis would like to say that he joined right in to help him, but all he really ended up doing was sitting on top of the counter and tasting everything he could get his hands on. If he annoyed Raphy at all, his boyfriend would never let on.

Louis does, however, help set the huge dining room table and he places the last plate down just as the doorbell rings from the foyer. Hand in hand, Zayn and Harry arrive right on time, bringing two bottles of wine with them like cordial dinner guests. The four of them sit in coupled pairs across from each other at the end of the long table. Raphy serves the seemingly endless options of food he prepared and they eat and chat lightly, remaining mostly superficial in conversation. As a huge believer in food and an attentive host, Raphy makes sure all of their plates are piled high and their glasses are never empty.

“Louis was right, you are an amazing cook, Raphael.” Harry compliments politely.

“Oh stop it please, it'll go straight to my head and I’ll start lying to people by saying that I’m a real chef or something outrageous like that.” Raphael grins warmly, leaning back in his chair. “Oh! I have dessert as well, I almost forgot. There’s both chocolate raspberry and strawberry crème éclairs. I didn’t make them though, before you give me undeserved credit. I bought them at a lovely little bakery downtown.”

“A chocolate one sounds good.” Zayn decides after a beat.

“Chocolate for Zayn, ok.” Raphael nods, taking note in his head like a hospitable host would. “What about you, Harry?”

“Harry is more of a fruity person than a chocolaty person.” Louis answers easily, hardly thinking about it.

“I am yeah, he’s right.” Harry looks taken aback that Louis even remembers that. “I do like chocolate though. Depending on what it is.”

“But more so with fruit.” Louis explains certainly, knowing Harry’s food palate like the back of his hand. “He would pick chocolate dipped strawberries before he would ever pick chocolate cake, but in this case he would pick a strawberry crème éclair over a chocolate raspberry one, if that makes sense.”

“Exactly.” Harry smiles in slight awe of Louis’ insightful answer.

“Oh my god, you guys really were best friends.” Zayn laughs a little, looking between them in surprise. “I kind of thought you were exaggerating and you just went to the same school or something.”

“Why would I lie about that?” Harry turns to Zayn incredulously with a grin.

“I dunno H, people always lie about knowing celebrities when growing up.” Zayn defends, lifting his wine glass. “It’s easy to make shit up.”

“Says the journalist.” Harry retorts. “We really were friends once upon a time.”

“I think you should prove it.” Raphael encourages, playing devil’s advocate. “Tell us something about Louis that you’d only know if you were really childhood friends. How else can we trust you?”

“Uh…I dunno, I don’t remember anything too specific.” Harry shrugs casually. “It’s been so long,
we were so young.”

“I guess you didn’t really know him then.” Zayn quips teasingly, causing Harry’s features to morph into a discontent frown.

Louis snickers, smiling across the table at Harry. “Come on, Haz. You’ve got loads of dirt on me. Don’t embarrass me though, I’m fragile.”

“Um ok, hmm…” Harry scrunches up his nose as he thinks to himself, biting his lip in concentration until his features suddenly relax into the softest smile. “Ok I got it. So when we were about seven, I think…Louis had this little green stuffed dinosaur named Ducky that he took everywhere he went. I don’t think he ever set her down longer than two seconds.”

Raphael gets an instant kick out of it, laughing as he turns toward him in fascination. “Loulou, is this true?”

“I do—or I mean I did, yeah. 100% true. I really loved The Land Before Time.” Louis confirms, eyes crinkled. Truth be told, he was still sleeping with Ducky even in adolescence. She was covered in stains and worn ragged but Louis will love that plushy till he dies. In fact, Louis wonders where she is right now.

“He was sooo obsessed.” Harry can hardly talk about it without smiling warmly, eyes lighting up a bit at the memory. “And...um…he would drag me over to his house and we would watch the movie over and over and over again. I would ask Louis what he wanted to watch next and without fail he would get up, walk over to the VHS player and just hold down on the rewind button while holding his Ducky to his chest.”

Louis slaps a hand over his face and laughs, shoulders shaking as he remembers it all perfectly. When he peeks through his fingers, Harry is watching him with the stupidest grin painted on his face as he bites his lip.

“And then he would look me dead in the eye and say, ‘Hazza, you already know what we’re watching next’ in the sassiest little seven-year-old voice ever.” Harry recounts fondly, gaze never leaving Louis. “So we’d watch it again and Louis would curl up against me and cry every single time at all the sad bits even if he just saw it. I mean…I was crying too, of course but that’s beside the point.” Harry laughs and Louis laughs right along with him. “Anyway, Louis never got tired of it and I’m pretty sure the VHS tape broke before he ever did.”

“Yep, yep, yep.” Louis grins fondly at Harry, echoing the catchphrase of his favorite tiny dinosaur. God, he still loves Ducky. He could watch that shit right now and be at peace.

“Oh my god, you guys were those besties. This is so mind-blowing to me.” Zayn awes, mouth slightly agape. “I can’t believe my fiancé was basically weaving BFF friendship bracelets with The Louis Tomlinson as a kid. That’s precious.”

“Oh, we were not weaving friendship bracelets, Zayn.” Harry pouts at the cliché insinuation.

“We did once actually, but…” Louis starts as an actually serious joke and everyone at the table laughs. Raphael gets up to serve dessert and Louis helps him, passing cute, delicious looking éclairs to Harry and Zayn on small white plates.

“So when is the wedding?” Raphael asks as he settles back down in his seat, hand coming to rest on Louis’ knee under the table. The question is all it takes to put a damper on Louis’ mood, he was just starting to forget about that. “I loooove weddings, I always cry.”
“Just a little more than three weeks away. Right, babe?” Zayn grins, turning to Harry.

“Yeah.” Harry mirrors his fiancé’s expression, looking back at him.

“That soon, huh…?” Louis feigns a smile, chin resting on his propped up elbow as he tries not to sigh heavily.

“Mhmm.” Zayn hums happily, leaning his weight over towards Harry. “We want to have time for a nice honeymoon in Hawaii before moving to New York.”

Louis still can’t believe Harry is planning to move halfway across the globe. He’s not even the kind of person that would enjoying living in that environment long term. Vacationing, yes. Living? No. And because Louis cares, he can’t help but say as much. “But New York City is just so...fast paced and crowded. Harry, can you really get used to that?”

“It’ll be an adjustment for me…I guess.” Harry says slowly and Louis knows he didn’t imagine the little waves of doubt that flashed over his eyes.

“Well, for one, he’ll have to leave that green thing behind.”

“Green thing?” Raphael frowns in confusion at Zayn.

“My Jeep.” Harry clarifies.

“You aren’t taking Jalapeño with you?” Louis questions, sounding concerned. He doesn’t even fully understand Harry’s love for that car, but he does understand Harry and Louis knows perfectly well that anything that Harry gives a name to has a special place in his heart. It can’t be easy for him to leave something like that behind. It might just be a car to most, but it has sentimental value to Harry and that makes it important.

Harry looks like he doesn’t quite know what to say. “I um…”

“He won’t need a Jeep in New York. Thank god.” Zayn sighs with apparent relief. “I swear Harry loves that car more than me.”

“That’s not true, I love you the same.”

Zayn scowls, not all appreciating Harry’s joke.

“Kidding. Too totally kidding.” Harry reassures with a smile, draping his arm around Zayn. “I love you more, of course. I’m picking you in the end, right?”

“Barely.” Zayn pouts, but Harry leans over to kiss on his cheek and his pout quickly morphs into a giggle.

Louis really wants to express his downright outrage on this topic on Harry’s behalf, but Raphy easily moves the conversation along and Louis forces himself to bite his tongue. “So the wedding is gonna be here in England then?”

“Yeah!” Zayn nods. “It’s gonna be the cutest little backyard wedding ever.”

“Backyard?”

“Harry’s parents offered their home for the wedding, isn’t that just the sweetest?” Zayn explains.

The backyards of Harry and Louis’ childhood homes are practically one entity, not a single gate or
fence to separate them. Whenever there was a holiday or a party their mums would decorate the entire space, stringing lanterns over the awning and setting up themed tables all across the yard. It was the perfect place for family gatherings and parties and it would certainly make a lovely wedding venue.

“That sounds perfect...” Louis awes quietly as he imagines it in his head. There would be flowers everywhere, all kinds and shapes in different complimentary hues accented by gold. A live string quartet would be playing off to the side and the wedding would start right at sunset, basking their faces in warm, soft tones. And after it was all said and done they’d dance the night away under the stars bathed in the gentle glow of the moon. Well at least if he was planning the wedding that’s how it would be. Not that Louis is the one getting married anyway.

Louis clears his head, refocusing back to the conversation. Shoving his oddly wandering thoughts aside.

“It’s going to be beautiful, we’re so excited!” Zayn squeezes Harry’s hand in his.

“Wow. Wow—I… I’m just so happy for you.” Louis forces out, although he can’t entirely say his words are genuine. Zayn seems nice enough, he guesses. Zayn is gorgeous as ever and he’s very intelligent and witty with a genuinely kind spirit, but that doesn’t mean he is good enough for his best mate. Louis feels so fiercely protective over Harry in a way he never quite has before. He doesn’t know how to explain it or what exactly to make of it, but it only seems to be getting stronger.

“You both should come!” Zayn suggests and Harry visibly stiffens in his seat, blinking blankly. “How cool would that be to have your childhood bestie come to your wedding at your childhood home?”

For some reason, unbeknown to him, the thought of witnessing that makes Louis more nauseous and unsettled than he would have anticipated. Or maybe he just ate too much? He’s gotta stop overdoing it with the food, it’s making him gassy. “Um…”

“We would be honored.” Raphael gushes happily, answering for the both of them. “Like I said, I love weddings. I also love proposals. Is there an engagement story?”

Why is his boyfriend asking all these questions Louis could go the rest of his life not knowing the answer to? He doesn’t want to know about when Harry got engaged, he hardly wants to know that he is engaged in the first place.

“Oh tell them the story, babe.”

“Hmm?” Harry sucks on his wine glass, essentially avoiding the question.

“I’d love to hear it.” Louis says, trying to be supportive but sounding fake and uninterested even to his own ears.

“There’s not really a story per say…” Harry shrugs as he sets his glass back down.

“Oh never mind, I’ll do it. It’s ok.” Zayn says, patting Harry’s shoulder. “So we were in London. I went to visit Harry while he was doing an extended photography shoot. And there was an art exhibit going on downtown so we decided to go at the last minute. There was this painting by Pierre Soulages that we both loved, it was just so expressive and unique. And I was so inspired by it that I got down on one knee and proposed to him on the spot.”

How fucking lame, Louis thinks to himself, resisting the disgusted twitch of his facial features. What a half-assed proposal. No wonder Harry said there wasn’t a story, there really wasn’t. Harry must
have liked it enough to say yes, but honestly Louis could have done better and he’s only thirteen. There was just no heart or emotion in it. Like did Zayn tell Harry all the things he loves about him? Did he get choked up thinking about how lucky he is to have him? Did he tell him all the many reasons he wants to be with him forever? Because Louis knows Harry really appreciates that sort of thing, he likes to be complimented and cherished and he deserves those things, especially in something as momentous as a proposal. Hopefully Zayn is just leaving stuff out and he really did do those things for Harry. Because frankly, if Louis had received that same proposal from any man he would have swiftly said hell no, try again.

“Was it the Pienture?” Raphael asks, probably sharing Louis’ sentiment as he is more interested in the art than the proposal. But he’s a romantic so Louis would expect nothing less. “Because I’m obsessed with that piece.”

“Yes! Do you like Soulages?” Zayn asks curiously.

“Oh, of course! I utterly adore his work.” Raphael enthuses, expressing his passion for French art and Louis feels extremely lost in this conversation. “We met him, actually. I took Louis to the Centre Pompidou in Paris last year for his exhibit. And we bought several pieces if you wanted to see them?”

“You met him? Oh my god, no way! I’d love to see them.”

“Oui, oui. They deserve to be appreciated by someone else who cares, besides me.” Raphael jokes, standing up from his seat and pressing a light kiss to the top of Louis’ head. “Excuse me, love.”

Zayn follows Raphael out of the dining room, leaving Harry and Louis all alone at the table. They sit across from each other in silence, casually avoiding eye contact. Harry looks up at the ceiling, while Louis favors gazing down at his lap. It goes on like that for at least a minute, until they both seem to have had enough of it.

“So…”

“So…”

They both chuckle lightly after accidentally speaking at once, easing the built up tension in the room. Louis has never once had an unwanted awkward pause in conversation with Harry and he sure as hell isn’t going to start now.

“Harry, so how is Gemma doing?” Louis questions curiously.

“Oh, she’s good, yeah.” Harry nods, smiling briefly. “She’s married now, with three kids.”

“Three? Really?”

“Mhmm. All boys; two, five, and seven.” Harry leans over the table, resting his elbows on the surface. “Do you want to see a picture of them?”

“Of course! I’d love to!” Louis answers eagerly. Their families were always so close, essentially one in the same. Gemma might as well have been Louis’ older sister too. He loved her just as much as his own sisters.

Harry slides his phone from his pocket, playing around with it until he finds the picture. He gets out of his seat, rounding the table to the opposite side, and sits down right next to Louis in Raphael’s chair. Their knees bump under the table and it reminds Louis of how their legs would always be tangled up together whenever they were in close enough proximity. It seemed like some part of him
was always touching Harry, personal space be damned.

But Louis pushes aside the rush of warm nostalgia in his mind for now as he gazes down at the illuminated screen. Harry is sat at the top of a playground, on a bright red slide with three little boys lined up like a train in between his legs. His legs are so long that all three of them fit, each one sporting the biggest matching, dimpled smile. The four of them look so much alike, except unlike Harry their hair hasn’t darkened yet and they still have dirty blonde locks.

It isn’t hard for Louis to picture Harry as a father, paternal instincts always came so naturally for him. He’s so gentle and soft but also fun and goofy, easily relating with kids. It’s one of the things Louis always loved about him. And Louis knows perfectly well how much Harry adored babies. He willingly babysat for nearly every new mum in their neighborhood. And since Louis loves babies too, he never failed to help him if he didn’t have practice or a game that day. But judging by the happy expressions in the picture, Harry certainly hasn’t lost his unique touch with kids.

“Oh Harry, they’re so adorable.” Louis awes sincerely, an uncontrollable smile creeping across his face.

“Aren’t they?” Harry beams warmly, arm draped over the back of Louis’ chair as he leans in. “They give Gemma hell, but they’re such sweet boys. Just very…active and a bit erm…rambunctious.”

Louis laughs at his word choice, nodding his head. “I can totally relate.”

“Yeah, I know you can.” Harry laughs along, glancing over to Louis. “But my nephews are nowhere near as troublesome as you were.”

“Are.” Louis corrects with a mischievous grin, nudging Harry’s shoulder with his own. “I’m still just as troublesome as before, thanks.”

Harry smirks knowingly, biting back a growing smile. It’s funny how whenever it’s just the two of them everything becomes easier. They always fall right back into step with their younger selves and everything feels right again.

Louis looks back at the picture, studying it once more. “I bet you’re the best uncle in the world.” He whispers fondly, looking up from the screen to gaze openly at Harry.

Harry flushes lightly under Louis’ praise. “I don’t know about all that, but I love them.”

“And what about your mum?” Louis asks next, thinking of his sweet second mother, Anne. “How is she?”

“She’s also doing really good.” Harry nods. “Remember Robin?”

“Of course, yeah.” Louis nods easily. Harry’s mum had just started bringing Robin around, and Harry had completely embraced and encouraged their relationship. He was so thrilled to see his mother being cared for again.

“They got married and they’ve been happy together ever since.”

“Really? Oh, that’s so great to hear, Haz.” Louis responds sincerely. “It’s really cool that our mums remarried. They got a second chance at love.”

“Mhmm. Not many people do.” Harry answers with a nod, lowering his head to his hands resting in his lap.
“Yeah…” Louis thinks to himself for a long moment before shifting a little closer to Harry in his seat. Their thighs are practically pressed against each other, any closer and they’d be sharing a chair. But the funny thing is Louis has never felt more comfortable. “Hazza, can I ask you something?”

Harry looks up slowly, green eyes locked on Louis. His expression is far more open than Louis’ seen it at this age. He is still so guarded in many ways, but he silently permits the close proximity of their bodies. And when his lips part in reply, Harry’s voice is a soft and warm whisper. “Yeah, alright Lou.”

Louis finds himself staring into Harry’s eyes a bit too long, nearly forsaking the question on his tongue. He studies Harry’s face, scanning over the slight micro-expressions of his lovely features. “It’s just that… I um… I mean, do you think that—”

“Oh, that’s incredible!” Zayn enthuses as he and Raphael stroll back into the dining room, laughing together.

Louis and Harry don’t move apart right away despite their return, still facing each other. Louis’ unasked question lingers in his mouth and he wishes with everything that their time together wasn’t cut short and interrupted.

“Babe, are you ready to go?” Zayn stands behind Harry’s chair, leaning down a bit and wrapping his arms around Harry’s neck. “I have an early morning.”

Harry tears his gaze away from Louis slowly, blinking before turning his attention to his fiancé behind him. “Yeah—yes. I am… uh ready.” He begins to stand up, but stops himself halfway through, as though he can’t help but turn right back to Louis curiously. “Louis, what was it that you wanted to ask me?”

Raphael, Zayn and Harry all look to Louis expectantly, the attention suddenly falling solely on him. “Um… well—nothing. Just uh…” He stumbles, shoving a hand through his hair as he shakes his head. “I just wanted to know if you’d like to uh... take some of these leftovers home? We really won’t eat all of it.”

Harry narrows his eyes at Louis skeptically, seeming to sense that that was not the original question Louis had in mind. His mouth doesn’t say anything, but his eyes speak volumes.

“Oh yes! Please!” Raphael insists, agreeing with his boyfriend. “Take it all. We’re hardly home, it’ll all go to waste.”

“We couldn’t possibly.” Harry shakes his head.

“Nonsense.” Raphael waves him off as he scurries towards the kitchen. “I’ll box it up for you.”

Louis watches as Harry stands up from the table, fingers finding themselves tangled with Zayn’s again. He stares at how they interact together, looking very much like an engaged couple, murmuring softly to each other. They separate a little, when Louis stands up to walk them out towards the front door.

“Thank you so much for having us, Louis.” Zayn turns around to say, tucked under Harry’s arm. “You have a lovely home and an even lovelier boyfriend.”

Louis smiles politely, nodding. “He’s alright, isn’t he?”

“Are you talking about me? Baby, you’re such a gossip.” Raphael teases playfully as he joins Louis’ side, carting a bag full of Tupperware containers which he ceremoniously presents to Harry. “A
party favor.”

Harry chuckles a bit at the gesture. “Thank you. I’ll bring all your Tupperware back, I promise.”

“Keep it, keep it.” Raphael insists with a smile. “De ma maison à la vôtre.”

“Merci.” Harry nods thankfully. “C’était un plaisir de vous rencontrer.”

Louis’ eyebrows shoot up in surprise, hardly expecting Harry to respond back. He’s just full of surprises it seems.

“Très bien, très bien!” Raphael beams proudly, applauding briefly. “Harry, you’re a natural, my friend! And the pleasure was all mine. It’s been lovely getting to know you both.”

Raphael is the perfect host, all smiles and pleasantries as he guides Zayn and Harry to the front door, stopping to give them each a farewell hug. Louis follows suit, although he does linger a touch too long as he gives Harry a hug. He can’t help but wonder when the next time he’ll see Harry might be. Louis doesn’t have a real excuse to meet up with him and it’s not like he has all the time in the world right now to hang out with Harry even if he did conjure up an excuse.

It’s horrible because Louis never needed an excuse to spend time with Harry before. Harry’s room was as easily accessible to him as his own. Anytime Louis needed him, Harry was never more than a window tap away. And now, the reality is that his best friend is practically worlds away and this adjustment is proving once again to be more than Louis can deal with.
Chapter 5

Every day is exactly the same. If Louis closed his eyes, he’d hardly know yesterday from today. That’s how little variation there is in his daily life.

Wake up at the crack of dawn, painfully struggle all damn day long, come home defeated and exhausted and then rinse and repeat.

Although, Louis really shouldn’t complain too much, because training is surprisingly starting to get a little easier. After taking on a few extra practice hours at home to learn his own techniques, Louis is beginning to find a slight groove. He is finally playing at a decently acceptable level. There is, of course, ample room for improvement, but at least he has come this far.

Louis is also trying his best to get on with his teammates, always joking around with them when he can and interacting with them like a good captain would. But no matter what he does, they keep giving him looks like “Why the hell are you talking to me?”

Of course they do whatever Louis says on the pitch, following his lead without question. But off the field, they almost go out of their way to avoid having conversation with Louis, walking on eggshells whenever he’s around.

At first Louis thought it was because maybe they respect him as a captain and they’re scared to upset him or something like that. But everyday it happens, it feels a bit more like they just flat out hate him. He could be wrong, he could be exaggerating or reading too much into things, but it seems to be increasingly apparent that all is not well within the interpersonal relationships amongst the Rovers.

Maybe that’s why they’ve never won a Premier title before. It’s obvious that they aren’t playing as equals. They are hardly even playing as a team. Louis doesn’t know who to blame for this, but the team motto adopted by his coaches seems to be “Pass it to Louis!” or “Just follow Louis’ lead!” and while that’s flattering and all, it’s certainly not how to win anything. Even if Louis was playing at the caliber of his usual self, that still is an absolutely horrible game strategy. One person can’t have all the credit and glory, it has to be a joint team effort.

Louis isn’t sure how to fix that key flaw, but he tries a little harder every day to be a better, more inclusive leader. Even though his efforts are essentially overlooked and dismissed almost instantly.

But Louis decides to leave work at work, pushing all that to the back of his mind as he walks into the large kitchen of his home. He finds his boyfriend leaning against the island countertop, rapidly clicking away at his phone.
“Hi, Raphy!” Louis greets happily, as he approaches him. Something about Raphy always serves to brighten his mood a bit, even after the most shit day.

“Oh…bonjour, mon cher…” Raphael briefly lifts his head to smile warmly, before returning back to typing on his phone. “Sorry, just give me one minute, baby. I’m emailing notes to my agent.”

Louis nods easily, walking past him and heading straight to the fridge. He pours himself a generous glass of orange juice and hops up on top of the counter. He swings his dangling legs, sipping on his glass while he patiently waits for Raphy to be done with whatever he’s doing.

He really likes having Raphy around, he makes everything a lot less lonely when Louis is at home. Along with being extremely hot and nice to look at, he also makes really great company. He’s funny and there’s a genuine sweetness about him that Louis finds endearing. He’s just a very nice person. But Louis sort of wonders what their daily life together is usually like.

“Raphy, what do we do together?” Louis wonders, still kicking his feet back and forth.

“Hmm?” Raphael hums distractedly. “What do you mean, Loulou?”

“Like you know…together? You and me on a normal day. How do we usually spend our time together?”

“Oh, we fuck.” Raphael answers easily, not even looking up from his phone.

Caught off guard, Louis gags on his orange juice, dribbling tons of excess liquid down his chin and staining his white knit jersey in bright blotches. He nearly drops the glass as he fumbles, but thankfully his boyfriend is too preoccupied to notice him mucking about. “Fuck…” He hisses, setting the glass down on the counter before he breaks it.

“Mhmm exactly.” Raphael hums as he finishes up on his phone. He finally sets it down, looking up to give his full attention to Louis. His expression quickly morphs into a concerned frown as he notices the damage. “Aww what happened to you, beau? You’re a mess.”

“It’s nothing—nothing. I’m fine, just…uh clumsy.” Louis waves off, laughing awkwardly.

“Here let me.” Raphael walks over to him and holds his hand out expectantly.

Louis blinks at the gesture, eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “What?”

“Your shirt.” Raphael points obviously. “Let me get the stain out before it dries.”

“Oh it’s fine. It’s totally ok, no big deal.”

“Loulou, you love that shirt.” Raphael reminds. “It’s your favorite practice jersey because it’s the first one you got as a Rover. It’d be a shame to ruin it.”

Louis has no way to know if that’s true or not, but it probably is; it’s a really nice jersey after all. It’s got his name on the back, like most of them do, along with his number, 28.


“Ok, ok.” Louis nods, stripping the rest of his top off and obediently handing it over.

“Merci beaucoup. Hello, by the way.” Raphael smiles softly, leaning up to sweetly kiss Louis’ nose as a delayed greeting. “I’m glad you’re home, mon bel amour. I miss you when you’re gone.”
Louis giggles shyly, cheeks blushing immediately. He feels a little exposed sitting atop the kitchen counter without a shirt on, even though there is absolutely nothing scandalous about it and his boyfriend has without a doubt seen it all and more.

Raphael pecks his nose once more, before walking towards the kitchen sink with the soiled jersey.

“But so um…that’s it? That’s all we ever do?” Louis asks, going back to why his jersey is stained in the first place.

“What?” Raphael looks up, having forgotten already. “Oh, right you mean fuck?”

“Um…yes…”

“Well, not completely, no.” Raphael sets about the kitchen, collecting seemingly random supplies to valiantly save Louis’ jersey. “We go a lot of places together. Like parties and events and things like that and we travel during your off season. We have fun together, but we don’t usually spend time like we have been doing this week. Just together, you know?”

“We don’t? Why not?” Louis is totally confused by that. He has a lovely boyfriend and yet he doesn’t like to simply hang out with him? That sounds like a waste.

“I don’t know?” Raphael frowns in thought, pausing his dedicated cleaning. “Usually, if we talk for too long, I’ll say something wrong that upsets you and we end up fighting. And I hate it when we argue. So to avoid all that we always stay busy one way or another.”

How could Raphy possibly upset him so easily? Is Louis just an irritable person or something? Raphy is not an unreasonable guy by any definition and Louis doesn’t know how he could stay mad at him for long.

“But Raphy, why do we fight so much?” Louis questions.

“It’s not always big things, it’s little things too.” Raphael explains, scrubbing at the material. “We just don’t agree on much of anything most of the time. You have a certain way of thinking and I love it so much, but I don’t always understand it like you want me to. And as much as I want to see things the way you do, I simply can not because it’s not who I am. Sometimes you’ll get so frustrated with me that you’ll tell me it’s over. There’s been a few times that we actually broke up, but most times I can get you to stay.”

“How?”

Raphy grins devilishly, looking up. “Ooh I’m very, very persuasive and you’re a very, very weak man when it comes to…you know…les désirs sexuels du cœur.”

Louis sighs, rolling his eyes. “Why did I even ask? I should have known.”

“Aha! I got it!” Raphael proudly raises the once again pristine looking jersey, dabbing at it a few more times to make sure it’s dry. “Look at that, no one would never know that you’re such a mess.”


“It’s a secret.” Raphy smiles smugly with a wink as he rounds the counter to slot himself in between Louis’ dangling legs. He slides the shirt right over Louis’ head, smoothing the fabric back over him as easily as he took it off. Louis just lets him do it, surprisingly not minding being manhandled by his boyfriend, instead feeling endeared by how helpful and caring he is. “There you go, good as new.”
"Thank you, Raphy." Louis beams.

"Oh, it was my pleasure, Loulou. Anything for you."

"Let’s do something together tonight." Louis suggests, hands resting on the tops of Raphael’s shoulders. "Just the two of us."

Raphael runs his fingers through Louis’ fringe gently, carefully smoothing all the flyaway hairs back in place. "But you said you didn’t want a distraction and I—"

"Not that!" Louis interjects, sitting back. Jesus, Raphy was not exaggerating by any means. It’s literally all they know how to do together as a couple. "I mean we could just spend time together? Watch a movie or something, I dunno."

"Oh?" Raphael sounds surprised, a happy smile growing on his face. "That sounds so lovely, mon amour. I’d love that."

"Me too." Louis smiles down at him. "What do you want to watch?"

"Umm, I’m not sure. We could search Netflix?"

"What’s Netflix?" Louis’ features scrunch up into a frown.

Raphael narrows his eyes, waving a suspicious finger at him. "No. No. You’re playing with me aren’t you?"


"No, I’m not falling for this, Loulou. You’re trying to trick me into saying something dumb or embarrassing. You always do that and I always fall for it. No, no, no." Raphael starts to walk away, shaking his head.

Louis reaches out to grab his arm before he gets anywhere. "Raphy, I promise I’m not being a little shit. I’m not trying to trick you, I genuinely don’t know what Netflix is. I warned you about the silly questions remember?"

"Right, your head. I didn’t realize it was that bad. Oh, I’m sorry, baby. How insensitive of me, let me explain." Raphael kisses his hand apologetically. "Net—internet and flix—films." He explains easily. "You can watch movies online…"

"Hmm. How convenient." Louis assesses slowly, trying to visualize it. What can’t be done with the internet, these days? "Don’t judge me but…just so we are like totally clear. You don’t need a VHS or anything at all…right?"

"Oh no, chéri." Raphael laughs, shaking his head with endearment. "Come on, I’ll show you."

Raphael takes his hand and leads Louis to a room he hasn’t really used much of yet. It’s a spacious home theater; massive screen projection on the far wall, faced by several rows of really comfy looking couches. With all this, there is no reason to even bother going to the theater anymore. This is far more comfortable, and Louis can talk and give commentary and make as much noise as he wants without getting dirty looks from fellow movie-goers.

Louis curls up on one of the sofas, practically melting into the ridiculously plush cushions, which are soo much cozier than the stiff theater seats. Raphael settles down next to him with the remote, one arm draped over the back of the couch around Louis. With a few clicks of the remote, he pulls up
Netflix and starts scrolling through a wide array of movies. Louis just sits back and watches as title after unrecognizable title flips across the screen, nothing really sparking his interest.

“Wait, stop!” Louis’ mouth falls open in excited shock, as the loudest gasp escapes his lips. “There… is… a… Toy Story 2!?”

“Oh yeah.” Raphael nods causally, glancing at Louis. “I’m fairly certain that there is a third one, as well? But I—”

“Really!” Louis enthuses animatedly, sitting straight up with his jaw dropped nearly to the floor. “Oh my god! No way!”

“Yes, but I don’t think the third one is on Netflix sadly.”

“But we can watch the second one? Like… right now? Right now, right now?” Louis holds his breath in anticipation, biting his lip with wide, eager eyes.

“Sure, mon amour. If that’s what you want.” Raphael grins fondly, kissing his temple. “You’re so very cute and adorable when you get excited, Loulou. Like a little boy. My baby boy.”

“Raphy, you don’t understand!” Louis laments, throwing his head back dramatically. “Toy Story is basically the best animated Disney movie of the ‘90s! Well, next to The Lion King—but I don’t think they can be compared because one is Pixar. Anyway, it’s the best and I love it and there are sequels that are just out there existing and I haven’t seen them!”

Raphael raises an eyebrow, looking impossibly amused by Louis’ fanatical outburst. “Well, then that settles it, we must watch it.”

“Have you seen it?” Louis raises his head back up.

“Many years ago, but I don’t quite remember what happens. So it’ll be fun for me too.” Raphael replies. “Although I do remember that Woody gets—”

“Shh!” Louis slaps a hand over Raphael’s mouth, narrowing his eyes at him seriously. “Don’t spoil it for me! I’ll kill you…”

Raphael laughs against Louis’ palm. “Ok, ok, I won’t say a word.”

“Ahh! I’m so, so, sooo excited!” Louis beams, releasing his boyfriend and settling back down on the cushion. “Oh! I wonder if Harry knows!”

“I’m sure he does.” Raphael chuckles. “I think you are the only person to not know this.”

“Mmm, I think I’m gonna text him to be sure.” Louis decides anyway.

Louis has been trying really hard to figure out the whole texting thing. It was really weird at first, but he is getting the hang of it slowly. Very, very slowly. Mostly he practices by sending Niall random messages, filling up his inbox with absolute nonsense. But Niall never gets annoyed. Usually just responding with a “Trying out texting again, Louis?” or “Call me if you actually need me so I know the difference.”

Louis slides out his phone, going to the green messages icon to tap out a quick message to Harry.

*haz!!!! did u know theres a toy story 2!??! and 3!?! its the best thing ive heard all day!!!!!!*

Louis hits send on the message. Truth be told, he’s been aching to text Harry, but he didn’t really
know what to text him about. And Louis also didn’t want to bother him or overstep in someway. Especially since Harry is an engaged adult and Louis is not quite sure of all the texting rules and etiquette yet. He’s been told there are levels to texting, but since no one has briefed him on what they actually are, Louis is left to guess for himself. But he assumes this is a perfectly normal and harmless text.

A minute later Louis’ phone vibrates in his hand with a response and Louis slides the message across the screen to open it.

Lol, yeah.

“Raphy? What does lol mean?” Louis struggles to pronounce the term, rolling the L’s around on his tongue.

Raphael chuckles as Louis struggles with his assumed pronunciation. “It’s not a word, Loulou. It’s an acronym. Like L.O.L.” He corrects, spelling it out the individual letters. “It stands for laughing out loud.”

 “…What?” Louis furrows his eyebrows, looking down at his phone at a loss. He isn’t used to all this, Niall only responds in basic English words and emojis, which Louis can handle. He doesn’t use weird, new age lingo and acronyms with multiple meanings. What is this?

“So you would send it when you find something funny. I send you a joke, you find my joke amusing and you laugh so you send me ‘LOL’ back so I know you laughed. Get it?” Raphael tries. “You could also send ‘LMAO’.”

Louis thinks it over. It would make sense he supposes, because how else would the other person know he was laughing through a virtual message? This is all very interesting. Confusing, but still interesting. “Ok, so what’s ‘LMAO’?”

“Laughing my ass off.”

“Ooh…that is kinda funny, I suppose…” Louis considers, nodding slowly as he begins to type out a response to Harry.

but toy story 3 isn’t on netflix 😞 such a bummer 😞 😞

I have it on Blu-ray if you want to borrow it?

“Raphy, last time, I promise…but what’s a Blu-ray?” Louis looks up again in question.

“Oh it’s uh…like a CD, but for movies.” Raphael explains. “HD movies. Oh—and before you ask, HD means high definition. Like really clear.”

“Ooohh gotcha.” Louis sucks on his teeth as he pictures it. “So like a VHS, kinda? But it doesn’t look like a tape? Instead it looks like a disc? And you use it like a CD? But on a TV, not a stereo? But it’s also not on the internet? Like Netflix? It’s a real, physical thing? And it’s clear?”

“Uhh…more or less? Yes…?” Raphael eyes him oddly, frowning as though Louis is speaking nonsense. “Yes. Sure—Yes.”

“Alright, I’m getting somewhere.” Louis nods his head, going back to his phone. All this technology is going to make his head explode. How does everyone keep up with all of this?

yes!!! id love to!!
I’ll bring it over tomorrow.

really!!! aw! thank u sooooooo much harold, ur the best!! 😊😊

No problem.

Louis texts Harry back with a mix of excited and random emojis. He may be getting a little carried away with his colorful and animated messages, but Louis knows Harry won’t mind. Harry always loved color anyway.

“So Harry.” Raphael starts, looking down at Louis who is still giggling into his phone. “You were very close to him as kids, yes?”


“But why hasn’t he come around before? It’s obvious that you really care for him in a way that’s so different than your usual friends. You’re so...open with him.”

“Of course I do, he’s really important to me. He is—erm was—my best friend.”

“But you’ve never talked about him before and you always told me that Russell was your best friend from school.”

“Rusty!? My best friend?!” Louis cackles, tossing his head back against the couch. “Please. He’s too uptight and bitter.”

“I certainly never cared for him much. He’s an asshole.” Raphael admits, scrunching up his nose a bit. “But Harry, I like. He’s a kind and thoughtful man.”

“Mhmm, that’s Harry.” Louis smiles warmly as he thinks of him. “He’s always been so kindhearted and sweet.”

“And Zayn is lovely as well. They make a nice couple.”

Louis’ expression instantly falls flat as he sighs. “Yeah.”

“What, you don’t agree?” Raphael lifts an eyebrow.

“I didn’t say that.” Louis shakes his head innocently.

“Your face did. Your face doesn’t lie, baby.” Raphael observes, eyeing him closely. “You’re very expressive. You don’t like Zayn for Harry?”

“No—I’m uh...happy for them. Obviously. Sooo happy. Over the moon happy. It’s so great. Yeah.” Louis lies, hoping his boyfriend will just drop it. “Anyway can we watch the movie now? I’m dying to see it. Literally dying.”

Raphael looks at him a bit longer, seeming to study his face as he thinks to himself. His expression morphs into a slow distant smile. “Yes of course, mon amour.”
Louis leaps down the stairs at the welcomed sound of the doorbell ringing, hardly containing his built up excitement. Since coming home from practice a few hours earlier, he's been a ball of overhyped energy and anticipation. And it’s not because he managed to actually score a goal today—which was fucking incredible—and it’s also not because one of his teammates actually said hello back to him. No, it’s much more exciting than any of that. The real reason why Louis can’t sit still for more than five seconds at a time is because Harry is coming over.

More and more, Louis finds himself missing his best mate. It’s not even an active train of thought, or a steady stream where he is repeatedly meditating on how much he misses him. It’s more so a collection of random thoughts and ideas that pop up or remind Louis of Harry at arbitrary times of the day. He’ll see something or think something and instantly get excited about telling Harry all about it, that is until Louis remembers that he isn’t around.

Like this morning, Louis was reading the back of the cereal box and he saw the funniest joke ever, so he reflexively turned to tell Harry and outwardly sighed when realization hit him.

As much as Louis loves his shiny new life with all the cool benefits and fun stuff it comes with, sometimes it seems a bit dull. It’s just that a good portion of Louis’ memories for as far back as he can remember, start and end with Harry. And it seems that trying to make new memories completely void of him just doesn’t feel right at all.

And that’s why Louis’ socked feet are skidding across the freshly polished floor of the foyer, scrambling wildly towards the front door. He doesn’t bother to check the security display to see who it is, instead impatiently swinging the door wide open.

“Harry! Hi! Hello!” Louis answers the door eagerly, waving almost obnoxiously at Harry, who looks slightly startled. Louis doesn’t even wait for Harry to greet him back before grabbing his hand and yanking him inside. “How are you, Haz? I hope you’re good!”

“Yeah, I am good, thanks.” Harry smiles politely, observing Louis’ hyperactive behavior cautiously. “And you? Uh…are you…are you…good?”

“Yes! Yes, I’m really great, actually. I’m soooo happy to see you!” Louis enthuses, grinning so wide, his face might split. “Did you bring it?”

“Yeah, I have it right here and I—uh is that…my jumper?” Harry interrupts himself curiously, eyeing the oversized sweater covering Louis’ upper half. He leans in a bit to have a better look.

“Mmm maybeee.” Louis singsongs happily, tugging the long sleeves down over his hands. He was kind of curious to see if Harry would notice it or not. “Don’t ask for it back though, cuz it’s not happening.”

“But it’s…mine.” Harry smirks amusedly, eyebrows pulled.

“Oh, you didn’t miss it.” Louis shrugs, hugging his arms around his own body. “You probably forgot it existed.”

“I’ve looked damn near everywhere for it. I can’t believe you’ve had it all this time.”

“A real top-notch, quality knit jumper this is, you know? It’s so comfy and warm and soft.” Louis caresses his hands over the worn fabric lovingly. “So yeah…I borrowed it. How could I not?”

“Borrowed.” Harry finger quotes sarcastically. “Right…”

“Yeah, well actually you left it in my room one night and I guess I forgot to give it back?” Louis
explains briefly. “But now I think I’ve ‘borrowed’ it longer than it was ever yours anyway, so it’s kind of like…mine now. For good.”

“You what?” Harry laughs, sounding a bit endeared. “What kind of logic is that?”

“Uh, my logic. Obviously. Finders keepers and all that jazz.” Louis grins cheekily. “I will, however, let you wear it if you want from time to time. We can set up a rotation schedule or something. Lemme know and I’ll pencil you in.”

“So basically you are offering to let me wear my jumper.” Harry wonders in amusement, unable to keep the grin off his face.

“I am, yeah.” Louis nods knowingly, a slight upturn to his lips. “And maybe it’ll start to smell a bit more like you again.”

Louis doesn’t register the connotation of his own words until they’re already out of his still open mouth, lingering awkwardly in the space between them. And Harry’s face is a clear confirmation that the implication was not at all lost on him.

Harry clears his throat, rubbing his nose lightly as he looks down at the floor for a moment. “Yeah so…um here you go.” He hands Louis the Blu-ray case and hardly wastes a single second turning swiftly back towards the front door. “It’s a really good movie. You should like it. Enjoy.”

“Wait, Haz?” Louis frowns, stopping Harry by his upper arm. “Aren’t you going to watch it with me?”

Harry pauses, looking over his shoulder in bewilderment. “Um…I hadn’t planned on it…no.”

Louis did not wait all week to see Harry only to have him run back home after two minutes. He doesn’t care what he has to do, Louis is not about to let Harry leave so soon.

“Well, I’d like to officially ask you then.” Louis jumps around to stand directly in front of Harry, clearing his throat theatrically. “Harry Edward Styles, would you like to join me and spend your evening watching the third installment of a toy’s touching and heartfelt story?”

Harry barks out a surprised laugh. “You’re an idiot.”

“Is that a yes?” Louis grins hopefully, leaning in.

“Uh…well…” Harry starts, mulling it over. “Where’s your boyfriend? Don’t you want to watch it with him?”

“He isn’t here. He won’t be back until tomorrow.” Louis explains. “He’s in London again for a callback thing for his next movie or something, I dunno.”

“Oh…” Harry exhales quietly.

“Yeah, so it’s just me and…hopefully you…” Louis tries again, ready to start begging if he has to. “It’ll be really fun, I promise. I have a movie theater with the most comfortable seats ever and literally any snack food you could think of. It’s really cool.”

Harry tilts his head back and forth, in drawn out deliberation. “That sounds very tempting…”

“You know you wannaaa.” Louis wiggles his eyebrows enticingly and waves the Blu-ray box side to side, shimmying his hips in a little dance to try and lure Harry in. “Come on Hazza. Don’t make
me beg. I’m not above begging, you know.”

“Well…I mean…” Harry stalls, still positioned just right of the door.

Louis pokes out his bottom lip, making his blue eyes as big and doe-eyed as possible. “Pleaaase Harry, it’d mean sooo much to me. I mean, when’s the last time we watched a movie together?”

“Oh…I really don’t know to be honest…”

“Exactly. So we basically have to do this. For old times’ sake. Especially if you’re going to be moving to America.” Louis hates to even say those ugly words, actively convincing himself that they’re not at all true. But it makes a good argument and Louis did say he would do absolutely anything to get Harry to stay.

Harry narrows his eyes at Louis deliberatively, biting on his inner cheek, before letting out a small sigh. “Ok fine. But I can’t stay too late.”

“Yes!” Louis fist pumps excitedly, immediately grabbing Harry’s hand and dragging him further into the house. “Come on, Haz! Oh, but you gotta set it up though, because I still have no idea what I’m doing when it comes to anything technical.”

“Alright.” Harry smiles, tumbling after Louis down the hall.

When they get to the entertainment room, Harry dutifully tackles setting up the movie, not having any of the difficulty Louis knows he would have had if he tried to do it himself. They sit at opposite ends of the same couch, two cushions of distant space separating them.

And as they watch the movie, Louis can’t stop thinking about how he really wants to scoot over and snuggle up against Harry’s side. He wants to curl under his arm and fit himself against the groove of his waist, resting his head down against Harry’s chest. Just like he has become so accustomed to doing since they were young lads. It’s where he belongs. But Louis somehow remains kept to himself, having to sit on his hands at one point just to keep himself from subconsciously reaching for Harry out of habit.

Thankfully, the movie itself provides plenty of distraction, easily captivating Louis’ complete attention. The characters seem to have only gotten funnier and more entertaining and Louis can’t stop smiling and laughing as the movie goes on. And Harry definitely sheds a few tears at the end when Andy is playing with his toys for the very last time.

But Louis may or may not have been right there with him, eyes brimmed. More like eyes pouring out like unstoppable rivers, if he’s honest. It was a really touching moment, ok? And so full circle for Andy and the whole gang of memorable toys; like the closing of a chapter. How could he not cry?

Louis bursts into a resounding applause when the credits start rolling, a few stray tears lingering on his cheeks.

“I take it you liked it?” Harry grins slowly, looking over at him from his lounged position on the far side of the couch.

“Oh Harry, I loved it.” Louis sniffs, drying his emotional eyes. “I feel like I just need a moment to process what I just saw. It hit me that hard.”

“I know. It gets me every time, I swear.” Harry nods in understanding, fanning his own wet eyes. “I always think, I’m gonna be fine, but nope.”
Louis continues staring at the darkened screen in stunned awe, shaking his head. “What a masterpiece, Disney really out did themselves. They just keep getting better, don’t they?”

“Mhmm.” Harry agrees in a drawn out hum. “I’m actually shocked that you haven’t seen it.”

Louis leans back into the couch, letting out a wistful sigh. “I know, how embarrassing.”

“Such a shame.” Harry shakes his head with exaggerated pity. “And you call yourself a Disney fan. How fake.”

“Hey, hey. Alright, enough of that. I get it. I’m trying to catch up.” Louis sighs again, hands raised in defense. It really isn’t his fault, but that’s neither here nor there at this point. “So is your favorite movie still *The Titanic*?”

“Oh, of course. I still cry every time.”

“You’re just a crier in general, I think.”

“You’re one to talk.” Harry teases, pointing at Louis’ redlined eyes. “But really, you can’t beat a timeless classic, so *The Titanic* is here for the long haul.”

“All these new movies and you still love the same one. How very Harry.” Louis grins, using Harry’s own name against him.

“It never gets old!” Harry defends, chuckling. “Although, I do love *The Notebook* as well.”

“What’s that one about?” Louis crisscrosses his legs in his seat, twisting towards Harry.

“Wait...?” Harry’s eyes widen and he touches his chest in offense, sitting up straight. “You mean to tell me that you haven’t seen the greatest romance film ever to grace the 21st century by the one and only legend, Nicholas Sparks?” He looks borderline ready to fight. “Seriously?”

Considering that he never made it past the 20th century, Louis has no idea who the hell Nicholas Sparks is. “Seriously.”

“Seriously?” Harry asks again, narrowing his eyes, still doubtful.

“Seriously!” Louis repeats louder this time.

Harry sucks in a shocked breath while shaking his head. For a minute he looks like he is just about to move on, but then his features morph into a disbelieving frown again. “But… seriously?”

“I’m fucking serious, Haz!” Louis bursts. “I haven’t seen *The Notebook*!”

“Woooow.” Harry sighs shaking his head gravely, like he’s just been given the worst news of his life. “First *Toy Story* and now this. I’m disappointed. What kind of life are you living?”

“I dunno to be honest.” Louis admits, and ain’t that the god honest truth.

“We should have watched that instead. If I had known, I would have never allowed this to continue. A goddamn travesty.”

Louis smiles at him warmly. “You’re quite passionate about this, I see.”

“Yes, Louis!” Harry emphasizes, with widened eyes. “It’s just… a timeless classic!”
“But I thought The Titanic was a timeless classic.” Louis teases, raising his eyebrows in challenge.

“Ok, yeah but…there can easily be more than one timeless classic, ok. And don’t you dare argue with me.” Harry smirks, slapping Louis’ knee lightly to call him out on the argument he obviously had ready. “It’s bloody brilliant and that’s not up for debate and you have to watch it. I’ll even loan it to you. But unlike my jumper, I actually want it back this time.”

“Noted.” Louis answers simply, grinning. Harry loves these cheesy, gross love stories and Louis always suffered through them for the sake of his friend. Louis can’t pretend like he didn’t enjoy them sometimes, but he would never let Harry know that, otherwise it would soon become the only genre of movie they’d watch.

“I mean it.” Harry says seriously. “We have to rectify this. You have to watch it, Louis!”

“Ok, sure yeah. I’ll watch it.” Louis agrees halfheartedly, nodding his head.

“Um, not good enough.” Harry sucks at his teeth in disapproval, judging Louis from his side of the couch. “I’m just not really sensing any genuine emotion from you right now. Where is the excitement? Where is the enthusiasm? Let’s try again, shall we?”

“Um…”

“Louis! Oh my god! You have to watch the timeless classic titled The Notebook written by Nicholas Sparks!” Harry raves devotedly as though he didn’t just express this same sentiment two seconds ago. And Louis wants to fall over laughing, but he knows Harry is pretty much serious.

“Oh, not The Nicholas Sparks!? Wow, yes! Of course, I’ll watch it! I swear! I’m practically bursting with excitement right now, if you can’t tell…” Louis answers with a bit more enthusiasm, although the sarcasm is still there. “Geez…”

“Good. That’s better.” Harry nods, seeming content with that answer. He starts to slide forward, readying himself to hop up from the cushion. It looks like he might be preparing to go home, since there is nothing really keeping him now that the movie is over. But Louis still isn’t ready for Harry to leave just yet.

“Hey, do you…maybe wanna go on a walk with me?” Louis sits up and asks before Harry stands to his feet. He could spend hours with Harry and it would still only feel like seconds. There’s nothing like the company of his best mate, no one else can even compare or come close. And Louis will continue to prolong their inevitable separation as long as he can get away with.

Harry turns his head towards Louis curiously. “Right now?”

“Yeah! The grounds are really pretty at night.” Louis explains, sliding a little closer to Harry on the sofa. “And there’s a gorgeous flower garden and a fountain and it all lights up and it’s so beautiful.”

“Oh, that sounds nice.”

“You’ll love it, Haz!” Louis promises, face brightening. “You absolutely have to see it. I think it’s one of my favorite things about this house.”

Harry twists his wrist and flicks his gaze down to his watch. “Well…um…”

“I mean you don’t have to of course…if um…you need to go…” Louis adds quietly, hanging his head. “I understand…”
“No, it’s alright…I’ll stay.” Harry decides. “Let’s go on a walk.”

Louis lifts his head up and smiles impossibly wide. “Ok.”

Louis leads Harry outside through the back patio to his lovely gardens, walking the designated pathway the leads right to the illuminated fountain. They’ve hardly been in the garden for a minute, before Harry turns to Louis and says, “I can see why this is your favorite.”

“It’s peaceful isn’t it?” Louis smiles, watching Harry’s reaction closely. Louis knew he would get it.

“Mhmm.” Harry hums softly, staring out at the breathtaking view before him.

Not that Harry ever needs to know this, but the more time Louis spends in his gardens, the more he is reminded of Harry. From the elegance and gentle grace of the splendidly colored blossoms, to the intoxicating soft floral scent of welcomed foliage that encircles him from every angle. It’s all so very reminiscent of Harry and it never fails to bring Louis’ thoughts back to him.

Maybe it’s because Harry is a bit of a flower himself. Tall and elegant, flowering curls blooming and flourishing around his dimpled sweet petal of a face. The radiance of his glowing skin alludes to the colorful energy inside him. And he smells so florid and saccharine, like a freshly picked rose.

And now watching Harry standing in the midst of the scenic garden, surrounded by a beauty that matches his own, facial features illuminated by the gentle tinkling lights, it feels like it was almost made for him, like he belongs here. Louis wonders if he personally designed the garden to feel that way or if that’s just his own personal reflection.

They start walking side by side along the narrow cobblestone path that weaves its way throughout the garden, remaining silent as their steps align. The fountain trickles in the background and the moon glows before them. And Louis thinks, it may not just be the garden that has him feeling at peace.

“Alright, I’ve got a question for you, Louis.” Harry announces out of the blue, still looking straight ahead.

Louis raises an eyebrow in interest. “I’ve hopefully got an answer then.”

“It’s a hypothetical question.” Harry warns, glancing over.

Louis chuckles a bit at that. Harry loves asking these kind of questions and Louis loves answering them. He’d always ask them at the most random times and they would be completely bizarre and far-fetched and Louis would always wonder where or why he came up with them. “Alright, let’s give it a go then.”

“Ok.” Harry eyes flash with excitement as he claps his hands once. “Right, so let’s say you’re a— hmm…let’s call you a farmer. Yeah…”

“A farmer?” Louis laughs, hardly expecting the question to start off like this. But with Harry, it’s hard to ever know where he is going with anything.

“Yes. A potato farmer.” Harry specifies seriously.

Louis chuckles, shaking his head fondly. “Ok, Haz…”

“So you’re a potato farmer and your potatoes are the best in the world. Everyone loves your potatoes, like literally everyone. The Queen herself only eats your potatoes. You’re a potato legend.
Until…” Harry pauses dramatically, eyes wide. “Disaster strikes and suddenly your whole entire life’s gone to utter shit.”

“Oh, what a bummer.” Louis frowns. “I was feeling a bit proud of my farmer self for a minute there.”

“You’ve got no crops this year, the fields are shriveled up and your well is dry as dust.” Harry continues getting more and more animated with his random tale. “Also your farm is nearly bankrupt and your farmhouse is under foreclosure.”

Louis sighs, rubbing his temples as he shakes his head in mock distress. “Well great, I’m just a sad shit aren’t I?”

“Pretty much.” Harry agrees, grinning. “But on the bright side, you own a cow.”

“Well, that’s something.” Louis brightens up, nodding a bit.

“You’ve got two options. Either forget who you were, like everything about yourself or forget who everyone else important to you is. What would you pick?”

Louis frowns in total confusion, narrowing his eyes at Harry. “Harold, what on earth does the long backstory you gave have to do with the actual question?”

“It doesn’t at all really.” Harry shrugs cheekily, laughing lightly to himself. “But hypotheticals are not nearly as fun without a good backstory.”

Louis giggles along with him, eyes crinkled. “I can’t argue with that, I suppose.”

“No, you can’t.” Harry grins knowingly. “Now answer the question.”

“Alright, uh…” Louis thinks for a moment to himself, making random faces as he thinks. “Oh, that’s tough one, isn’t it?”

“It is, yeah. Choose carefully.” Harry advises.

“Quick follow up question though…” Louis starts, looking seriously to Harry. “Can I keep the cow?”

Harry laughs with a dimpled grin. “Sure.”

“Good, that’s really good.” Louis nods to himself slowly, mulling over the possibility. “Cows make great pets I hear. I’d be a really good cow dad, I think. I would name him Alfalfa and—”

“Louis, focus!” Harry interrupts, nudging his shoulder. “The cow and the farm don’t have anything to do with my question.”

“Well then you shouldn’t have put it on the table, Harold.” Louis sasses back with a pout. “That’s your fault. I want a cow.”

“Answer the damn question!” Harry demands, biting back a laugh.

“Ok, hold on to your potatoes.” Louis holds up his hands in defeat. “Um…wait but first, I have an actually serious follow up question about your question.”

Harry narrows his eyes at Louis skeptically. “I’ll allow it, I suppose.”
“Will everyone else still know me even if I didn’t know them?”

“Yes, they’d know you, but you wouldn’t remember them at all.”

“Hmmm.” Louis hums, sucking on his teeth as he deliberates. “Alright, so this is what I’m thinking. If I forgot who I was, then I wouldn’t really know why everyone else is so important anyway, right?”

“Mhmm, mhmm…” Harry contemplatively nods along with Louis’ train of thought, hands behind his back as they walk in sync.

“So I think I’d have to go with not knowing everyone else, because if they were really important to me, they’d never stop being important regardless of if I remember them or not. It might take time, I suppose, but…we’d be back to where we were eventually and it’d be like I never lost them.”

Harry stops walking, blinking at Louis’ curiously with his mouth slightly open in what appears to be surprise.

“What?” Louis turns back to look at Harry in confusion. “Why’d you stop?”

Harry closes his mouth and shakes his head slowly. “No…uh…I mean—it’s nothing…it’s just I said the exact same thing.”

“Great minds think alike.” Louis meets Harry’s gaze and smiles gradually. “It’s really the only thing that makes any sense.”

“Yeah, I agree. I think if someone is really meant to be in your life, nothing will stop them from being there. Some people are just…” Harry’s words seem to get lost somewhere as he peacefully searches Louis’ face, own expression softening marginally. “Irreplaceable.”

“Yeah, definitely…” Louis mumbles, staring right back.

“Anyway…uh…” Harry calms his face back to neutral, turning to face forward as he starts walking again. “I asked Zayn the same question last night and he tried to tell me that he would rather forget who he was because everyone around him would help him rediscover himself.”

That doesn’t even make sense, Louis thinks. And in a way he kind of knows how that really feels, relying on other people to understand himself, and it sucks ass. But he doesn’t say that, of course. Louis refuses to speak poorly of Harry’s fiancé even if he doesn’t necessarily agree with his viewpoint. “I guess that’s another way to look at it.”

“Yeah.” Harry agrees quietly.

“How’d you meet Zayn anyway?” Louis decides to ask. He realizes that he doesn’t even know what Harry’s type is and even if Louis did know when they were young, he can’t possibly assume it would stay the same after 17 years.

“Oh…um…we worked together on a collaborative journalism piece in a magazine. I was his photographer and uh…we ended up spending a lot of time together…and yeah…”

“That was it?” Louis presses, because truthfully he was expecting more. Like what attracted him to Zayn? Who made the first move? What do they have in common? How does he know Zayn is the right person for him? Just basic questions really…

“That was it.” Harry confirms with a single nod of his head. “We’ve been together for three years.”
“Three years and you’re getting married and moving to America for him.” Louis summarizes out loud. “You must really love him.”

Harry nods his head again as they round a corner of the garden, passing by the soft lavender lilies. “Yep…”

Harry never seems to give too much away about himself, always purposely keeping himself guarded. He is just now starting to allow himself to joke around with Louis again, but when it comes to anything even slightly more serious the walls come right back up and he shuts down every time, without fail.

It’s so easy for Louis to tell Harry absolutely anything and be his true self around him. But Louis has to continually remind himself that in his world, Harry was still his best friend only last week. While for Harry, almost two decades have spaced apart their relationship and this is all new to him again. He presents himself in bits and pieces because Louis isn’t a part of his day to day life, like he once was. And even though Louis understands to a certain degree, he still wants to scream about how fucking frustrating it is. To be a total outsider in his best mate’s life. To be replaced.

In a way, Louis finds himself being increasingly jealous of Zayn. He can’t justify his feelings and his rationale seems baseless, but if Louis is honest, Zayn’s relationship with Harry makes him so uncontrollably jealous.

It doesn’t matter that Louis has his own relationship and his own life, something about not being the most important person in Harry’s life anymore really gets to him. Zayn gets to spend all the time in the world with Harry and be the center of his attention. He has uninhibited access to him in a way that Louis no longer does and the more Louis thinks about it, the more jealous he feels.

“So…is Zayn your soulmate?” Louis questions seriously, pushing the question out before he has a chance to change his mind. It’s kind of an invasive question, sure, but it needs to be answered. Like…now.

“My soulmate?” Harry chuckles a bit in surprise at that, casting his head back and looking up to the night’s sky. “I dunno? That’s a bit naïve isn’t it? Are there even such a thing as soulmates?”

“I think so, yeah.” Louis nods easily in consideration. “I mean, I think that some people are just destined to be together. Like fate. You know?”

Harry shrugs, hands stuffed down in his pockets. “It seems farfetched but…I dunno, maybe.”

“Well, does Zayn give you that feeling?”

“And what feeling is that exactly?”

“You know…the feeling.” Louis emphasizes, flashing a growing smile up at Harry. “That unsettled kind of excitement, that kinda like…washes over you when you’re around him? Like butterflies in your stomach and goose bumps all over your skin.”

“God, I hope not, how awful. I haven’t felt that way about anyone since—erm…” Harry’s voice dies out and he shakes his head as though avoiding his own thoughts, forcing himself to move on. “Uh…and anyway, who wants to feel like that all the time when they’re around someone? It’s exhausting and uncomfortable and impractical.”

Louis’ face falls a little in disappointment. What happened to Harry’s genuine love of love? The boy he knew was so infatuated with the concept of falling in love and being in love and just…love in itself. No one, absolutely no one, loved love more than Harry Styles. But now he’s essentially
reversed his tune all together, forsaking all his whimsical romantic notions and referring to them as myths.

Louis must be missing something; a vital piece to the puzzle. Did Harry have his heart broken sometime along the way that’s made him so cynical? It couldn’t have been Zayn, otherwise Louis highly doubts Harry would be marrying him. So it begs the underlying question of who hurt Harry so badly that his romantically quixotic, starry-eyed spirit was sucked right out of his system?

“Exhausting? How can being in love with your soulmate be exhausting?” Louis argues, not understanding that logic even slightly. “They’re supposed to be the person that makes everything easier, not harder. The person no one else can ever compare to. The person you get excited to talk to because they make your day brighter. The person you can tell anything to, who is always there for you no matter what. They compliment parts of you and you compliment parts of them and…you just…click. Like puzzle pieces, I suppose.”

“Hmmm.” Harry hums quietly to himself, but not offering much more than that on the topic. They walk a bit further in silence, before he flicks his gaze back to Louis. “What about you and Raphael?”

“What about us?”

“He adores you.” Harry answers simply.

“No, he adores everyone, really.” Louis shrugs off.

“I don’t think so. I mean…I think I read somewhere that he flew you to a private island that he named specially after you and then he spent days wooing you along the sandy beaches.” Harry exaggerates, painting quite a picture. “Sounds very soulmatey.”

“That doesn’t even sound true.” Louis laughs out right, shaking his head at the obviously fabricated gossip story.

“Sources say he carries a ring around in his pocket.” Harry whispers like it’s hot news and he’s some kind of eager journalist. “Just waiting for the right moment.”

“Oh please.” Louis scoffs, rolling his eyes. “Give me a break.”

“I dunno, Louis.” Harry shrugs teasingly. “It’s sounds pretty legit to me. People Magazine has never led me astray.”

“Shut up.” Louis chuckles, shoving Harry’s shoulder playfully. “Well…he’s a lot to uh handle…but he’s a very nice…um man. I like him.”

“Nice? All you have to say about your boyfriend of two years is that you like him because he’s nice?”

“He is nice!” Louis repeats with his arms raised. For god’s sake, he only met the guy a week ago. “Um let’s see…he’s also funny and caring. And very, very French, which is cool. Raphy is proud to be himself and I admire that about him.”

“Obviously.” Harry nods through a light laugh.

“Yep, that’s my Laffy Taffy.” Louis jokes unknowingly.

“What? Wait, like the song? That’s…wow.” Harry starts to nearly fall over laughing, hand over his mouth. “You really call him that?”
“What song? Why are you laughing?” Louis stops to scowl at Harry in bewilderment, watching him double over.

“You don’t know? Oh my god, that’s even more hilarious…” Harry continues to giggle to himself, biting his lip in a weak attempt to stop. He runs a hand through his windblown hair to regain composure. “Um….you should just…listen to it…yeah…”

“Why? I don’t get it…”

“Just do it.” Harry says with the stupidest shit eating grin on his face. “Give it a little listen and then tell me what you think.”

Louis narrows his eyes, brows still furrowed. “Ok, whatever.”

For the third time, their voices fall quiet and they walk the cobbled pathway in silence. Louis trains his eyes downward, watching their feet hit the stone with symmetrical strides.

“So is Raphael your soulmate then?” Harry wonders next, shifting his gaze back to Louis in seriousness.

“Oh no you don’t.” Harry takes two wide steps and cuts Louis off, standing right in front of him. “You can’t just ask me that about Zayn and not let me turn it back on you.”

“It’s really not the same, Harry.” Louis tries, shaking his head and avoiding Harry’s eyes. Seriously, it really isn’t the same. Louis doesn’t know Raphy well enough to decide that at this point and he can’t entirely speak for his older self’s feelings like that.

Or can he?

“What? Like hell it isn’t.” Harry disputes, eyeing Louis expectantly. “If you believe in soulmates then it should be that simple. Is Raphael your soulmate or not?”

Louis pauses for a moment, looking down at the shaded stones beneath his feet as he thinks deeply to himself. Harry is right, it shouldn’t be that difficult of a question to answer, but somehow the very nature of the issue causes him to seriously wonder.

If Raphy was indeed his soulmate, he would know it right? Based on Louis’ very own definition of the concept, he would sense that unique connection and feel that familiar comfort easily, regardless of how long he’s known him. It should be obvious.

It’s strange because Louis never really thought too hard about soulmates and lifelong loves in the past. Not when it applied to him at least. It didn’t seem all that relevant and he just kind of assumed that it’d all work out sometime along the way as he grew up. But when Louis really thinks about it, when he really stops to give a simple definition a real life identity, the only person who has felt anything near what a soulmate should is…

Harry.

“Um…no—No… I don’t think so…” Louis answers quietly as he meets Harry’s eyes, processing unfamiliar thoughts for the very first time. He has never once thought of Harry as anything but his closest friend, his best friend. Thinking of him in any other sense is totally ridiculous.
…Isn’t it?

Harry looks taken aback by that answer, seeming caught off guard by the genuine uncertainty prominently laced in Louis’ eyes. Mixed emotions flare and flash across Harry’s face so rapidly that Louis can’t quite place them.

They hold each other’s gaze in the quiet serenity of the garden and it starts to feel more and more charged, the momentum steadily building between them. It’s worse than how it was the other night at Louis’ dinner table. That same binding magnetism thrumming between them, but a thousand times worse. Louis feels like he’s being swallowed into the mossy forest of Harry’s irises and try as he might, Louis can’t tear his gaze away.

Have Harry’s eyes always been *that* clear of a green? That’s incredible. They’re enchanting, mesmerizing Louis in downright overpowering ways.

Louis feels suddenly hyperaware of Harry’s proximity to his own body, the space between them strangely reduced to mere fractions. He’s so *close*, Louis could count the fresh hairs of stubble peppering his chin and if he allowed his eyes to drift a bit further, he could almost taste the plumpness of Harry’s red tinged lips.

And where the fuck did *that* thought come from? To be fair, Harry’s lips are ridiculously red and they are also ridiculously plump and luscious and—stop, stop, STOP.

Louis sucks in a weak, baited breath, heart rate apparently taking note of their vanishing vicinity and he swears—like he absolutely *swears* that Harry is looming closer and closer, drawing nearer still, until…

Harry clears his throat, finally tearing his gaze away and taking a much needed step back. “Uh, well I have to…” He starts, scratching at the back of his neck and pointing off in a random direction. “I mean—I should probably…because I have to…you know…”

Louis opens his mouth to agree with Harry’s jumbled nonsense of a sentence, but his voice seems to be momentarily out of commission. So he nods his head dumbly, mouth still slightly ajar.

“It’s just that—I uh…I gotta…because it’s late a-and…I erm…” Harry stutters pitifully, shaking his head seeming just as frustrated with himself as Louis feels. “…You know?”

“…I know. Right. Mhm. Same—y-yeah…” Louis finally gets his stupid uncooperative mouth to say. Barely. Although, what he is agreeing to is still rather ambiguous and vague. “But this was erm…nice. Yeah. Thanks for uh…hanging out with me.”

“Yeah, yeah…” Harry nods excessively, not knowing what to do with his hands. “It was fun…”

“It was…yeah…” Louis agrees channeling his own version of an off-kilter bobblehead.

“Yeah…”

Louis doesn’t know what the hell just came over him, but it certainly can not happen again. How fucking embarrassing. Yeah, Louis is the first to admit that he and Harry have a unique relationship and an undeniable chemistry together, but it’s not because they’re *soulmates*. What the fuck? That’s absolutely absurd. Completely and utterly ridiculous. ‘LMAO’, as the hip texters would say.

Yet, as Louis walks Harry to his Jeep in charged silence and even as he watches Harry drive off through the front gate, he can’t seem to shake the unfamiliar feelings that just came over him. He could go mad with it, perplexed beyond belief as he continues to try and pinpoint what he’s feeling
inside and repeatedly coming up short.

Louis has never had this kind of reaction to Harry before. He’s never elicited these feelings or had these kind of thoughts just by interacting with him, just by being close to him.

And what’s even more strange is that it seems Harry felt those exact same feelings too.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

hiii loves! soooo surprise surprise, I'm posting two chapters at once! hip hop hooray! I hope you enjoy 6 and 7 :) thank you so much again for all the lovely comments and messages! i love you all :) 

love lex .x

Chapter Six

Louis hasn’t seen Harry since their time together in the garden the other night. 

But the thing is, Louis has been thinking about that night a lot. Like, a lot, a lot. Even when he isn’t trying to think about it, his mind drifts back there anyways, always landing right back to Harry. And since Louis doesn’t know what exactly to do with his thoughts, he fights to ignore them, pushing everything to the far recesses of his mind.

And the great thing about Harry is that he seems to be 100% on board with that plan, completely pretending like nothing out of the ordinary ever happened. Perhaps Harry has mastered the art of compartmentalization or perhaps nothing really did happen and it was all in Louis’ head. But regardless, life moves on between them. Although they haven’t spoken in person, they’ve been texting incessantly. Not about anything too serious, of course. Just dumb, random things.

Louis sends Harry a series of laughing emojis after reading Harry’s horribly lame, but still endearingly funny joke about bagels. This curly boy really had the audacity to type out “Hey Lou, what kind of bagel can fly?” and then proudly follows up with “A plain bagel” as the answer. And what’s worse is, Louis can’t believe that he actually laughed at it. It’s a horridly stupid joke, but the fact that Harry randomly texted it to him, made Louis smile.

Louis clicks out of his conversation with Harry, and looks briefly over his other messages. Among the different messages, he notices his last, brief conversation with his boyfriend, still labeled as Laffy Taffy in his phone. He instantly remembers how Harry had nearly coughed up a lung laughing at that the other night and so Louis decides to put an end to this confusion once and for all.

“Raphy?” Louis calls from his totally laxed position, haphazardly lounged across one of the couches in the living room.

“Yes, mon amour?” Raphael flicks his head up from his laptop, sitting properly on an adjacent sofa, legs crossed.

They’ve been sitting in companionable silence with Raphael working on revising a new script and Louis alternating between waiting for Harry to text back and playing the cool FIFA game thing Niall showed him. He absolutely sucks at it, but it’s wicked awesome because he can play as any footballer in the international league, even himself. How fucking cool is that?

Earlier, Louis was playing a game of one-on-one with Niall and he mistakenly decided to play as
himself and completely got his ass handed to him by Niall’s David Beckham. Not Louis’ proudest moment, but definitely realistic. Even if by some outlandish miracle he was talented enough to beat David in real life, Louis would totally let him win on principle. The man is a fucking legend and Louis would sooner fall down and worship the ground he walks on than beat him at a game of footie, real or virtual. But anyway, video games have gotten a trillion times better since the ‘90s, that much is certain.

Louis sets his phone down on his chest, turning his head lazily towards his boyfriend as he picks the game controller back up. “Do you uh…by any chance, happen to know why exactly I call you Laffy Taffy?”

“Oh, isn’t it because it rhymes?” Raphael wonders curiously. “Raphy Taffy, Laffy Raphy.”

“I mean…that’s what I thought?” Louis guesses, shrugging. He slides sideways so his head is dangling upside down off of the couch, legs propped up in the air. It’s kinda fun playing FIFA upside down, it’s like an extra layer of challenge. Not that he needs any more challenge, Louis already sucks at this game. “But then Harry made it seem like—”

“Harry?” Raphael interrupts, lifting his head up in sudden interest. “Did you see him or something?”

“Oh yeah, Harry came over and hung out with me while you were in London.” Louis explains, a little distracted as he focuses on his upside down FIFA match. “We watched Toy Story 3, which completely blew my mind by the way. It was sooo sick! I loved it!”

Raphael watches him oddly, expression twisting into something akin to hesitant doubt. “That’s all you did? Hang out…”

“Yeah.” Louis answers easily, not thinking anything of it. “What else would we do?”

Raphael shrugs slowly, still a bit on edge. “I mean…I don’t know. Nothing, I guess.”

“Shit, I got a penalty. This is a lot harder than it looks, you know?” Louis frowns to himself, starting to feel the blood rush to his dangling head. “Anyway, so we went on a walk and we were talking about you—”

“About me?” Raphael frowns, interrupting again. “Why me?”

“Oh, because Harry said that you adore me.” Louis states matter-of-factly.

“I do.” Raphael confirms instantly. “Oh how I adore you, chéri.”

A slight blush creeps over Louis' cheeks, or maybe that's still the rushing blood from being upside down. “Yeah, so then I said that you are my Laffy Taffy and he flat out laughed. Like he nearly fell over laughing and I don’t get it? What is so funny about that?”

“Hmm. I’m not sure, I don’t get it either.”

“So there isn’t a song or something? Like a Laffy Taffy song?”

“Oh! Yes, the song! I can’t believe I forgot about that.” Raphy laughs as recognition dawns on him. “Oh, you loooove that song.”

“Why do I love it?” Louis adjusts himself back to right side up, twisting himself up to sit properly on the couch as he pauses his game.
“You tell me.” Raphy grins amusedly. “Here, I’ll play it for you.”

Raphy gets up from his chair and plops down on the couch right next to Louis with his laptop. He pulls the song up on YouTube and as soon as he hits play, Louis is confused. The beat itself is highly synthesized, unlike most of the music he is used to from his own era and as for the lyrics, well…

...Shake that Laffy Taffy, that Laffy Taffy. Shake that Laffy Taffy, that Laffy Taffy...

“I mean…it’s catchy?” Louis gathers, listening intently as he leans into Raphy’s side. “…I guess?”

“Just wait for it.”

I’m lookin’ for Mrs. Bubble Gum, I’m Mr. Chik-O-Stick. I wanna dun dun dunt, Oh! Cause you so thick. Call me Jolly Rancher, cause I stay so hard. You can suck me for a long time, Oh! My! God!

“Oh…my…god…” Louis breathes, echoing after the song’s lyrics with eyes wide, jaw hanging open. He doesn’t know what he was expecting, but it definitely was not that by any means. If he had a list of all the possible candy related lyrics he could come up with, those would have never even crossed his mind. “I’m a hoe…”

“Mmm, mon dieu de sexe.” Raphael laughs to himself.

Louis eyes him seriously. “Did you just agree with me? That I’m a hoe? Because…”

... Imma toss the Laffy Taffy. Toss it, flip it, and slap it. Bust a couple of nuts and get right back at it...

“Ehh…I called you a sex god, so maybe?” Raphael grins teasingly, nudging Louis’ shoulder.

“Oh. My. God!” Louis says again, throwing his head back and covering his face. He feels a bit mortified now, unknowingly walking around calling his boyfriend his Laffy Taffy, not having the slightest clue as to what it actually meant. Is it really so naïve to think it was just about the candy and also that it happens to rhyme? Obviously it is. Whether Louis should be laughing outright or internally cursing himself, remains unclear right now.

“I’d just like it be known for the record that prior to this, the most scandalous song I knew was Pony.” Louis says, defending his youthful innocence.

“I don’t think I remember that one?” Raphael scrunches up his features as he thinks to himself.

“Oh yes you do.” Louis assures, having the least bit of doubt. “I’m beyond positive that you have at least heard it sometime in your lifetime. It was way too popular to have died.”

“Hmm, alright, if you say so. Let’s look it up then.” Raphael searches for Pony on YouTube next, easily finding the song and hitting play.

I’m just a bachelor, I’m looking for a partner. Someone who knows how to ride, without even falling off…

“This is like…the G-Rated version of Laffy Taffy.” Raphael laughs amusedly.

“Exactly.” Louis sighs, shaking his head. “And that really says a lot, I think.”

If you’re horny, let’s do it. Ride it, my pony. My saddle’s waiting, come and jump on it...

“Oh, you know what?” Raphael smiles slowly, twisting on his side to face Louis.
“What?”

“You did a strip tease to this song for me!” Raphael announces excitedly, eyes lighting up as he wiggles his eyebrows. “Remember that?”

“No. No, I did not! No!” Louis covers his face again in embarrassment.

Raphael nods smugly, biting his lower lip. “Mhmm. Actually you’ve done it more than once, because I love it so much. Oh, and this is my favorite part!”

*If we’re gonna get nasty baby, first we’ll show and tell, till I reach your ponytail. Lurk all over and through you baby. Until we reach the stream you’ll be on my jockey team…*

“No! No! No!” Louis shakes his head, hands still over his face. “Noooo!”

“Yes, baby! Yes, yes, yes!” Raphael teases, mocking his boyfriend. It would be adorable if Louis wasn’t so absolutely horrified. “I even have a video of it—”

“No, please god, *no!* Spare me! I don’t want to see that! I’ll go blind!” Louis protests. Would it be classified as second or first hand embarrassment if he is embarrassed by himself, but an older self whose memories he doesn’t have access to? If feels like a toss up, if he’s honest. All Louis knows is that the embarrassment aspect remains real and valid either way.

“Ok, but are you sure, Loulou?” Raphael grins, laying his head down against the couch cushion and watching Louis like he’s the funniest and most precious thing to ever exist. “Ooh, it was soo hot. You did this thing where you—”

“Please! Spare! Me!” Louis bursts in absolute mortification.

Raphael laughs at his expense, smirking at Louis fondly. “I don’t think I’ve ever experienced a bashful version of you until recently. You’re so very cute Loulou.”

“Ugh, *god.*” Louis casts his head back against the cushions, letting out another groan.

“I love you.” Raphael leans in to sweetly kiss his temple before standing to his feet. “I’m going to go make us dinner, ok?”

Louis nods slowly, pouting his lip. He picks up his disregarded phone off of his lap, opening up his conversation with Harry and typing out a new message.

*so i listened to laffy taffy…*

The response comes almost as quickly as Louis hit send and it’s truly ridiculous how eager Harry is to make fun of him about this.

*And???

*i hate you.*

*LMAO*

Louis’ phone buzzes again before he can even type a response to Harry’s first message.

*No, but I’m really laughing my ass off, just so you know.*

Why did Harry feel the need to clarify that? Louis can perfectly picture Harry cracking himself up
over this and as much as he wants to hate it, because it’s at his own expense, the concept still makes him grin. Louis starts to answer the messages, but then Harry goes even further and triple texts him.

*I can’t breathe, I’d fucking kill to see your face when you heard it OMG

*um lets just say I was less than amused

☠☠ DEAD ☠☠

it’s not funny. no one is laughing…

*I am :) In fact, I can’t STOP laughing :)

ur the worst

Sorry, not sorry :)

After what felt like hours of back and forth negotiating over text, Louis somehow got Harry to agree to visit him at the stadium. Louis convinced him under the guise of stating that it would be an absolute crime for Harry to live his entire life without having seen the exclusive cool parts of Keepmoat Stadium. Especially since he has an eager personal tour guide at his disposal.

Harry didn’t really argue with that, but he only actually agreed when Louis told him that he could also use this opportunity to drop off his copy of *The Notebook* when he comes by; something he could never turn down. Harry couldn’t possibly pass on the opportunity to redeem another so-called ‘lost soul’ by forcing *The Notebook* down Louis’ throat, as he has probably done with countless other people deemed lost by Harry’s standards.

Knowing that Harry is coming to visit is what gets Louis through the rigors of training all day. It makes all the trivial ups and downs a little easier to swallow, at least for the day.

After running—struggling, through a 10 kilometer circuit on the treadmill, his coaches finally let him go and if Louis’ legs didn’t feel like limp noodles, he’d jump for joy. Instead, he hobbles back to his office, as fast as he can, to wait for Harry to arrive.

Louis contemplates maybe hitting the showers to ward off the sweaty stench he’s sporting right now thanks to the treadmill. But there is already a light tapping at his office door, so Louis forsakes that idea completely, eagerly answering the door.

“Erm hi, Lou.” Harry waves warmly, with a dimpled grin. And Louis couldn’t keep the smile off his face if he tried, loving the way Harry says his name. His voice makes Louis feel warm inside, wrapped up by the syrupy smooth lull of Harry’s low drawl.

“Haz, you’re here!” Louis greets happily, opening the door wider. “I’d give you a hug, but I totally reek, sorry.”

Harry laughs lightly. “Thanks for the warning.”
“Yeah, don’t mention it.” Louis smiles, stepping to the side to allow Harry inside. “Come on in. You didn’t get lost did you? This place is a bloody maze sometimes.”

Harry steps inside the office as Louis closes the door behind him. “Oh no, your assistant, Niall, showed me where to go.”

“I love that Irish lad.” Louis beams warmly. “He’s the best.”

“He seems like a cool dude, yeah.” Harry agrees.

“You have no idea how lost I would be without him.” Louis admits. “But anyway, I’m glad you made it!”

“Me too.” Harry smiles, looking around the large space. “So this is your office…”

“Mhmm, this is me.” Louis confirms, looking around as well like he hasn’t really given much thought to it. “I don’t do much in here besides take naps to be honest. The couch is like a cloud.”

“You have time to take naps during training?” Harry asks incredulously, glancing at Louis.

“Hardly. But we do get a few breaks throughout the day, so there is no better way to spend them than passed out on that bad boy.” Louis points to his favorite couch along the far wall. “An hour well spent, lemme tell you.”

Harry laughs, shaking his head. “Oh, here’s the movie, before I forget.”

“Like you would ever forget.” Louis scoffs, taking the case from Harry’s hand. “You’ve been shoving this movie at me all week long.”

“And you better watch it. Or else…”

“Or else what?” Louis tests curiously.

“Just…or else.” Harry repeats, narrowing his eyes as if that is supposed to scare Louis or something.

Louis smiles slowly, fighting back a laugh. “No, but Harry—”

“Shhh, don’t over think it. It’s just or else.” Harry interrupts, with a raised finger. “You’re gonna watch the movie, so you don’t need to know, right? Right.”

“Um no, not right. I need to know all my options. So you’re saying that I either watch the movie or else…” Louis looks to Harry to finish the sentence, leaning in anticipatively.

“Or else.” Harry says again in finality with a nod.

“I can’t deal with you.” Louis giggles. “Fine, I’ll watch the movie, ok?”

“That’s all I ask. See, was that so hard?” Harry teases with an amused smirk. “Now we can move on with our day.”

Louis sighs, shaking his head in fond exasperation. “So I see you’re still spending your days walking around with a camera on your neck.” He notes, pointing at the straps framing Harry’s neckline.

Harry looks down at himself with a frown. “Oh shit, I totally forgot I was still wearing this. I came straight from work and I hardly notice it anymore.”
“It suits you anyway.” Louis smiles warmly. “You look kinda naked without it.”

Harry laughs, holding the camera in his hands and doing a little pose with it. “You think so?”

“Oh yes, it’s like you were born with it. Definitely your best accessory by far.” Louis professes, giving Harry a small round of applause. “I meant to ask before, but what kind of photography do you do anyway?”

“Uh…treasured moments mostly.” Harry answers, noting Louis’ confused expression. “And by that, I mean the typical things people use photographers for. You know, weddings, milestone birthdays, anniversaries, family portraits, new babies…”

“Right, right. The usual.”

“Yeah…” Harry nods slowly, and he sounds like he wants to say more.

“…But?” Louis goads.

“But…if I’m honest with myself, what I really wanted to do is fashion photography.” Harry confesses with a dismissive shrug.

“Oh, that sounds like you!” Louis agrees, nodding his head. “Why didn’t you then?”

“Um…well I guess uh…” Harry pauses for a second, seeming to fight himself on the real answer. “Ok…truthfully…I think I put too much stock into what people thought of me when I was younger. It made me sink into myself and…um stifle who I really was. At least for awhile anyway. A long while…” He admits quietly, avoiding any sort of eye contact. “And I didn’t really reach a point of acceptance until my twenties. It took me a long time to get to a place where I really embraced myself.”

That’s the most Harry has ever revealed about himself in all the time Louis has known him as an adult. And it immediately saddens Louis a bit. The idea of his best friend just kind of wandering aimlessly through his teenage years, feeling unaccepted and invalidated, doesn’t sit right with Louis at all. In fact, it makes him feel angry on Harry’s behalf, and an overwhelming sense of wanting to protect him and support him. If they were best friends, as they should have been, Louis never would have let that happen.

Admittedly, Louis is taken aback by the sudden raw honesty of Harry’s words; he almost doesn’t know how to react. “Well…um…now that you have learned to embrace yourself and everything, why don’t you change it? You can still do fashion photography now. You’re so incredibly talented, Harry. You always have been. Anyone can see that.”

Louis thinks about all of the photographs Harry has taken over the years. He had a gift even as just a preteen, and now his craft has matured impeccably. Louis remembers walking through Harry’s studio and his breath catching at the all the awe-inspiring pictures mounted on the wall. How his attention was instantly captivated by the perception of the genius behind the lens. Harry’s genius. It’s not even about Louis showing favoritism towards his friend, Harry is brilliant by his own merit, in his own right and he deserves all the recognition for his talent.

“It’s not that easy.” Harry sighs. “You don’t just become a fashion photographer overnight, you have to get in with different designers and do internships and climb the ladder, so to speak…and it all starts really early on. It’s one of the most competitive sub-specialties in photography.” He explains with a slight shrug, running a hand through his lengthy curls. “Maybe if I had been a little more secure in myself when I was younger, it could have worked out but…who knows.”
Louis expression pulls into a frown. Yeah, he knows everyone has insecurities at that age, but these don’t sound like typical insecurities. And it makes Louis wonder even more about what happened during Harry’s teenage years.

“And anyway, with Zayn wanting to move to America, it’s not realistic to try anything new now. Especially not somewhere as high profile as New York.” Harry continues. “I’ll already have to rebuild my clientele from scratch just living there.”

The more Louis hears about this New York thing, the more he is against it. It’s great for Zayn of course, but not so much for Harry. All things considered, the whole concept seems less than ideal in Louis’ eyes. But he still can’t figure out how exactly to express his concerns without coming off the wrong way and offending Harry. So he chooses to just be supportive as best he can.

“You’re so brilliant, Haz. The best photographer I’ve ever seen.” Louis compliments genuinely. “So I’m sure you’ll have tons of new customers before you know it. I don’t think you have anything to worry about.”

“We’ll see.” Harry answers humbly, with a halfhearted shrug.

“I won’t hesitate to fly myself out to New York to be your customer if that’s what it takes.” Louis pledges dramatically although sincerely. “And I’ll walk all the streets of the city and tell everyone I see all about you and how amazing your work is.”

“Thanks, Lou.” Harry smiles warmly, finally meeting Louis’ eyes again. “Although the walking the streets part doesn’t sound safe for you. But I appreciate the sentiment.”

“Ok fine, maybe you’re right. But I still want to be a customer.”

“Oh? Do you now?” Harry asks with a raised eyebrow and Louis can tell that he’s teasing him and he’s up to something.

“Yes.” Louis confirms proudly, holding his chin up. “I really do.”

Harry appears to fiddle with his camera absentmindedly, but Louis is no fool. He knows Harry and his silly games like the back of his hand.

“Oh nooo...don’t.” Louis shakes his head instantly as he suspiciously eyes the camera poised in Harry’s hand. “Haz, I didn’t mean now, ok? Don’t do it.”

“What?” Harry continues playing around with the lens, smirking. “I’m not doing anything?”

“Put it down, Harry.” Louis warns, holding a protective hand up as a preemptive shield. “Seriously, I’m sweaty and tired and gross.”

“I don’t know…what…you’re talking about?” Harry replies slowly, still playing dumb with the camera pointed directly at Louis.


“I...dunno? I just…” Harry presses down on the shutter button and the camera instantly flashes to life.

“Harry!” Louis whines, pouting his lips into a frown. It’s exactly like when Harry would snap ugly surprise pictures of Louis, invading his privacy with his nuisance of a camera. And what made it worse is that Harry always found it so entertaining.
“Oh god, I’m so sorry!” Harry apologizes even though he is still smirking and looking anything but sorry. “It did that all by itself, I swear.”

“Oh right, mhmm sure.” Louis nods sarcastically. “Sure.”

“I’m serious, Lou. I would never.” Harry exaggerates, theatrically shaking his head. “It has a mind of its own.”


“Fuck this camera, oh my god?” Harry pretends to be shocked, jaw dropping in surprise as he frowns at the camera hanging from his neck. “How did that happen? From the bottom of my heart, I am sincerely sorry.”

“I can’t believe you still find this funny.” Louis says, hands over his face.

“Well, I can’t believe you still react to it.” Harry retorts, laughing to himself. “That’s what makes it funny.”

“Touché.” Louis nods, peeking through his fingers. “Are you done now?”

“Done with what?” Harry feigns ignorance, frowning.

“You’re a fucking menace to society. You know that?” Louis mopes bitterly, lowering his hands.

A slow smile dimpled spreads across Harry’s face as he very purposefully snaps another picture. Louis tries to keep his face flat and unamused, but he fails miserably, snorting out a giggle as his expression breaks into an amused grin. And soon they both end up bursting with uncontrollable laughter. It isn’t even clear what they are really laughing at, but that only seems to make it all more hilarious.

There’s an unexpected knock at the door, but Harry and Louis are still laughing happily with each other as the door opens.

“Tommo I—ooh, look who we have here.” Rusty sneers as he saunters though the door. “Twinkles Toes is that you, mate?”

Harry looks over his shoulder and his laugh promptly dies in his throat. His lighthearted expression morphs into a look of pure exhaustion as he sighs heavily. It’s obvious that the already tense relationship between them only magnified since the last time Louis witnessed it. Louis always hated getting caught between them, he never knew what to do. So nine times out of ten, he regretfully did nothing.

“Well, fuck. Look at you.” Rusty crosses his arms over his chest and scans his eyes over Harry, slowly looking him up and down. “Curly Sue is all grown up, how precious. Last time I saw you, you were just a wee little baby.”

Harry’s face remains completely flat and void of emotion, only offering the briefest tight lipped smile. “Oh hello, Rusty. Yeah…you’re right it has been awhile...”

“It’s Russell now, thanks.” Rusty corrects pretentiously.

Something completely shifts in Harry’s demeanor in that moment, as though deciding something in his head. He stands up straight, narrowing his eyes as he approaches Rusty deliberately.
“Oh, right, right. You know what? I hardly recognized you.” Harry gestures to his face “Finally fixed all that, huh? That brow lift just opened up your whole face. Wow. The wonders of modern medicine, I tell you. That’s really something.”

Rusty’s face says it all; he looks completely taken aback by Harry’s unanticipated patronizing remark, unable to even mumble out a response.

“A brow lift!” Louis gasps, tilting his head at Rusty’s face. “That’s what it is. So you did get work done. I was really betting on the nose, to be honest.”

“Honestly, if he was smart he would have done the nose too.” Harry adds, winking as he points to his own nose. “Good help is so hard to find these days, huh Rus?”

“Holy shit…” Louis snickers in surprise, eyes wide as he covers his gaping mouth. What a burn. This adult version of Harry doesn’t give a fuck. And it’s kind of a turn on.

Oh wait, oh god. Did Louis just openly admit to himself that his best friend turns him on? Because… that’s…

Rusty scowls, touching his nose self-consciously. It’s obvious that he doesn’t quite know what to say or how to recover from this. He shakes his head arbitrarily, scoffing under his breath repeatedly as he struggles to think of a comeback. “Yeah…well…nice hair…”

“Uh? Thank you? I guess? I dunno? Did you mean that as an insult or…? Harry wonders in confusion, eyes narrowed inquisitively.

“You’re a proper princess now aren’t you?” Rusty demeans immaturely.

“I sure am, thanks. Long hair, don’t care.” Harry grins proudly, giving his tumbling curls a cute little hair flip. “And it’s just so heartwarming to know you’re still a proper dick.” He smiles ironically, leaning in closer. “It’s just sooo fascinating to me how some people refuse to mature through life. Absolutely incredible. Tell me, how does it feel to still be thirteen, Rusty?”

Louis is certain he is witnessing a murder. His jaw remains open as he watches them go back and forth. Or more so watches Harry claim Rusty’s life in the classiest way possible. And Harry looks so ridiculously hot doing it, Louis feels almost enraptured by him.

Oh, and there his stupid mind goes again. Since when did he start openly referring to Harry as hot? Well, of course he is hot, objectively speaking. But…what is going on here? This is not the time for Louis’ brain to start this shit up again.

“Quit it, Harriet.” Rusty barks back, with hardly any bite.

“Or what?” Harry questions boldly, getting all up in Rusty’s personal space. “You’ll call me a princess? Maybe tell me to go paint my nails?” He lifts one of his perfectly manicured hands, wiggling his fingers directly in front of Rusty’s face. “Oh! Look it’s already done!”

Rusty bites his lip, staring intensely at Harry and seeming hardly able to handle how close he is to his face.

“What do you think? I’m trying out lavender this week—I just love pastels, but I’m a big fan of jewel tones too.” Harry gushes, admiring his own nails exaggeratedly. “And you know what? Last week, I totally switched it up with a matte black. It was a pretty good look for me, I think.”

Louis was right, it’s very much like how it was back in school, except now there is definitely a
power shift. And it’s not even that Harry is in a better place in life status wise, Rusty is a celebrity athlete now. Harry just knows himself so much better. He’s always been witty and funny and even sarcastic, the confidence was just lacking. But now Harry is a grown, self-assured man and it’s nearly impossible to tear someone down when they are that confident and proud of who they are.

“God, the sexual tension. Wow…” Louis jokes from the sidelines. And whether he is talking about Harry and Rusty’s close proximity or his own internal angst is questionable at the moment.

“Fuck off, Tommo.” Rusty growls, trying to maintain his sense of nonexistent control.

“Uh chill, it’s not that deep…or is it?” Harry teases, wagging his tongue mockingly.

Rusty immediately turns the brightest shade of red, eyes wide as he obviously grows more flustered by the second, much to Harry’s amusement.

“Oh calm down, I’d never do you anyway.” Harry winks suggestively, face only centimeters away from Rusty’s, getting into his head.

“Just shut the hell up already—shit.” Rusty tries, although weakly.

“Oh sure, no problem, Rus.” Harry nods easily, with a cute dimpled smile. “I’ll shut up just as soon as you grow up. How about that?”

Rusty always has a demeaning insult or a petty comeback ready to go and Harry just rendered him absolutely useless. And what’s funnier, it doesn’t look like Harry was trying very hard, effortlessly putting Rusty in his much deserved place without even breaking a sweat.

“I have to go.” Rusty announces all of a sudden, forsaking any prior claims of superiority.

“Aww, so soon? Bummer. We were just starting to catch up.”

Rusty grumbles to himself bitterly as he promptly turns to leave, tail between his legs.

“It was sooo good to see you, Rusty! Let’s do lunch sometime!” Harry waves sarcastically, sporting the most demeaning smile. “On me, yeah?”

Rusty flips Harry off as a final exude of bitterness, before heading right out of the door.

“Oh my god, I think you really sexually frustrate him.” Louis cackles as the door slams shut.

“Yeah, I kind of figured that out a little too late in life. I could have had so much fun back in school. He’s still such a dumbass.” Harry rolls his eyes in pure annoyance. His mood has totally shifted from how open and playful it was before Rusty stepped back into the picture. “I can’t believe —well, I can actually—that you’re still friends with…that.”

Louis shrugs because he doesn’t really understand it either to be completely honest. “He’s my teammate, I guess.”

“Yeah. Sure.” Harry answers briefly, body language totally closed off.

What just happened? The once warm and inviting vibe between them, just froze over. There is no warmth coming from Harry at all anymore, actually there is nothing coming from Harry anymore. He is completely shut down again. As though something just triggered him backwards.

“So…um do you still want that tour?” Louis asks unsurely, trying to get the air between them back to how it was ten minutes ago.
“Um no.” Harry decides tersely; expression nearly void of any identifiable emotion. “You know what? I can’t stay.”

Louis’ eyebrows furrow together. “Why not?”

“Because I can’t.” Harry shrugs flatly, that same wall Louis has seen so many times before, comes right back up at full force. And it doesn’t look like anything Louis can say will make it go away any time soon.

“But Harry—”

“Louis, seriously. I don’t have time.” Harry snaps, turning towards the exit.

“Are you mad at me?” Louis worries, unable to hide the apprehension in his voice. “Is it because of Rusty because I—”

“Just leave it, ok.” Harry interjects coldly.

“No, I won’t just leave it.” Louis persists. He can’t let all of the progress he’s made with Harry over the last week unravel so easily. “Why are so upset all of a sudden? Haz, just talk to me, please.”

“I have to go.” Harry ignores Louis completely, marching straight to the door. “I’m not doing this with you right now.”

“Doing what with me? Haz?” Louis questions, following behind Harry hesitantly, not wanting to anger him further. “Harry? Harry, please?”

Harry doesn’t even offer him a goodbye as he bolts out of the office, heavy door slamming behind him on his way out.

Louis stands in the same spot, stunned and confused as he stares at the closed door. This is not the first time Harry has fled the scene, but this is the first time he has done it like this. He’s upset, that much is painfully obvious, but about…what? It’s not about something that happened just now, Louis knows that much, it’s something that must have gone down in the past.

Why won’t Harry just talk to him? All Louis wants is to understand what Harry is feeling, to be able to comfort him and be there for him. Harry has never been this cold towards him before, but now he keeps repeatedly shutting Louis out. He has yet to figure out why exactly he and Harry aren’t close anymore, but Louis is starting to realize it might be a lot more serious than he originally thought.
Chapter Seven

“Ok, look. I’m just gonna level with you, is that alright? Can I bare my soul to you for a minute?”

Louis nods his head slowly, seated at a desk across from a heavily brooding Liam. His manager had yanked him into his office right before the team broke for their usual practice break. Which totally sucks because Louis was really looking forward to a good solid nap in his office on his favorite couch.

But instead he has been sitting here for the last thirty minutes, listening to Liam rant endlessly. And the thing is, Liam hasn’t even begun ranting about anything pertaining to Louis yet, it’s like he just needs to get all of his general frustrations out first. Louis has been zoning in and out, but so far Liam has covered the immense struggles of being a Head Manager, how much shit he puts up with everyday, and also how he should definitely get paid more for this level of stress.

Louis isn’t quite sure how else Liam can possibly bare his soul any further, but Louis doesn’t mind listening if it will help by any means. Especially since he is still waiting for the part that actually has to do with him specifically. The whole reason why Louis is even in Liam’s office to begin with.

“Yeah…ok sure, Liam.” Louis zones his attention back in, sitting up in the large chair. “Go for it.”

“It’s a nightmare. A big fat PR nightmare!” Liam groans, pacing back and forth behind his desk with his arms raised wildly above his head.

“I’m not quite sure that I follow…” Louis furrows his eyebrows, watching his manager wear a clear path into the carpet as he continues treading to and fro.

“Ok, so here’s what’s been going on. Allegedly our sponsorship money and funding is compromised. Part of it appears to have been used for illegal substances which, of course, was never approved. There’s been loads of rumors and speculation about it, but I tried to keep them all at bay.” Liam explains, talking abnormally fast and slurring his speech. “But it looks like we have been using all our funding to cheat, and furthermore it makes it look like we only got into The Premier by cheating.”

Louis wakes up fully at that, eyes widening. “What? No way? But that’s not true right? We didn’t actually cheat?”

um...well...this chapter has a few sad bumps in the road y'all. I'm sorrrrryyyyy but it won't last forever. its gonna be alright. we hope

still love you!

lex .x
“No! It’s not true at all!” Liam disproves, hands raised fervently above his head. He takes a deep breath, closing his eyes to calm himself before continuing. “Um, anyway, long story short, the chairs of the EFL wants to disqualify us from the championship. So…there’s that.”

“What!? But they can’t do that, right?” Louis wonders, leaning in speculatively. “…Can they do that?”

“They can do whatever they bloody want! They run the entire league for fucks sake!” Liam bursts again, hardly keeping it together as the stress radiates from his body. “I managed to get them to hold off on the disqualification and start with an official investigation first. I don’t know where it’s all coming from—the rumors, I mean. The paper trail looks legit from what I can tell. So I suspect it’s someone on the inside.”

“Like someone on our team? But why? Who would do that to their own team?” Louis questions in shock. “I mean, they all seem like such nice lads, you know? I can’t imagine any of them wanting to screw over Donny like that? Especially not for something as momentous and important as The Premier.”

“I don’t understand it either, but the press have already gotten wind of it and it’s bad. Really, really bad.” Liam groans, hands pressed to his temples. “The investigation is starting in a few days and the story will be everywhere. Fuck. Even if they find out it’s false in the end, the damage to the public opinion has already been done. It’s complete character assassination! Our public approval rates are shot to shit. No one will even want us to win with that kind of moral! We might as well drop out!”

“Oh, ok calm down, Liam. Just breathe through it, yeah. Breathe.” Louis tries, watching with wide eyes as his manager essentially loses it, sweat prickling at his brow. “There’s gotta be something we can do.”

“I don’t know, Louis. I just don’t know. I’m really out of my depth here.” Liam slumps down into his chair, laying his face down against the wood of his desk. “And I’m telling you this beforehand, because you’re the leader of this team. I don’t expect you to fix this but…You wouldn’t happen to have any bright ideas on you?”

“No, not really, mate. Sorry.” Louis answers regretfully, wishing there was more he had to offer as team captain.

“I didn’t think so, but I thought I’d ask.” Liam exhales heavily, lifting his head up marginally. “Well…I’ll keep you updated. But just keep this between us for now, yeah?”

“Uh yeah, of course, Liam.” Louis nods genuinely. “And if I think of anything, I’ll let you know.”

A light knock sounds from the door, ending the conversation.

“Come in.” Liam sighs, holding his head up weakly with his elbows propped up on his desk.

Niall pokes his head through the door tentatively, before stepping inside the office. “Um…Louis, sorry to bother you, but you have a…um…guest waiting for you in your office…”

“Oh, really? Is it my boyfriend? Or is it Harry?” Louis really, really hopes that by some small miracle it’s Harry. He doesn’t know what exactly happened yesterday, but Harry won’t even answer his texts. At first Louis thought maybe his texts weren’t going through or something like that. Until this morning when he went to their convo to send his fifteenth text and saw the appearance of Harry’s read receipt, quickly disproving that theory. Harry is just flat out ignoring him and Louis doesn’t know what to do or make of it.
Niall swallows, flicking his gaze towards Liam awkwardly. He clears his throat several times and fiddles with his glasses nervously. “Yeah…um…he’s uh waiting...”

Louis frowns, still confused by which ‘he’ is waiting for him. But right as he is about to ask Niall to clarify, his assistant ducks out of the office and disappears without warning. Louis shrugs, making his goodbyes to a discouraged Liam before meandering his way back over to his own office.

He wants it to be Harry. But then Louis doesn’t know what to say to him if it actually is. Of course he could start with an apology of some sort, but he doesn’t know what he’s apologizing for and that’s just downright awkward. Louis finds himself walking slower and slower down the halls to his office and by the time he actually gets there, he is pretty much hoping it’s just Raphy coming to visit him. At least that way he’ll have more time to figure out how to address his Harry situation.

Louis pushes open the unlocked door and instead of seeing the long dark chocolate curls of his best friend or the short curls of his boyfriend, he is surprised to see blonde. Straight, slicked back, dirty blonde hair. The same blonde hair that happens to belong to the Head Manager for Arsenal.

“Um…Jack?” It is Jack, right?” Louis tries tentatively, shuffling into his office space slowly. He offers his hand out for a polite shake. “Sorry, I’m not always good with names.”

“Ha, ha, very funny.” Jack grins, eyes never leaving Louis as he approaches him. He takes Louis’ hand, gently running his thumb along the grooves of Louis’ skin.

“Um…” Louis snatches his hand back instantly, shoving it into the pocket of his warm-up joggers. He furrows his eyebrows curiously, growing more confused. Louis hasn’t seen Jack since the gala when he showed up uninvited with his husband. And Louis doesn’t care much for the man by any means, so he can’t think of any possible reason why he would be here in his office right now. “So… uh…is there something I can help you with or…?”

“Yes. Yes, there is.” Jack purrs, taking a few steps closer which prompts Louis to immediately take a few steps back. “I snuck in here just for you. You would not believe what I had to do to get in here.”

“Ok?” Louis frowns, both unimpressed and uninterested, sidestepping his way out of Jack’s reach. “But…why?”

“Why?” Jack echoes in concern, expression slightly wounded. “What do you mean ‘why’? You aren’t going back on our deal, are you?”

“…Our deal?” Louis questions in bewilderment. What is this man going on about? He doesn’t even belong here; caught on the wrong side of England. It can’t be protocol for the manager of an opposing team to just be mingling about his rival’s stadium and letting himself into offices he has no business being in.

“Yeah, you know…” Jack smiles mischievously, inching closer again. “I help you, you help me.”

Louis’ prominent frown only deepens, eyebrows knitted tightly together. “Help with…what?”

He only gets closer and closer, cornering Louis and eyeing him in a way that makes Louis feel like he’s being hunted. Jack has yet to verbally make his intentions clear, but from the look on his face Louis can sense it can’t be anything good.

“Oh, I think you know.” Jack places a suggestive hand on Louis’ waist, stepping even closer.

Louis glances down at the unwarranted gesture, catching him so off guard that he doesn’t even know quite how to react. There was always something unsettling about him. Even when Louis met him the
first time at the gala, he did not appreciate how Jack looked at him. And now here he is, standing far too close for comfort, with his hand tracing along the dip of Louis’ side. “What are you doi—”

Jack interrupts Louis with the sudden, unexpected press of his lips to Louis’, leaning into him.

“You’re married!” Louis gasps outright, instantly shoving away from Jack in surprised disbelief, with an appalled hand over his own mouth.

“That never stopped us before.” Jack grins devilishly, winking at Louis.

“You’re fucking married! To my fucking rival!” Louis repeats in disgust as he wildly shakes his head. He knew there was something off about Jack, he fucking knew it. Each time he processes the words in his head, it hits him harder. The words themselves start to take shape, growing in meaning and increasing in weight. The implications clear as day now.

He’s a cheater. Louis is a cheater.

“Well, he won’t be your rival for long and I’m divorcing Marcelo, I told you that.” Jack shrugs as though he couldn’t care less.

“How does that make it better!” Louis shouts angrily, both hands atop his head as he tries to calm himself down. But there is a rising panic in his chest, an unsettling guilt threatening to choke him.

“No, really. We are over.” Jack promises. “I swear. I only want you now. I don’t care about him anymore.”

“What, so since you’re done with him, you’re just gonna trade him in for the newer, younger model? Fucking hell, he’s your husband! You have got to be shitting me, this can’t be real…” Louis breathes heavily, scraping his fingers roughly through his hair as his heart rate skyrockets with anxious discomfort and unease. ‘Oh my god, oh my god, oh my GOD!”

Louis can’t begin to wrap his mind around this. Not only is he cheating, but he is cheating on Raphy! The sweetest, most attentive and loving boyfriend Louis could ask for. And with a married man, no less! A man who is not only the head manager of the Rover’s most rivaled team, but he is husband to that very same team’s prized star.

The amount of blatantly disrespected lines he has crossed is unbelievable. What kind of person is he? Where is his moral compass? Why does Louis know what is right and wrong but his older self seems to not have a clue? Louis feels like throwing up, waves of nausea surging over him. Of all the low points to hit, this has to be the absolute worst.

There are so many questions swirling through Louis’ mind as he tries to come to grips with the person he is turning out to be. How many times has Louis invited this vile man over to his office? Or to his home? Or god only knows where else? How many times has he gone behind his boyfriend’s back and lied to his face? How far back does this affair go? How unhappy must he really be to even think of doing something like this?

Louis’ thoughts keep going back to his poor unsuspecting boyfriend. He doesn’t deserve this kind of betrayal. Raphy is kind and thoughtful and he treats Louis like a king. He adores Louis, he genuinely does. Louis doesn’t have a single doubt in his mind that he could ask Raphy anything in the world and he would go through any length to do it. And that’s not a testament to how Louis treats him, it just shows how much of an amazing person he truly is. Why the fuck would his 30-year-old self play with that poor man’s heart, stringing him along, knowing perfectly well that finding out about something like this would crush him. It’s cruel and selfish and Louis can’t stand for this.
“Ah come on, sweetheart. Lighten up.” Jack presses, lunging at Louis again. “I’ll make you feel better.”

“Get the fuck away from me, you son of a bitch! I am not and never will be your sweetheart!” Louis yells brashly, slapping Jack across the face as hard as he can. “I don’t know what kind of deal I made with you, but you can go to hell! That is so not cool! You should be so ashamed of yourself! I certainly am! You disgusting pig of a man!”

Jack rubs his stinging jaw in what appears to just be mild surprise. “Louis, baby, come on? What has gotten into you? Remember what we talked about?” He boldly approaches Louis again, seeming convinced that he can somehow sway Louis to see it his way.

“I don’t give a fuck! And I said to stay away from me, asshole!” Louis promptly knees him right in the balls, watching as Jack crumbles to the floor with a loud groan. “What part of that was unclear?!?”

With that, Louis storms out of his office, refusing to look back. He doesn’t know where he is going, but he knows he can’t stop because the second he stops is the second he absolutely loses it. He pushes out of the back exit door and as soon as the fresh air hits his face, the hysteria sets in. Louis stands hunched over in the empty parking lot, hands on his knees as he gasps for much needed air. He closes his eyes and just tries to breathe through it.

He can’t be this person. He can’t be the person who broke up a marriage. Or the person that would sacrifice core values all in the name of selfish gain. He can’t be the person that willingly disrespects his own relationship. Louis has given himself an underserved pass on a lot of things he’s noticed about his current life, but this is unacceptable. How the hell does he live with himself?

Louis doesn’t know where to turn to. He can’t even bear to so much as look at Niall, his usual go-to for just about everything. No wonder he was acting so weird back in Liam’s office, he obviously knows and is beyond uncomfortable about the whole situation. Poor Niall has known this entire time and has been forced to keep a secret like that. Louis doesn’t know how he will ever face him again.

But right now, Louis does need to talk to someone. Someone he can trust. He knows that he is going to be in deep shit for skipping the rest of training for the day, but Louis can’t stomach the idea of even going back inside the stadium right now. He needs to get away from here.

Louis slides his phone out of his pocket and rings his driver just as Niall had showed him how to do if there was ever a time he needed a ride and Niall was unavailable. It only takes ten short minutes for a sleek black car to pull into the lot. Louis gives his driver the address of an apartment he has never been to before, an address he got from Niall on his very first day of being a 30-year-old.

Louis is an unraveled mess for the duration of the car ride, anxious and uneasy and on the verge of either vomiting or breaking down into a mess of tears. By the time the car pulls up to a tall apartment building, Louis is hopping out of the car before the gear has even shifted into park. He hurriedly sneaks in behind another tenant who just buzzed the main door open, looking rapidly around the lobby until he finds the stairs. Louis bounds up the stairwell, taking the steps two at a time until he reaches the third floor. Stumbling down the unfamiliar hall, Louis finally finds the apartment door corresponding to the address. As he knocks on the wood, he can’t stop himself from bouncing anxiously on the balls of his feet, filled with unsettled, flustered energy.

“Please be home, please be home…” Louis mumbles desperately under his breath, silently begging as he stares at the door in baited anticipation. “Please, please, please…”

And when the door finally swings open, instead of Harry’s face greeting him, it’s Zayn’s.
“Oh, hi Louis!” Zayn smiles politely, leaning against the door frame with a slightly perplexed expression. “What a surprise.”

“Oh…hey, Zayn.” Louis waves weakly, hardly masking the crushing disappointment in his tone. “Sorry to uh just show up like this…but uh…is um…is Harry around? I just…I really need to talk to him…”

“You just missed him, mate.” Zayn answers regretfully.

“Oh.” Louis exhales dejectedly, trying to keep his face from falling too hard.

“We’re getting married in less than two weeks and he’s just now getting fitted for his tux.” Zayn chuckles fondly, shaking his head. “He’s something else, isn’t he?”

Louis tries to smile back, tries to force an agreeable laugh, but he just can’t. It’s not funny. None of this is funny anymore. His life is an absolute shitshow, nothing is as it should be and it is not fucking funny.

“But I’ll be sure to let him know you stopped by.” Zayn easily offers.

“Yeah, thanks.” Louis mumbles, already starting to turn away from the door with his shoulders slumped.

“See ya around, Louis!”

Louis can hardly pretend to be cordial at this point, he wants to cry. Just fall down on the ground and cry. This is just yet another reminder of how increasingly pathetic his life is. All Louis wants to do is talk it out with Harry, but he doesn’t even have the privilege of that anymore. Harry isn’t his best friend. Harry isn’t in his life. His life is filled with wealth and fame and scandal and betrayal.

Louis realizes he doesn’t have any friends he can talk about this with. None whatsoever. Come to think of it, Louis doesn’t even have any friends in general. Liam is his manager and he could never admit a matter as delicate and grave as this to him. It’s a huge conflict of interest and Liam already has so much on his plate with the whole illegal investigation thing. Finding out about Louis’ affair with the Head Manager of Arsenal would definitely not help the situation.

Rusty is, first and foremost, a self-absorbed asshole. And besides the fact that Louis can’t trust him for shit, he is a teammate who is tied to the Rovers, making him also a conflict of interest in these matters. Not that he even has the emotional capacity or the physical ability to offer Louis any kind of comfort as a friend.

As much as Louis loves Niall, his assistant is not his therapist and he is completely off limits right now. The poor man has probably had to bear witness to so many unspeakable things by now. God only knows what other less than favorable pots his 30-year-old self is dipping his fingers into.

And Raphy, his dear sweet boyfriend is a tragic unknowing victim to all of this, so he can’t very well unload something like this on him either. Louis is hardly strong enough for something like that right now anyway. In fact, thinking of him only pains Louis more, sending a guilty pang right to his heart. He may not be in love with Raphy, but he does care about him and Louis would never want to see him get hurt. And knowing that he is really cheating on him, that it’s him that is hurting Raphy; Louis has never felt like a shittier person.

The only place Louis can turn to now is the place he should have gone to all along.

When Louis steps out of the car for the second time in the past hour, he stands on his favorite spot
along a familiar sidewalk. The spot that, in itself, holds so many reminiscent memories. The spot
directly in between Harry and Louis’ houses. The spot that would flood on rainy days and they’d
stand face to face huddled under one shared umbrella. The spot where they would kick around fallen
leaves that had collected overnight. The spot where they’d split a FunDip packet and laugh when
they made a mess of colored powdered sugar on the ground. It’s the same spot where they would
part ways every afternoon, scribbling goodbyes into each other’s palms through giggles and warm
smiles.

The view from his spot, although familiar, is strangely different. It’s colder somehow. The warmth
Louis associates with the hallowed soil beneath his feet doesn’t feel quite as warm anymore. Louis
gazes on at the two homes before him, categorizing all the many changes within his mind. Both his
and Harry’s houses have undergone cosmetic renovations, updated paint and trimmings, new doors
and shudders. It all looks great at first glance, until Louis realizes what’s so off and unsettling about
it.

The tree. The grand, old, memory-filled oak tree, Martha Greene. She’s gone.

Louis walks tentatively to where her strong trunk once stood, directly in between both homes, a link
from Harry’s room to his own. Now all that remains is a sad stump, sawed down and smoothed flat
over the top. He can hardly believe his own eyes as he stares at Martha’s remnant roots, kneeling
down to flatten his hand on top of the leveled surface.

Maybe it’s because he is already in such a despondent, discouraged mood, but Louis feels the need
to pay his respects to the tree, to properly mourn her. To anyone else, it’s just an old oak tree, not
much to be upset about. But he and Harry loved that tree and her being gone feels like another
reminder that their friendship is gone too.

Louis scrubs his hands over his face and trudges to the front door of his childhood home. He
hesitates a bit before he knocks, balled fist hovering in front of the paneled wood. He is terrified that
no one will answer, but he is also terrified that someone will. So much has changed in these many
years since he last remembers standing on this doorstep. Louis doesn’t know what he will find
behind this door. If nothing is the same, why would his family home and the people who inhabit it be
any exception?

After several minutes of waiting and knocking with no answer, Louis figures no one must be home.
Which is hardly unexpected at this point of his shit day. Literally no one is around when he needs
someone. But why should they be? It doesn’t look like Louis is around for anyone besides himself,
he can’t expect anyone to treat him any differently.

He sighs heavily, stuffing his hands into his pockets as he kicks his feet. Louis drops himself down
on the first stair of the front porch, willing himself not to break down right there. He hunches over
and rests his head down on his lap. He’s about to close his eyes and completely shut himself out from
the world, when he notices the rusted, old potted planter at the base of the porch. It’s the flower pot
his mum always kept a spare key in when Louis would either lose or forget his keys as a kid.

Louis picks himself up, sliding over to the pot to find that the house key is still there, just like it
always is. And Louis doesn’t know whether to smile or cry that even after all these years, his mum
still keeps a key waiting for him to come home.

He holds the small key in his palm for several minutes before finding the strength to stand to his feet
and push the key into the lock. Just like the outside, the interior of the house has been completely
updated and refurnished. It’s absolutely beautiful and well decorated, but so much has changed that it
hardly feels like his home anymore.
Louis makes his way upstairs, wandering down the hall towards his bedroom. He hardly knows what to expect as he turns the doorknob, but he pushes on regardless.

The entire space is unrecognizable. It’s still very much a boy’s room, but a boy far younger than he was the last time he was here. The room has been repainted and decorated; a giant letter E is mounted on the wall above a twin sized bed covered by a bedspread with little trains on it. There are toys everywhere, trucks and Legos and cars and trains, loads and loads of trains.

As Louis snoops through the room, he wonders what his little brother is like. Obviously a big fan of trains, which is really cool. Louis hasn’t met Ernest, but he kind of wishes he could play with him right now, get to know him a bit. He has wanted a brother for as long as he can remember and now that he finally has one, he barely knows him. And the sad part is, it’s not because he skipped his life, it’s because his older self didn’t bother to build a relationship with him.

Finding no comfort in his old bedroom, Louis heads to the only other place in the house that served as an escape for him as a kid. He climbs down the staircase, descending into the basement, unsurprised to find the space also transformed. Sighing, he meanders over to the closet, the rickety door still creaks the same as he opens it. It still smells like moth balls and it’s still filled with random junk. Although not so much of it is anything pertaining to him anymore, as it used to be. There’s tons of little girl stuff, dolls, toys, board games, outdated clothes and shoes.

Louis gazes among the disregarded items, absentmindedly flicking through the junk until his eyes catch on something he hadn’t dared hoped to find. He pushes aside a few storage bins and boxes to reach it, gasping when he finally wedges her out of the dust covered shelf.

“Ducky.” He breathes, biting back a watery smile.

Louis has felt like crying since he fled his office a few hours ago, but seeing his favorite childhood keepsake, being reminded that all the things he cherished are isolated in the past, completely pushes him over the edge. He hugs the soft dinosaur to his chest, breathing in her scent and choking back a sob as he finds that she still smells just as he remembered her. Louis slides his back down the furthest closet shelf to curl up on the floor. He pulls his knees to his chest, rocking back and forth slowly as he finally allows himself to cry.

Nothing feels right. Nothing is right. There is not a single thing in his current life that is going well and Louis feels so impossibly overwhelmed and alone. He doesn’t know how to adjust to all of this or how to accept what has tragically become of his life. All he can do is sit on the cold hard ground, back repeatedly hitting the shelving behind him, failing to soothe himself as the sobs rack his body uncontrollably.

Louis can’t be sure how long he sits hunched over himself on the unforgiving floor, rocking rhythmically. He has no idea how long he has been crying against Ducky’s worn plush, eyes squeezed closed. But when he looks up the door handle is jiggling curiously, before it opens slowly with the same familiar creak.

“Mum.” Louis gasps through his tears, looking up at his dear mother from the floor.

“Oh, Louis.” Jay comforts immediately. She doesn’t ask why he is crying or what he is doing randomly slumped down on the basement floor or why he is even here, for that matter. She simply wraps her loving arms tightly around her eldest son, pulling him up to his feet. “Lou, baby, you’re home.”

“Mum, I’ve missed you so much.” Louis cries, burying himself in her arms.
“Oh, I missed you too, love.” Jay whispers against his hair, never letting go. “I always miss you.”

Louis clings to his mother, eyes held shut as he breathes her in. It feels so good to be back in her arms again. That sense of comfort and safety that he has been so desperately longing for comes rushing over him.

“Come on, dove. I’ll make you a cuppa.” Jay murmurs against his cheek after a few minutes of simply holding each other.

Louis nods, tucking himself under his mother’s wing. He’s grown a bit since the last time he was in her arms, but it doesn’t stop him from curling his body up against her.

Jay leads them up the basement stairs, navigating to the kitchen. They separate so that she can set about making tea while Louis settles down on a barstool at the edge of the long kitchen island.

“I’m so happy you came when you did, you know. I’m all alone this week.” Jay starts to fill the growing silence stretching between them. “Dan is away on business and little Dorie and Ernie are at camp for the summer. They’ve gotten so big, they’re hardly my little babies anymore. I’ve got my hands full when they’re here, but I hardly know what to do with myself when they’re gone. They’re such curious little things. Wild, just like how you used to be.”

Louis listens to her talk quietly, legs dangling off of the stool he’s perched on. It’s so lovely just hearing her voice again, just being in her presence. They used to talk all the time about everything and nothing at once and Louis would sit, just like he is right now, perfectly content. It was probably the only time Louis would ever sit still as a kid, listening to the sound of his mum’s soothing voice.

“It’s so good to have you home, Lou.” Jay says quietly turning around to meet his eyes. And Louis just knows by the gentle weakness of her voice that him being here means everything to her. His mum is such a strong woman, an inspiring woman, and she cares more than words can describe, especially when it comes to her children. But there are traces of sadness when she looks at Louis, a sincere longing.

She gazes at him for a moment before letting out a small breath as she returns her focus to the task at hand. Louis surveys the kitchen as Jay bustles about. His eyes fall on the stainless steel refrigerator, covered in a wide assortment of colorful drawings and yearly family portraits and happy memories. But amidst the proud school reports, adorable art projects and cherished pictures, there are only mere forgettable traces of Louis.

The few mentions of his existence come from small cutouts of magazine articles and newspapers sections highlighting the different successes of his career. And in a way it warms Louis’ heart that his mum keeps track of him and still wants to display all his achievements proudly on her fridge. But at the same time it breaks his heart because she isn’t a part of his life enough to have first hand footage.

There aren’t any pictures of his adult self huddled together with his family after a winning game, nor are there any of him spending quality time with any of his siblings. There aren’t any of him posing with his mother at red carpet events and there are none of him celebrating at all the many themed birthday parties for his baby brother or sisters. Louis is missing from every major life event, every yearly holiday, every family gathering, everything. It’s like he isn’t even a member of this family.

“Mum…” Louis croaks, mouth feeling dry as sawdust as he tears his gaze away from the fridge.

“Hmm?” Jay hums back in question as she sets down a steaming cup of freshly steeped tea, just the way he likes it.
Louis lifts his head to look at her, but when he opens his mouth to speak, he can’t seem to find any words. In place of speaking, he drops his gaze back down to his lap, cuddling his plush dinosaur as a source of needed comfort.

Jay seems to sense his silent unease and she settles down next to him with her own mug. “Oh my, is that Ducky? I haven’t seen that thing in ages, I assumed she must have fallen apart with how rarely you ever set her down as a child. Has she been here the whole time?”

Louis nods his head quietly, hugging the ratty keepsake to his chest for reassurance. He lifts his head again, turning towards Jay slowly. “Mum, I…” He starts, voice still sounding horribly weak and scared. “I just…”

If she is confused by his uncharacteristically adolescent behavior, she doesn’t let on. Instead Jay reaches over to encouragingly rub Louis’ shoulder. “Take all the time you need baby, it’s alright.”

“I’m…I’m just so confused, Mum.” Louis exhales, forcing himself to just start with something, anything. “I don’t understand…and I…um…I don’t know if you can answer this or not but…what happened…what happened to me?”

“Oh baby, only you can really answer that.” Jay sighs, a saddened twinge to her tone. “But I suspect it’s a combination of things, really.”

“Like what?” Louis asks quietly, almost afraid of the answer. “Nothing is as it should be, Mum. I’m not even friends with Harry anymore.”

“You’ve spoken to Harry?” Jay wonders, a bit of hope laced within her voice. “I see him every so often when he comes home to visit Anne. He never forgets to come see me too, always bringing me flowers. He has grown into such a lovely young man.”

Louis smiles a little at that. Even though they aren’t friends as adults, Harry never stopped treating Louis’ mum like his own, including her on his family visits home. He doesn’t have to do that, but he does it anyway and that just shows what kind of person he is.

“I’m so happy for his engagement.” Jay continues, sipping on her tea. “I’m helping Anne with some of the decorations for the wedding. I think it’s going to be lovely.”

Louis nods blankly, feeling a whole new wave of misery wash over him. Is Louis the only person on the earth not overjoyed that Harry is getting married? He has tried so many times to will happiness into his system, he has faked it so hard that he hoped his brain would finally take a hint. But the more he fakes it and the more he lies to himself, the worse he feels and it only further draws attention back to the obvious.

“I’m do you know why Harry and I aren’t…you know…us anymore?” Louis asks sadly, hanging his head to avoid his mother’s eyes. If anyone understands what he means, it’s her; she and Anne witnessed Harry and Louis’ unique bond from the day it originated. “He’s so closed off with me…and I…I don’t—I can’t…he’s…” His voice tapers out and he feels so hopelessly overwhelmed. “I just…I always assumed he’d be there and now he’s not. I never thought…or I never pictured that there would be a time when we wouldn’t be together. I don’t know what to do…I don’t know what I did.”

Jay reaches out to squeeze Louis’ hand, rubbing her thumb in smooth soothing circles over his skin. “Well love, what happened is between the two of you and not even I know the full story and I don’t think it’s my place to speak for how Harry feels.”
Louis nods his head sadly, knowing that his mother is right. No one can answer that for him except Harry himself. But considering the person he seems to be now, Louis is not so sure he even wants to know anymore.

“But what about everything else?” Louis questions next, feeling the weight of so many questions that are still left unanswered. “I mean…why don’t I come home anymore? Why am I not more involved with you and the girls and the twins? I’m so removed from everything and…I don’t understand why.”

“Well...you were really upset when Mark left.” Jay starts to explain, both hands cupped around her mug. “You weren’t surprised, I don't think, but just disappointed. And you wouldn’t talk about it. Not to me, not to anyone. Before when you’d go through something, I’d at least know that if you weren’t talking with me you were working it out somehow because I knew you’d talk to Harry about it.” Jay smiles slowly, expression softening. “He helped you in so many ways and I’ll always love him for that.”

That much is true, Louis knows. He told Harry absolutely everything; there was not a thing that he kept from his best mate. It was a mutual thing between the two of them. If one of them was sad, they both were sad. They shared each other’s every emotion at times. Harry could show up in Louis’ room crying and Louis would cry with him. And Louis could rant for hours about something that upset him and Harry would get just as upset even if it had nothing to do with him.

Sometimes it felt like Harry was the only person that really understood. He could tell Harry anything and know that he would never judge him or make fun of him. Well, Harry would tease him of course, but never in a malicious way, only to cheer Louis up because that’s what best friends do. They hold each other up when one is down, they support each other through whatever comes their way.

It’s a rare thing to have someone like that, Louis realizes. It’s a rare and beautiful thing.

Jay’s nostalgic smile fades, reeling back to the present. “But you didn’t have Harry anymore and the new friends you had...well...”

“What, Mum? Tell me.” Louis urges, knowing that she is only trying to protect him.

“They didn’t really care about you, Louis.” Jay admits sadly. “More so just what you could do for them. They used you and you’d bend over backwards to get their approval and fit in. It distracted you from your feelings, I think. Allowed you to be someone else.”

Louis mulls it over for a bit; thinking back to the months leading up to his 13th birthday, when he had just made it onto the footie team at school. Louis thinks back to how he was so willing to do nearly anything Brady and Rusty asked of him, no matter how little sense it made. Louis was desperate to be accepted among his much cooler and popular teammates, to the point where he was quickly becoming addicted to their approval and praise. Even then there were things changing about himself that Louis didn’t like, but he also had no idea how to stop it. Louis can only imagine how that could have easily spiraled out of control if left continually unchecked.

“Everyday I tried to talk with you, tried to see how you were doing and what was going on in your head. I just wanted you to know I was still there no matter what. But you started to pull away from me too. You started changing, coming home later and later, growing more rebellious by the day.” Jay recalls despondently. “And we would argue so much, you would fight with me on just about everything. There were nights where you would get so mad that you’d storm out of the house and you wouldn’t come home for days.”
“By the time you got signed, it’s like you didn’t need me at all anymore. You grew up overnight. You moved out, started making money all on your own and left us behind.” Jay continues, gazing down at her lap. “There’s times when you visit, a few random times out of the year, but you stay distant for the most part. You’ve got your life now and I don’t interfere with it. I didn’t know how to get through to you anymore, so I stopped trying and I started to let go.”

Jay pauses, looking up at the ceiling for a moment to collect herself. When her eyes meet Louis’ again, they’re brimmed with unshed tears and sorrow. “But it was so hard for me, Lou because we were always so close, you and me.” A few tears begin to roll down her cheeks and her voice falls to a whisper. “You’re my first love, my heart. Letting you go was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do as a mother. I keep up with you of course, I promised I would. But I miss you terribly. Not a day passes that I don’t think about you. No matter what, you’ll always be my Louis.”

Louis watches as his mother swipes at her eyes, trying to collect herself. He doesn’t remember any of what she described, because he didn’t truly live it, but his heart aches with remorse even still. His mum is one of the most important people in his life, she’s everything to Louis. And to think he caused her so much grief and unnecessary anguish, pains him more than anything else.

“Oh Mum, I’m so sorry, God, I’m so sorry…” Louis’ voice breaks and he tears up again. His hands tremble in his lap as he shakes his head remorsefully. He can feel nothing but the grave weight of his sweet mother’s heartbeat in his own heart. How could he ever treat her like this? How could he ever shut his own mother out of his life?

Louis’ shoulders start to shake as he cries harder, whole body responding to the remorseful grief he feels inside. He is so overcome by all the horrid things he’s done; he can’t even think of words to say to her. Louis can only manage to stutter out the same sincere phrase as his body tremors and the tears fall faster and harder. “I’m sorry, I… I’m sorry, I’m s-sorry…I…”

“Aww baby, come here.” Jay pulls Louis’ withering form into her arms, cradling his head to her chest. “It’s alright, love. It’s alright.” She rocks him back and forth, soothing him as only a mother can.

Louis squeezes her tightly, arms holding on as he continues to sob. Jay presses comforting kisses to the crown of his head, petting his hair gently until he gradually begins to calm down.

“I’m not a very good person, Mum.” Louis whispers after a few silent moments in each other’s arms. He leaves his eyes closed, afraid of the look he might find in his mum’s eyes. She must be so disappointed in the man he has chosen to be. “And you raised me so much better than this. I… I can’t believe it got this bad…I’ve made so many mistakes and I…”

“Oh boo, you can’t live in the past. You have to learn from the mistakes you’ve made and try to grow from them.” Jay encourages as she continues to stroke his fringe. Her voice isn’t filled with anything but love and affection. There’s no traces of bitterness, no residual resentment, or deep-seated anger towards him. “It’s never too late to do some good. Every day is a new opportunity to be better than the last.”

She’s right. Of course, she’s right, she always is. He can’t let any of this continue to shape his life anymore. Even though there is nothing he’d rather do more than lie down on the floor and hope this all just goes away, he has to do better. Louis has to make this right, as best he can. He has to start living a life he can be proud of, a life that his mum can be proud of.

“Just know that I will always love you and I’ll always be here for you no matter what.” Jay promises sincerely, softly kissing his head again. “You’ll never stop being my first love.”
Louis hugs her tighter, if that is even possible with how securely he is already suctioned to her side. “I love you, Mum.” He sniffs quietly, unable to say much else. Maybe he hasn’t told her that in a while, but at the sound of his soft words, Louis feels his mum hug him back, snuggling close and resting her cheek atop his head. “I love you…”

If this is really going to be his life now, Louis is beyond determined to at least live it at his absolute best.
Chapter Eight

Louis spends the night at his childhood home. His mum insisted on it, absolutely refusing to let him go anywhere after their emotional heart-to-heart conversation. She makes him his favorite dinner and they snuggle up on the couch together and watch brainless game shows and reruns of *The Golden Girls*. It’s just the two of them again and it all feels so normal and comfortable and *easy*. So much so that Louis almost allows himself to forget all about his current vexing problems. Almost.

Jay senses how worried and anxious Louis is and she doesn’t hesitate to pull him into bed with her for the night so he won’t be alone. She holds him close to soothe his spirits, softly petting his hair until he finally falls asleep.

And although he felt safe and secure in his mother’s arms, Louis hardly slept through the night, his brain constantly whirling with how he can possibly even begin to fix the damage that seems to be all consuming and never-ending. Not only that, but Louis knows that when he does leave the comfort of this house, when he finally goes back to his adult life, he is going to be faced with so many tough conversations.

In the morning his mum makes him a full English breakfast and a fresh cup of tea. She encourages him once again and repeatedly tells him how much she loves him and how much she believes in him. And it’s so very hard to leave, especially when the idea of hiding out indefinitely sounds more and more appealing the longer Louis thinks about it. But he has to get back to his life no matter how hard. Louis has to try and make so many things right again.

After profusely reiterated goodbyes and warm hugs with the genuine promise that he will call and come visit again very soon, Louis forces himself into the cab car he called earlier, waving a final goodbye to his mum.

When Louis gets back to the mansion he is forced to call home, he trudges through the front door only to find his boyfriend worriedly pacing the inner foyer, entranced by his phone. His neck snaps up sharply as he hears Louis come inside the house, relief flooding his features.

“Loulou, you’re home! Thank *god*, I was so worried about you.” Raphael closes the space between them with only three swift steps, scooping Louis into his arms and sighing contently as he holds him tight. “I left you a million messages and I called absolutely everywhere, your office, your manager… I even called your assistant, but no one knew where you were.”
Seeing Raphy and having him completely surround himself around Louis just repeatedly floods massive waves of guilt all over him. Louis can’t stop think about how unfaithful he’s been, about how so much of their relationship is unfortunately rooted in lies on his part. And that same nauseated shame that he felt yesterday seems to suffocate him once again, this time to an even higher degree.

“I went home.” Louis answers quietly, managing to pull back from the vice grip Raphy has him in. The look in his boyfriend’s eyes portrays obvious confusion, which makes sense considering the fact that technically they are home right now. “…To my mum’s.”

“Oh, I’ve never met your mother.” A slight indent forms along Raphael’s brow as he talks, considering this out loud. “Or your family…only your sister once.”

That doesn’t even shock Louis in the slightest. A week ago he would have been downright appalled that his boyfriend of two years hasn’t even met someone as important to him as his mother. Family always comes first for Louis, but he can’t honestly say the same rings true for his adult self.

“Raphy…I um—we need to talk.” Louis forces himself to say, somehow managing to look him in the eye for a moment before it becomes too much.

“Is everything ok, Loulou?” Raphael worries, running a hand along the side of Louis’ hanging face. He’s so gentle and concerned with how Louis is feeling and truthfully Louis almost wishes he would stop because it’s only making it worse for him. “You look so sad and upset. What’s wrong, baby?”

Louis lifts his head back up and holds the concerned gaze of Raphy’s hazel eyes for several long moments, wishing that somehow it didn’t have to be like this for them. If Louis wanted to fuck around, then he should have never gotten so seriously involved with someone as kind and genuine as Raphy. It just makes this that much harder. Why couldn’t he be dating someone mean spirited and narcissistic, someone who would make all of this a bit easier to deal with?

He’s been thinking about this a lot, going over and over all of it in his head in an attempt to try and understand the rationale of his older self. If Louis wants to truly be introspectively honest with himself, it’s apparent that one of the main reasons his adult self must keep Raphy around is because of his overall likeness for his old best mate. As horrifying as it sounds, Louis has been using Raphy as a stand in of sorts for Harry.

And it would also make sense that since no one could ever fill that hole but Harry himself, Louis probably found himself more annoyed with Raphy than anything else after awhile. Always wanting to change him and make him fit his expectations but, of course, he couldn’t and it wasn’t for a lack of trying. And maybe that, along with any number of selfishly beneficial reasons, is why it was probably so easy for his older self to cheat on Raphy. He could never have been in love with him, only superficially infatuated and attracted to him for all the wrong reasons.

“No, I’m not ok. Not really…” Louis answers honestly, once again unable to look his boyfriend in the eye any longer. “I…I don’t know how to start this, Raphy…but I uh…well…”

Raphael studies his face, seeming to recognize a few familiar patterns in Louis’ speech. “Are you breaking up with me? …Again?”

Louis raises his head up again and nods slowly, afraid of what comes next. He has never had to do a break up before. Actually, Louis has never had to do a lot of the things he’s been dealing with recently. But despite his lack of experience, he still knows deep down that it’s what’s best. “But only because I really care about you and I don’t want to see you get hurt anymore.”

Raphael’s whole expression shifts, features breaking down weakly. He slowly starts to shake his
head, hands still resting gently on Louis’ waist. “Oh please don’t.”

The sound of his unsteady voice causes Louis to stumble a bit, waves of guilt resurfacing. “Raphy… you should be with someone who can make you happy.” Louis tries, speaking as gently as he possibly can.

“You make me happy.” Raphael persists, holding on to Louis’ waist a bit tighter.

“Not all the time.” Louis reminds softly, tilting his head as he tries to keep his resolve. “I’m not very good to you and I don’t appreciate you like I should as your boyfriend. And I’m so sorry for that. You deserve better.”

“No, but Loulou I want to marry you.” Raphael pledges sincerely. “I have a ring and everything…”

“Oh my god, that is true…” Louis gasps, remembering the engagement rumors between them. But somehow knowing that Raphy really did intend to propose to him only makes this whole thing worse. What would his older self have done? Married him anyway despite the fact that he’s never been faithful to him? Raphy would find out eventually, there’s no way something like that could stay under wraps forever and the fallout would probably be so much worse by then. Raphy would be so heartbroken; Louis doesn’t even want to think about it.

“Yeah, I wanted to wait and ask you after The Premier was over.” Raphael explains quietly, eyes stormy. “I was going to take you away as a surprise to the island we went to when we first got together. And I was going to woo you just like I did before. I had it all planned out.”

“Oh no. God, Raphy—that’s so…you’re so…romantic and thoughtful and…goddammit!” Louis covers his face with both of his hands and shakes his head. He wants to cry, he wants to yell, and above all he wants to somehow bitchslap his older self across the face and hopefully knock some sense into him. “You were going to do all that for me and…and I…fuck…”

“Yes, of course I was. And I still would if you would let me.” Raphael promises, gazing at Louis openly. “I love you so much and I want to marry you.”

Louis paces the floor with his hands on his head as the deliberates what to say next. This is hard; harder than any conversation he has ever had to have and he just hopes that he is doing it right. He wants to spare Raphy as much as possible and maybe that’s wrong, but Louis doesn’t have the heart to tell him the full truth right now.

“Raphy, you don’t want to marry me.” Louis says gravely, turning to face him. “You would end up hating me and it would never work out. We have nothing in common except physically. You said it yourself before, all we do is argue.”

“That’s not all we do. We’ve had a lot of good times together and I know I can upset you sometimes and that we don’t always agree, but I can change for you. I promise I can.”

“But I don’t want you to change for me. I don’t want you to change for anyone. Ever.” Louis answers earnestly, taking one of his hands and holding it gently. “You’re one of the loveliest people I’ve ever met, Raphy. You’re sweet and romantic and genuine. You’re just a beautiful person, really. You deserve to find someone who will really appreciate you and not try to change you like I did.”

Raphael doesn’t say anything and he also doesn’t meet Louis’ eyes, keeping his head held down as he just listens.

“You deserve to find your soulmate, Raphy.” Louis tells him gently, giving his hand a comforting squeeze. “And it’s not me. As much as you might want it to be me, it can’t be; we don’t fit right
together. But that doesn’t mean that I don’t care about you, because I do, I promise I do. You might not understand what I mean by this but…you’re definitely one of the best things about my current life. I can see why I keep you around. But it’s for selfish reasons and from what I can tell, I don’t think I treat you how you should be treated and I’m so sorry for that. You have no idea how sorry.”

Raphael lifts his head to look at Louis again and although his eyes are impossibly sad they’re also sympathetic and even understanding.

Louis closes his eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath before continuing. “I know you probably weren’t expecting this but I…I’ve really been thinking about us a lot and our relationship and as hard as it is to say, I know we can’t be together anymore. I hope you know that I’m only trying to do the right thing. I don’t want to see you get hurt and I only want what’s best for you.”

“You know, you’ve broken up with me several times and this is the only time that you’ve actually made any sense.” Raphael finally speaks, sounding contemplative as he processes all that Louis said. He looks down and plays with Louis’ fingers in his hand. “This is the only time you’ve talked with me about how you feel instead of yelling and cursing at me. You’re being honest and open with me for once and I appreciate that. I can see how terribly hard this is for you, you’re so worried about hurting me and it’s sweet, I know that you care. I don’t want you to be right…but deep down I know that you are. We don’t belong together. And we would kill each other eventually, I just never wanted to let you go.”

Raphael lifts his head and smiles warmly, locking on to Louis’ eyes. “I have so many memories of you, but I think the past two weeks with you was my most favorite time together out of all of them. We were never perfect, but our time together will always mean something special to me.”

Louis doesn’t know what his older self ever did to earn this man’s affections, but Louis feels truly honored and grateful to have gotten to meet and get to know Raphael Moreau, for even such short of a time.

“I’m going to miss you, chéri.” Raphael pulls Louis in for a warm hug, nuzzling his head down against him.

“I’ll miss you too.” Louis hugs him back, squeezing his arms around him. They stay like that for a few quiet moments, wrapped up in each others arms and Louis knows that he is not just saying that. He really will miss him.

“You have feelings for him.” Raphael mumbles quietly against Louis’ neck. Not as a question, but as a confident statement. “For Harry.”

“I…” Louis doesn’t know quite what to say, mouth held slightly ajar. How could he possibly know that? Is it really that obvious? To be fair, Louis hasn’t even fully admitted that to himself yet. And to hear it from someone else, an outsider to Louis and Harry’s entire relationship, causes him to seriously think.

“I’m French, remember? Romance is my native tongue.” Raphael teases a bit, head still hooked over Louis’ shoulder in a hug. “Trust me, I’m right.”

“But…I…”

“Louis, I know you more than you think and you have feelings for him. It’s in the way you talk about him, the way you look at him, the way he captures your entire attention without even asking for it. It’s something you’ve never had with me. It’s beautiful and it’s special…” Raphael pulls back to meet Louis’ eyes seriously. “Don’t let it go to waste, ok? You don’t have to tell me, but if I am
“Right, then you have to fight for him.”

Louis nods several times blankly, not knowing how else to react as he internalizes Raphy’s parting words. He really is such a romantic. Even in a break up, he can’t pass up the opportunity to play cupid, and Louis adores him for it.

“Find your happy, Loulou and I promise I’ll find mine.” Raphael whispers softly, before pressing a sweet farewell kiss to each of his cheeks. “Je t’aime…et je sais qu’un morceau de moi t’aimerai toujours.”

Despite his limited knowledge of the language Raphael speaks so beautifully, Louis somehow understands what he means and he can’t help but be touched. Louis pulls him right back in for one final embrace, arms circled around his neck. “Thank you for everything, Raphy. I’ll never, ever forget you.”

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“Liam, I have an idea!” Louis bursts into Liam’s office, hardly bothering to knock as he marches straight to his manager’s desk.

“Louis? Uh…hi? Where have you been?” Liam looks a bit startled at first as he sets down his phone and looks up at Louis curiously. “You missed training yesterday and you’re missing it again as we speak. I can’t have my captain constantly skipping practice. Not on top of everything else. There has to be some sort of standard. We’re in enough shit as it is.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m really sorry about all of that.” Louis starts to explain. “And I know I should have given you a ring or something to let you know, but I had…um…a lot going on and I wasn’t really thinking. I’m really sorry, Liam.”

“Is everything alright? Are you ok?” Liam worries, sitting up in his seat.

“Um…I’m getting there, yeah. I’ll be alright I think.” Louis nods slowly. He’s still a little shaken up from Raphy and he’s still impossibly worried and overwhelmed by everything that still lies ahead of him, but he’s doing pretty ok for the most part. “But uh…we can talk about me another time, I came here because I have an idea for you—or I mean for us, for the team.”

“Oh? Ok, let’s hear it then.”

“A charity match!” Louis announces eagerly, eyes wide.

“A what?” Liam face morphs into a puzzled frown instantaneously.

“We should host a charity match!” Louis proclaims again, just as excitedly. “It’s a really great way to foster community spirit and get the support of the general public again. It’ll be hard to believe that we could be stealing money and doing illegal things or whatever if we are donating our time and money to charity, right? Exactly. But really it is a great opportunity for us to give back and help others. There are so many charities in need and I think we could make a really big difference.”

“A charity match…” Liam tests, processing out loud.

“Ok, think of it this way; the rumors are out and we all look like a bunch of dickhead cheating
Louis knows next to nothing about how PR and public image works for a sports team, but what he does know and what his mum taught him is that good deeds stand on their own merit. Doing good for someone else can’t help but shine. So Louis figures that if he puts everything into giving back and making someone else smile, maybe he can overshadow all the bad going on around him.

“And then once we are in the clear, we’ll look even better to the public…” Liam nods, thinking it over strategically in his head. Louis can practically feel the gears turning in his mind. “I have to admit that conceptually it all sounds great and all. But we don’t have the time or the funds to put on that kind of event. Who is going to plan all of that?”

“I will!” Louis volunteers himself right away.

“What? Louis, there’s no way you can plan an entire event of this magnitude in a manner of days.” Liam stresses, voice filled with disbelief.

“I can Liam! I can do it!” Louis enthuses, refusing to take no for an answer. “And think of all the people we could help; it would be so great!”

“Yeah that’s true, but that still doesn’t account for the funds it takes to do this kind of thing. We barely have our own sponsors as it is.”

“I’ll pay for it!” Louis offers instantly. “The whole thing—I’ll pay for it myself.”

Liam furrows his eyebrows and looks at Louis pointedly. “Louis, do you have any idea how much something like that would cost?”

“Yeah sure, whatever. I don’t care!” Louis declares, waving Liam off. Actually he has no fucking idea whatsoever as to how much it’ll cost, but he does know he can definitely afford it. If memory serves him correctly, he is ranked as one of the highest earning athletes and it’s about time he did something good with his fortune. Louis highly doubts he could ever in a million lifetimes spend all that money on himself anyway. And he knows that he can throw the nicest, biggest, most extravagant event for a well deserved charity and still hardly put a dent in his net worth. “This is important, Liam. I want to do it.”

“That’s very admirable of you, Louis.” Liam commends. “But you’ll still need the whole team on board to play in the match. How are you going to get them all to agree to that? I don’t want to be the one to have to point out the obvious, but…um you don’t really have the strongest relationship with your teammates.”

Louis sighs, sadly very aware of this fact. “Yeah I know, I know, but I’ll figure something out.”

“And on top of that you’ll need celebrity guests to play in the match as well to draw public interest.” Liam reminds. “Otherwise it’ll just be The Rovers playing The Rovers and no one is going to give a shit about that.”

“Ok yeah. I’ve got that, no problem.” One thing Louis knows is that he has a pretty solid social standing, if his social media platforms are anything to go by. As far as Louis can tell, he’s the life of
the party, invited everywhere to parties and events all over the world. So that must mean he has some kind of social collateral and celebrity pull.

“Ok, but then it’s a matter of organizing the teams and partnering up with charities as the beneficiaries and then designing the proper jerseys and orchestrating the ticket sales and—I mean that’s just talking about the match itself.” Liam rambles, going on and on. “You’ll still need to organize the gala and get a proper guest list in order and book a venue and a caterer and…it’s a lot of bloody work, Louis. I’m just trying to be realistic with you.”

“Yes, yeah I know. I get it…” Louis nods slowly, getting tired just thinking about it. But no matter how hard it sounds, he is going to do this. He needs to do this.

“Oh! And you’ll need a photographer for all the official pictures of course. Especially since we’ll need really good pictures to present to the press.”

“I know a photographer!” Louis announces instantly, happy to at least be able to check something off of the growing list of impossible duties.

“Oh, well that’s good, I suppose.” Liam says, still not sounding quite convinced or sold on the idea. “But Louis, even if you can somehow get all of that done, it still might not do any good. It might change nothing. It could just be one huge waste of time and money.”

“Well, at least we tried.” Louis defends. “I want to try, Liam. And you know what? It could never be a waste because so much good will come out of it. We’ll be doing something amazing for people who really need it…and that has to be worth something.”

“That is true…” Liam nods his head slowly in consideration. “Alright, Tommo. If you really want to do this and you believe in it, then I’ll support you. It’s worth a shot and I think you’re ballsy and determined enough to pull it off. So whatever I can do to help, just let me know.”

Louis smiles wide, biting his bottom lip to keep from bubbling over with excitement. “Thank you, Liam! I promise I won’t let you or the team down.”

Louis has been avoiding Niall like the plague, but there is no way he can plan this charity event without him. Actually, a more accurate statement would be, there is no way Louis can even make it through life as a 30-year-old without him. He knows he needs to talk with Niall next and so far he has been pretty good with getting shit done, knocking out two conversations he was definitely not psyched to have. Louis just needs to keep the ball rolling.

So Louis pulls out his phone and sends a text to Niall asking him to meet him in his office. Of course, Niall comes straight over and is knocking on Louis’ office door before he knows it.

Niall walks into the room after Louis calls him in, offering a small, slightly timid wave. “Hey Louis —”

“Here.” Louis skips right over saying hello and hurriedly shoves Niall’s arms full with a huge life size teddy bear before anything else can be said. It’s the biggest one Louis could find in Donny on such short notice, and he just wanted to get something nice for Niall.
“What’s this?” Niall asks in surprise and Louis can’t even see him from behind the giant bear. But that kind of makes talking a little bit easier anyway.

“Um…well…it’s kinda my sad attempt at a peace offering? I didn’t really know what to get you, but I saw him and…I thought he kinda looked oddly like you in weird, cute kinda way and um…yeah.” Louis rambles, words sounding scattered and unsure. “If you hate it, that’s ok cuz who wants a random stuffed bear anyway right? I mean it’s—”

“You’ve never bought me anything before.” Niall interrupts, smiling softly at Louis as he sets the bear down on the ground for a moment. “You really think he looks like me?”

“Yeah, it’s his eyes, I think.” Louis answers, looking down at the honey colored bear. “He’s got really genuine eyes…like you. And he’s also really huggable, like you.”

Niall nods appreciatively, still grinning. “I could see that, yeah.”

Louis knows this is his moment to properly apologize, so he takes a deep breath as he always does and gets right into it. “Niall, I know I’ve probably asked a lot of you since you started working for me—too much of you in fact and…um well…I really have no excuse for my behavior, but I just want to wipe the slate clean, you know?” He explains, hands stuffed into his front pockets as he sways on his feet. “I’m sorry for all the shit you put up with as my assistant. I know I don’t always respect you as I should, but I promise from this point on it’ll be different. I’ll be a better boss and hopefully a better friend too, if you let me of course.”

“Well to be completely fair, you haven’t been nearly as bad recently, more lost and confused than anything else.” Niall replies with a small knowing grin, meeting Louis eyes with a shrug.

“I can’t argue with that. I’m a bit of a mess most days, I know.” Louis laughs agreeably, nodding his head. He holds out his hand towards Niall for a shake. “But I hope you can still forgive me.”

Niall bypasses his extended hand altogether and pulls Louis in for the warmest bear hug, arms circled snugly around his back. “Of course I forgive you, mate. And for the record, I’ll take lost and confused you over the old you any day.”

Louis hugs him back tightly, feeling treasured relief wash over him. He’s grown really attached to Niall, loving him from the very beginning when he saved Louis from drinking that green shit Liam was about to force down his throat. Something about Niall makes everything a bit easier and he has said it a million times before, but Louis really would be so embarrassingly lost without him.

“I have a bit of a favor to ask you though.” Louis pulls back slightly from their embrace.

“Does it involve teaching you how to do something involving basic modern technology?” Niall wonders, biting back a teasing laugh.

“Not this time.” Louis grins warmly, eyes crinkled. “Actually, I was hoping you wouldn’t mind being a bit of an event planner with me? I don’t want to overwhelm you, but I’m planning a charity match for The Rover and it’s extremely last minute and probably a lot of work, but I really hope you’ll still help me out.”

“Wait, you’re giving me a choice?” Niall asks in clarification.

“Yeah, of course, Ni.” Louis answers obviously. “I’m not going to make you do it; it’s not your job to plan events with me. You’re my assistant, not my servant.”

“You’ve never really asked my opinion before.” Niall shrugs, still sounding a bit taken aback.
“I guess you could say I’m making it a point to do a lot of things I’ve never done before.”

Niall smiles, something that appears a lot like pride shining in his eyes as he looks at Louis. “I would absolutely love to help. Also, I’m pretty well versed in event planning you know.”

“Really?” Louis asks in astonishment.

“Yeah, my mum plans weddings back home in Ireland. I used to help her when I was younger. I don’t want to brag or anything, but I was preeetty good at it.”

“Oh wow, you’re always so full of surprises.”

“Yes, that’s me.” Niall winks. “A living, breathing, Irish surprise.”

Louis giggles, shaking his head fondly. “Ok Niall, I give you complete access to my bank account. Even though I’m pretty sure had that already.”

Niall nods in confirmation, suppressing his own laugh. “I do.”

“Ok, well now you have my permission to do your absolute worst. I don’t care what anything costs. I just want it to be really nice for the kids. I’m not exactly sure where we should start with the planning, but we can figure that out together once I get back, I suppose.”

Niall frowns in confusion. “Get back from where?”

“Harry’s studio.” Louis answers. It’s his very last stop for the day and arguably the one that matters most and definitely the one Louis is most anxious about.

“Need a ride?” Niall offers with a sly smile.

“Oh please, yes!” Louis agrees right away. “It’s only been a day or so, but I’ve really missed you chauffeuring me around.”

Niall laughs, shaking his head. “Yeah and I’ve definitely missed all the scuff marks on the dashboard from your feet.”

Louis grins knowingly, perfectly aware of his habit of kicking his feet up on the dashboard every time he got in the car.

“You’re gonna have to sit in the back seat this time though, I have a new VIP.” Niall picks up the giant bear and slings it over his back to give him a piggyback ride. “I think I’m going to name him Loubear.”

“I’m being replaced by an oversized stuffed bear. Typical.”

“Well, at least I named him after you, stop complaining.” Niall teases, balancing Loubear on his back.

“Does that make him our love child?” Louis wonders, sounding serious as he thinks it over. “Since he looks like you, but he’s named after me?”

Niall bursts into amused giggles, slinging an arm over Louis’ shoulder as they exit the office. “Oh Louis, Louis, Louis. You’re such a mess.”
On the way to the studio, they make a not so quick stop because Louis can’t just walk in empty
handed. Simple gestures sometimes make all the difference and Louis is a very firm believer in peace
offerings.

Niall drops Louis off in front of the studio with the instructions of texting him when he’s ready.
Louis inhales deeply before pushing through the doors of the building, already feeling an
overwhelming sense of nervousness.

“Hello!” The receptionist greets cheerfully and Louis is instantly proud of himself because he
remembers that her name is Lynn from the last time he was here. “How can I help you?”

“Hi Lynn, is Harry in today?” Louis asks as he approaches the desk, going for personable and
hoping that his efforts are appreciated and hopefully get him one step closer to Harry.

A look of surprise paints her expression at being addressed by her name, but she simply smiles back
at him. “Yes, he is. Do you have an appointment with him?”

“No, um…not exactly.” Louis admits, leaning over the desk. “But I really need to talk with him if he
has a second.”

“Ok, I’m not sure if he is free right now, but just have a seat over there and I’ll check back with
him.” Lynn answers professionally. “And your name was?”

“Oh, uh…Louis.”

“As in Louis…Tomlinson?” She wonders, perking up a bit with interest.

“Mhmm.” Louis hums, nodding his head.

“Oh my god, I thought you looked really familiar. My brother loves you!” Lynn gushes. “He’s got to
be your biggest fan, he goes to all your games and everything.”

“No way?” Louis blinks back in surprise. It still weirds him out that he has actual fans. It’s flattering
of course, but still so…weird?

“Oh, he’s gonna be so jealous when he finds out that I met you and he didn’t. Would you mind if I
asked you to sign something for him?” Lynn offers him a sharpie marker and a white coffee mug.

“Oh sure, Lynn! Of course I can.” Louis feels like he is committing some level of forgery every time
he signs something and has to carefully mimic his adult self’s signature. He finally perfected it, but it
still feels so unnatural and again just…weird.

“Thank you so much!” Lynn enthuses, all levels of professionalism she previously displayed thrown
into the wind. “I promise I’ll get Harry to come out and speak with you right away. And if there is
anything else that you need just let me know.”

Louis thanks her repeatedly in return and then settles down in one of the crisp white waiting chairs
along the wall. He anxiously crosses and uncrosses his legs different ways at least 8 times, balancing
the box containing his peace offering for Harry on his lap.

Harry comes out from the back of the studio five minutes later, hair pulled up into a messily neat bun
atop his head, clear framed glasses balancing on the bridge of his nose. He looks so comfy and
warm, enveloped in a blush pink oversized jumper, sleeves rolled up at mismatching arbitrary lengths
on either sides of his arms. Harry is effortlessly gorgeous and soft all at once and Louis just wants to
cuddle up against him and smell that comforting scent Louis knows he’ll find in the crook of Harry’s
neck.

“Louis, what are you doing here?” Harry sighs as soon as his eyes land on him, pulling Louis right
back to reality.

“Harry, just here me out, ok?” Louis hurries to his feet as Harry begrudgingly approaches him. “I
need to talk to you about something.”

“I’m working.” Harry answers flatly, adjusting his glasses on his face.

“I know, I know. But—”

“You can’t just show up here and demand to talk to me.”

Louis shakes his head, knowing he has already lost this conversation before it even had a chance to
get started. “No—I didn’t mean to—I’m not demanding anything, I promise—I uh…I brought you a
—”

“I really don’t have time for this, I have to get back to work.” Harry interrupts, dismissing Louis
completely. He spins on his heel and retreats to the back of the studio just as quickly as he came.

Louis lets out a long heavy sigh, throwing his head back in exasperation. He slinks back into the
chair, leaning back to get as comfortable as he can because he knows that he is definitely going to be
waiting for a good amount of time, if Harry’s current attitude is any indication.

Lynn eagerly offers him water three times before she starts offering coffee and tea. Louis declines
politely every time, but he is pretty sure she would offer him the clothes off her back if he requested
it. That must, yet again, be the power of being a celebrity, but Louis is just happy that she hasn’t
kicked him out of the studio yet. He is basically just loitering around at this point because he, one,
doesn’t have an appointment and two, the person he wants to see doesn’t have any interest in seeing
him. But Louis figures that Harry has to come back out at some point and Louis is damn sure going
to be waiting right here for him when he does.

After what feels like an eternity, but was probably more like 3 hours, Harry finally appears again,
walking out a client. He notices Louis right away, but he says his goodbyes to his client before
dragging his feet over to Louis with a frown creasing his features.

“You’re still here...” Harry says slowly as though he is actually a bit surprised by this news, lips
pursed together into a flat line.

“I told you I needed to talk to you, Harry.” Louis answers simply, standing back up to his feet much
slower this time. “I’ll wait all day if that’s what it takes.”

Harry doesn’t offer a verbal response, but he also doesn’t storm away just yet and Louis isn’t sure if
that means he should start talking or wait, but he decides to go for it anyway. Seize whatever small
window Harry allows.

“I brought you a cupcake. Not a cupcake, a dozen cupcakes actually. A baker’s dozen more
specifically, so thirteen cupcakes.” Louis rambles, looking down at the light pink box he brought
along with him.
He’s nervous and he knows he has a habit of rambling when he’s nervous. But Harry is standing right in front of him and he looks so cute and adorable and huggable, and Louis is almost embarrassingly happy just to see him. But sadly, Harry isn’t quite as happy to see Louis in return. No, in fact, it’s quite the opposite and all Louis wants is for them to be ok again, for them to be at least on speaking terms again. He has so many muddled thoughts and confusing feelings when it comes to Harry and that only fuels the nervous energy coursing through him, hence the uncontrollable rambling.

“You don’t have to eat them all—I guess that’s probably a lot of calories, innit? That can’t be too good for your health. A bit too much sugar for one person, I think. Right. Yeah.” Louis continues, hardly even making any sense to his own ears. “But to be fair, I couldn’t decide which one to get you and they all looked so good. I swear I was in that bakery for at least an hour trying to figure it out. But then I thought that maybe you might want to try them all? Because they’re all kinda fun fruity flavors like Lemon Drop and Strawberry Wild and Pineapple Upside-down Cupcake. Oh! There’s one that even looks like a little baby kiwi. It’s really cute…”

Harry says nothing, just blinking at Louis with the same stoically blank face. So Louis clears his throat, refocusing his mind on why he is here in the first place because it’s not because of a fucking kiwi cupcake, no matter how cute it may or may not be.

Louis doesn’t want to say too much and scare Harry away, but he also doesn’t want to not say enough and get nowhere in return. It’s all too much to think about and Louis feels so tired already. This has been such a fucking long day.

“Harry, I’m really sorry for how things ended the other day.” Louis starts, still unsure of where his words are going to take him, but just going for it anyway. “I…um…I don’t know exactly how you feel about…things or about us, I guess. And um…I don’t want to overstep or make you uncomfortable. There’s a lot of things I think we seriously need to talk about, but I’m not going to force you to if you aren’t ready. I just…I’m sorry Haz, and I promise I really didn’t mean to upset you, so whatever it is…I hope you can set it aside for now and hear me out.” He says gently, eyes never leaving Harry’s. “I really do have something important to ask you.”

Harry searches Louis’ eyes for a few more silent moments until his unmoving face finally morphs into a slightly permissive sigh. “Come on, follow me to my office.”

Louis smiles with relief, happy to finally be getting somewhere. “Ok.”

“And I’ll take that.” Harry plucks the pink cupcake box from Louis’ hands and Louis internally counts it as a small win. Harry can’t refuse a cupcake, let alone thirteen different cupcakes and Louis knows it. Peace offerings always prevail.

They settle into Harry’s office, both sitting down on opposite ends of the same couch. Louis remembers the last time he sat in this spot, when he first learned that he and Harry weren’t friends anymore. He wishes he could say that everything started to get better from that point, but it was actually quite the opposite it turns out. And now here he is again, back in this office, back on this couch, wanting more than ever to just have Harry back.

Harry opens the box of cupcakes and goes for the Razzle Raspberry one, leaning back into the couch and propping his feet up on the coffee table. He flicks his gaze to Louis as he picks at the magenta-tinted cupcake. “Ok. I’ve got ten minutes until my next client. Go.”

“I want to hire you.” Louis announces, cutting straight to the point before his mouth has a chance to get carried away again.
“What?” Harry sputters, nearly choking on his cupcake, obviously not expecting those to be Louis’ opening words.

“Yeah, so I don’t know if you’ve heard the rumors about The Rovers?” Louis asks first.

Harry nods noncommittally. “Here and there, I guess. What about it?”

“Well, it’s a really long story, but I’m planning a charity event for the team…like a charity match kind of thing and I need a photographer.” Louis explains vaguely, not going too much into details for the sake of time. “So I want you—erm I mean, I want to hire you.”

Harry still looks a bit confused, eyebrows deeply furrowed. “You’re planning it all by yourself?”

“Yeah, pretty much? It was my idea and I somehow got my manager on board. Oh! And Niall agreed to help me, which is really great. But I’ve somehow got to find a way to get my teammates involved even though I’m 98% sure most of them fucking hate me. And then I’ve gotta find celebrities willing to commit to something like this so last minute, on top of a shit ton of other things and I don’t really have a lot of time to pull it together.” Louis feels himself starting to ramble again, nervousness taking control as he talks faster and faster. “And now you’re looking at me like I’m completely out of my mind and I know how it sounds…but I dunno? I’m still gonna try. I need to try. I just really think I could be doing so much more to give back and help people, you know? And I…I just…I want to do something good for a change.”

Harry continues to listen to Louis amble on, watching him closely with his full attention. However, the faster Louis talks, the bigger Harry’s eyes get, seeming to grow a bit concerned for him.

“Anyway uh…I know it’s not fashion photography or anything quite like that, but if it all goes alright, it’s going to be massively publicized which could really get your name out there, I think? Right? I dunno…” Louis sighs, racking his hand through his fringe. “I just think that your work is absolutely incredible. It’s honest and it’s real and it’s so unlike anyone else’s. I want this event to be really special and everything and I know you would do the best job at capturing it properly.”

“Louis, I’m flattered that you’d ask me but…I don’t know…I mean—I think it’s so wonderful what you’re trying to do, I really do…” Harry answers genuinely, leaning a bit closer on the couch with his arm resting on the back cushion. “But I don’t know if I can help. I don’t do sporting events. I’ve never done that before.”

“But you’ll be great Harry, I know it. You have such a natural eye, you’re the perfect person for this.” Louis insists, attempting to drown Harry in sincere praise as his strategy to get him to agree. “And it’s not just going to be a match, there’s gonna be a gala too, for the kids and stuff. So it’s not all just a sporting event. And of course, I’ll pay you—”

“The last thing I want is for you to throw money at me.” Harry interjects instantly. “I don’t need you to do that, Louis.”

“I know you don’t need me to. But I want you to be properly compensated for your work, that’s only fair.” Louis slides his checkbook out of his back pocket. He had only written two checks in his life before all this and even though he just started planning this event today, he’s already been happily handing out checks left and right. Louis quickly scribbles out a check and hands it over to Harry.

“£50,000!? Are you serious!” Harry blurs as he picks up the light sheet of paper, eyes bugging out over the number scrawled over it. He sets the check down on the couch cushion between them and just frowns at it.
“That’s not enough. Ok.” Louis immediately snatches the check back and rips the paper up, starting on a new one for £100,000. “Here, how about that?”

“No, Louis! Fuck!” Harry gasps in genuine shock. “That is way too generous! I’m not taking that much money from you.”

“Please take it, Haz.” Louis leans over and presses the check into Harry’s hand, pleading with his eyes.

“My photography isn’t worth this much.” Harry looks down at their joined hands and the money held between them.

“It is. It is to me.” Louis nods genuinely, squeezing Harry’s hand. “It’s worth so much more than that, but at least take this. I don’t want anyone else but you.”

“Louis, I don’t need you to do me any favors. That’s a lot of money and—”

“I’m not!” Louis jumps to say. “I’m asking you to do me a favor. You’re the best and this event deserves the best. I really need you, Haz. Please.”

Harry remains quiet, mulling it over. He bites on the inside of his cheek silently as he deliberates and Louis feels like he is holding his breath the entire time. He can’t take the uncertainty of the moment.

“And maybe this can help get your studio started in New York? Or help you get settled or something—I dunno…” Louis exhales, sounding defeated as he scrubs a hand over his face. “I don’t know what else to say—I just…I really need your help, Harry. It’s important.”

“Ok.” Harry answers finally, head still bent downward.

“Ok? Wait? You’ll do it?!” Louis marginally perks back up with hope.

“Yes, I’ll do it.” Harry nods, lifting his gaze to Louis. “On one condition though.”

“Anything.” Louis promises straightaway.

“Alright, so for this amount of money, you have to let me do more to help than just take pictures…”Louis smiles gradually, eyes lighting up. He was hoping Harry would say something like that. That by some small miracle Harry would want to get more involved in this than what Louis was originally asking of him.

“I’m serious, I won’t take it otherwise. Let me help with planning.” Harry insists. “I want to help.”

“Well, I probably—definitely, bit off more than I can chew with this so I really could use all the help I can get.” Louis says, extending his hand out to Harry. “It’s a deal.”

Harry reaches over and shakes Louis’ hand. “Well since you are now my biggest paying client, I guess I’m all booked for the week.”

“I guess you could also say that I own you for the week.” Louis jokes casually, still holding on to Harry’s hand.

“I wouldn’t take it quite that far.” Harry laughs a little, smirking. “But I will reschedule everyone else to help.”

“That’s good enough for me.” Louis grins happily.
Maybe a part of Harry said yes for the money and all that it could do for him in the long run, or maybe he said yes because he is kindhearted and he genuinely wants to give back and help a charity in need, or maybe those cupcakes put him in a slightly better mood and it’s a combination of both.

Or maybe, just *maybe*, Harry really said yes just to help Louis out, knowing how much it would mean to him. But regardless of the reason he agreed, one thing remains the same: Louis is guaranteed to spend loads of time with Harry all week long. And absolutely nothing has made Louis happier all day.
hi loves! :'(

this is finally a purely harry and louis chapter hip hip hooraaayy! lol :) i hope you enjoy it!

if you live in a place that celebrates thanksgiving then i hope you have a wonderful holiday! im thankful for each and every one of you :)

love lex .x

Chapter Nine

Fun fact: trying to plan a large scale, multifaceted event in a manner of 72 hours is truly impossible.

But Louis quickly learns that a simple caveat as well as a solution accompanying that fact is that luckily anything can be made possible for the right price. And he will gladly pay whatever price it takes to get the job done, no matter what it takes out of him. And that’s not only referring to money, but also time and more importantly energy.

If Louis claimed to be tired before, he could not have even known the meaning of the word, because now he is truly and utterly exhausted.

The whole first day of planning is spent on the phone, making call after call, explaining the same large scale but painfully last minute situation over and over again in order to somehow book a decent venue and a willing caterer and a billion other things needed to pull some kind of miracle together.

There are only two good things about his lack of rest that Louis can find any peace in. The first is remembering that planning this monstrous event is only temporary and the second is none other than Harry Styles.

The lingering tension held between Louis and Harry easily subsides the longer they spend around each other and before either of them know it, they can’t resist laughing and joking amongst themselves in between all the heavy coordinating. Harry makes the impossibly long days of planning and stressing so much more bearable with his dumb jokes and random stories, never failing to put a bright smile on Louis’ face. And not only does Harry brighten Louis’ mood, he also really gets shit done.

Harry handles organizing the right charities to partner up with, a huge piece of the whole ordeal since it is a charity event after all. What is a charity event with no charity? Harry has apparently done photography projects with local charities in the past, so he easily reaches out to The Little Princess Trust and Believe in Magic as the main beneficiaries of the event. And Louis is beyond happy to be able to help little kids, especially ones who deserve something special in their lives.

Niall works on getting the word out to as many people as he can possibly reach. Completely hijacking Louis’ social media platforms, contacting radio stations and even sending personalized email invitations to all press outlets, urging them to come out and support the match and the charities
Thanks to Liam offering to take care of all things strictly stadium related. Securing the legalities of using Keepmoat as the match site, organizing ticket sales for the public, and even designing custom jerseys to coordinate with the logos of the charities.

The second day is when Louis sets out to wrangle people into playing in the match he spent all of yesterday orchestrating. Louis soon learns that a text or phone call is probably not going to cut it, so he goes to each and every one of his teammates and personally asks them—begs them, to support the charity match.

As expected Louis is met with extreme resistance and repeated dismissal. Everyone has some kind of far fetched excuse as to why they can’t do it, and a few of the bolder players flat out just say they don’t want to do it right to his face. Louis can’t say he doesn’t appreciate their honesty though.

But even so, Louis has never been someone who gives up and takes no for an answer, and that is why he retaliates back to the peace offering strategy and buys each of his teammates a handcrafted Bvlgari Diagono Chronograph watch. In a way, it does sort of feel like he is using his money to bribe his team, but Louis sees it more as an apology gift for being such a horrible captain in the past and hopefully a fresh start.

Going beyond the match, Louis really wants to have a solid relationship with his team. And with any luck, maybe through a newfound respect for each other they can possibly have a chance at winning The Premier this year. So after much apologetic ass-kissing and ample schmoozing, Louis gets 97% of his team to play for the charity game and also attend the gala.

Louis keeps the ball rolling and also manages to pull some strings and get an all star celebrity guest list to play for him. Which funny enough, happens to be a million times easier than convincing his own teammates. Who knew he had so many A-list contacts in his phone? Even though some of them—too many of them—turned out to be some form of past ex. Which…awkward.

Although the biggest and best shock was finding out that he has had The David Beckham’s phone number in his phone the entire fucking time. At his unlimited disposal. A personal, direct line straight to the legend himself. How unreal.

It would be beyond cool, if he could somehow convince Beckham to play in the match for him. Not only would it completely make the match, it would make Louis’ entire life. Louis keeps psyching himself out about calling him though because what the hell is he supposed to say to him? “Hey it’s Louis, wanna play for me in a charity match?” Are they even friends like that? Is that even remotely possible? Or realistic, for that matter? This is David Beckham he’s talking about here. His favorite football player in the history of all football players to ever grace the sport. And Louis is just supposed to call him out of the fucking blue and expect him to fucking answer and then have casual small talk with the man? What the fuck?

But Harry, in all his infinite wisdom, convinces Louis that it’s probably no big deal and suggests that if he really can’t handle a phone call then to just text him. And that sounds all nice and good, but when Louis actually sets his mind to do it, he ends up sat staring at the blinking cursor of his phone for a solid hour not knowing what to type. It begs the same question of if “Hey it’s Louis, wanna play for me in a charity match?” is now appropriate to send out as a text. And does he add an emoji to that? Or is that too much? What is the goddamn protocol here? It’s far too much pressure and Louis can NOT screw this up, so that’s when he decides it’s probably best if he doesn’t bother Beckham at all.

And that’s also when Harry decides he’s had enough of all this, so he snatches Louis’ phone out of
his hand and sends the message himself. Although Louis has no idea what message Harry actually sent him. And the uncertainty drives Louis absolutely mad, but Harry absolutely refuses to give Louis his phone back. Dodging out of his reach and keeping the phone out of Louis’ grasp, laughing and teasing him the entire time. Just casually texting David fucking Beckham back and forth, falsely perpetrating as him.

It’s sickening.

And then once Harry is done, he nonchalantly tosses Louis’ phone back to him with a shrug and simply says, “Yeah, he’ll do it.”

So that’s how David Beckham joins the ranks of Louis’ rounded up celebrity guest list of match players. A good portion of them are not athletes at all, but that only adds to the entertainment level of the match and also makes it far easier to sell tickets, which in turn, generates more money for the charities. There’s a good mix of actors, musicians, models and even a few radio and talk show hosts all happy to help out for a good cause.

The third day is all about finalizations. He and Harry divide up all the willing players into two teams representing the benefit of two different charities. They try to intersperse the celebrity guests on each team, mixing them up amongst The Rovers. In the end, each charity team not only has a full line up, but three spare players each.

Everything is finally falling into place and Louis truly can’t believe it’s actually coming together. Amazingly enough, there’s also plenty of buzz in the press about The Rovers generously taking on a charity match in the midst of championship training. And it’s easily starting to overshadow the negative allegations against them, which has been making Liam happy, to say the least. It’s putting more and more pressure on Louis though. It’s a huge day, with a lot riding on it and he just wants the event to go smoothly and without a hitch.

“Alright, so it looks like…” Louis stands back to look at the huge checklist scribbled out on the whiteboard of Louis’ at home gym. It was once a play board used to come up with team strategies, but for the time being it’s being used as an event planner. The board is an absolute mess, a mildly organized mess, but still altogether a mess. It’s riddled with phone numbers, confirmations, color splodges, scattered ideas, partial concepts and seemingly endless tasks, but as far as Louis can tell, all the to-do boxes have finally been checked off. “I mean…unless I’m missing something here—it looks like we actually got it all…done?”

“Yaaay…” Harry cheers weakly, sounding more exhausted than anything else. He is sitting haphazardly on a stationary bike, head down with his cheek pressed against the monitor. “If I knew you were going to work me this hard, I would have asked for more money.” He lifts his head up slowly, holding a finger up. “And no, before you offer. I don’t actually want you to give me another small fortune, I was totally kidding.”

Louis laughs, reaching over to ruffle Harry’s already tousled hair. “Say the word and I’ll pull out my checkbook.”

“I’m just gonna throw it out there that if Harry doesn’t want it, I will shamelessly take it.” Niall jokes, bouncing on a fitness ball in the middle of the gym floor.

“Don’t worry Niall, I already have a fat bonus check with your name on it.” Louis promises, turning towards him.

“You know I would have done it without it.” Niall replies genuinely. “But since you already took the time to write it and I have plenty of bills to pay, I won’t turn it down.”
“Thank you so much, Niall.” Louis pulls Niall up to his feet and gives him a big hug. “You made all of this so much easier. I don’t think this would have been possible without you.”

“Um? Excuse me but…what about me?” Harry lifts his head slowly with a frown, holding it up with his propped elbow. “Where is my ‘I couldn’t have done it without you’ declaration?”

“Yes, you helped too, I guess.” Louis shrugs casually with a teasing grin. “But Niall is the real MVP here. You definitely get an honorable mention though.”

“I’ll remember this…” Harry nods judgmentally with his eyes narrowed. “Watch yourself, Tomlinson.” His words have literally no bite behind them as he lays his head back down sleepy.

“Well, it’s been fun, lads.” Niall waves as he starts to head out of the gym. “I’m going to go sleep for a minimum of twelve hours and I’m not going to feel the least bit bad about it.”

“You deserve it.” Louis agrees completely. “Sweet Dreams, Ni.”

Niall smiles again, stepping out of the room. “See you tomorrow for the big day.”

“Bye Harry…” Harry murmurs blearily after Niall is already long gone.

“You’re waaay too late.” Louis grins down at him.

“Late for what?” Harry mumbles, eyes closed.

“Never mind, it doesn’t matter. What does matter though is that I’m hungry.” Louis announces, feeling his stomach rumble angrily. He notices the time projected by the digital clock on the wall and it’s only half past three, still very early. “Harry, are you hungry?”

“Uh…I could eat, yeah. Otherwise I was just gonna go for a nice little spin.” Harry jokes, patting the bike’s handles. “Gotta get my cardio in.”

“To be honest, it looks more like you’re about to take a nap on it.”

“That works too…” Harry yawns, resting his head back down.

“Oh my god, Haz!” Louis gasps suddenly, a smile spreading across his face.

“Oh my god, Lou!” Harry echoes back in teasing, bolting upright and sounding just as randomly excited for no reason. “Um…why are we yelling?” He leans in to whisper, eyes narrowed curiously.

“Because I just had the best idea!” Louis grins slowly, eyes bright and excited. “Harry! Let’s go to Lucille’s!”

“Lucille’s Diner?” Harry asks, frowning as though he doesn’t remember the last time he thought about that place. “Oh wow? Is it still open? I haven’t been in ages.”

“I mean…it’s gotta be open, right?” Louis wonders, hoping that he is indeed right.

“I don’t know? Maybe? It’s been a really, really long time, Louis.”

“Well that’s why we gotta go, Harry!”

“Alright then.” Harry nods, promptly hopping off his bike. “I guess we are going on a little adventure, you and me.”
“Indeed it appears so.” Louis agrees, offering his arm to Harry properly. “Shall we?”

“We shall.” Harry grins, looping his own arm with Louis’.

“Do you mind driving?” Louis asks as they make their way, arm in arm, out of the gym.

“No, I can drive.” Harry replies easily, allowing Louis to lead him through the house.

“Wanna drive one of my cars?” Louis offers further, peeking up at Harry.

“Wait, what really?” Harry asks in surprise, stopping in his tracks. “You’d let me drive one of your ridiculously priced sports cars?”

“Yeah, of course. Why wouldn’t I?” Louis shrugs, not seeing it as a big deal at all. He tugs on Harry’s upper arm to lead him out towards the garage. “Also uh…I’m not the best driver and I wouldn’t want to make you carsick…or something…”

“You can’t be that bad.” Harry answers, walking perfectly in step with Louis.

“Mmmm weell…” Louis drags out, expression riddled with culpability. “Remember when we went joyriding that one time? It was actually to Lucille’s coincidentally.”

“Oh how could I forget?” Harry winces at the memory, touching his forehead. “I’m still recovering from whiplash to this very day.”

“Well, let’s just say I haven’t made any great improvements since.” Louis admits slowly.

“Now that’s just sad and embarrassing.” Harry cackles, shaking his head.

“Shut up.” Louis knocks his shoulder against Harry playfully as they step into the oversized garage, the overhead lights automatically flickering on. “So which one do you want to drive?”

“I can pick any of them?” Harry asks skeptically, glancing at Louis like he is waiting for him to change his mind. “Are you absolutely sure?”

“Yeah, go for it.” Louis encourages. “I trust you way more than I trust me.”

Harry laughs lightly, looking upon the rows of shiny, extravagant vehicles. “Ok hmm…there’s so many options. I feel overwhelmed by luxury. I can’t possibly choose.”

“Just go by color, that’s what I would do.” Louis advises jokingly. “But really it’s not like you can make a wrong decision.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Harry agrees, hand on his chin as he deliberates. “How about I narrow it down to two and you pick between them for me?”

“Alright, I can do that.”

“So between the Ferrari and the Maserati, how are you feeling?”

“Oh the Ferrari and I don’t get along, so I have to chose the Maserati on principle.” Louis answers, briefly glaring at the jet black Ferrari Spider that betrayed him.

“Wait, but…why don’t you get along?” Harry questions curiously with a frown.

“Um…it’s a long story.” Louis evades, scratching the back of his neck. There is no way in hell he is
going to tell Harry about the time he idiotically crashed that car into a wall. No. Way. In. Hell. So instead he walks over to the Maserati and opens the passenger side door, watching it butterfly upward.

“It’s a pretty long car ride.” Harry reminds, heading to the driver’s side.

“You know it’s kind of on a need-to-know basis right now. And frankly, you don’t need to know.” And with that Louis shrugs and hops into the car.

Harry laughs, shaking his head. “Ok then.”

“So is it everything you thought it would be?” Louis asks, having been on the road for several minutes. Harry drives Louis’ sports car like it was meant to be driven. None of Louis’ cars have seen the light of day since the Ferrari incident, so it’s kind of nice for one of them to finally get some proper use.

“It’s more actually.” Harry reveals, wiggling against the lavish leather of his seat. “My ass has never felt more at ease while sitting in a car seat.”

Louis snorts at that, laughing to himself. Harry is not wrong though. The car has a feature where it automatically curves the seat to the shape of the passenger, practically melding to the body for pristine lumbar support. It sounds weird and invasive at first and it definitely crept Louis out, but it actually makes the whole car ride experience mind-blowingly comfortable.

“I still can’t believe that you’re actually letting me drive your Maserati.” Harry says, having repeated a similar sentiment several times already. “I’m fairly certain this car is worth more than my entire life.”

“Listen Harry, believe it or not, I’d let you keep the car if you wanted it, but I don’t think you’d accept it.”

“You’d be completely correct in that assumption.” Harry confirms.

“I figured.” Louis nods, leaning back. “Well for the record, if you want it, it’s yours.”

“Thank you, I’ll always keep that in mind. Especially the next time my ass complains about Jalapeño’s far less luxurious upholstery.”

“The ass wants what the ass wants.”

This time it’s Harry that snorts out an amused laugh, shaking his head. “So how are you feeling about tomorrow? Excited? Maybe a little nervous? After all, it is a really big day for you.”

“Umm…” Louis considers gradually, humming to himself and puffing out his cheeks. “I’m feeling positively tiregenic.”

“Tiregenic?” Harry frowns, blinking at a loss. “Is that a word you made up or…?”

“Uhh yeah basically.” Louis shrugs without explanation.
Harry’s frown only deepens at that, glancing at Louis curiously.

“Oh sorry, I should probably explain that, shouldn’t I?” Louis laughs to himself. “Ok so I’m tired, right? Always tired really. But I’m also energetic? I have a weird excited energy thing going on. And there isn’t a word that really captured my exact feelings, so I did what had to be done and created one myself. Thus, tiregenic was born, just now, in this very car with you.”

“Oooh…” Harry nods slowly, mulling it over. “Tiregenic. I like that.”

“Yeah? It should be a real word, to be honest. It just feels right. You know?”

“Mhmm. It does, you’re right.” Harry agrees. “I’m gonna steal that.”

“Such is the life of a trendsetter such as myself.” Louis sighs dramatically as he sinks back into the lush leather of the seat. “Everyone steals your cool new words.”

“What a heavy burden you bear.” Harry sympathizes teasingly.

“Or in less words, a burdor.” Louis suggests.

“Burdening honor?” Harry guesses seriously.

“Exactly!” Louis grins proudly. “Aww, you get me.”

“I don’t know how I actually got that one, to be completely honest.” Harry laughs in surprise.

“Because it makes sense, Harry.” Louis defends in all seriousness. “Because it makes fucking sense.”

“It don’t think it really does, but I get it anyway if that makes you feel better.”

“I’m a word wizard.” Louis asserts pompously, sitting up a little straighter.

Harry shakes his head instantly. “No.”

“Master of vernacular.” Louis easily continues.

“No.”

“Liaison of lingo.”

“Are you done? Is that it?” Harry raises an eyebrow.

Louis just blinks at Harry’s side profile, eyes narrowed as he thinks for a moment. “…Jargon juggler.”

“Enough.”

“Did you know that English is—was my best subject in school?” Louis announces unnecessarily.

Harry nods. “I did know that, yeah.”

“Well let this serve as a reminder.” Louis replies anyway.

“But I never forgot? So I don’t think—”

“Shh.” Louis reaches over to silence Harry’s mouth with one finger. “It’s ok to forget things
sometimes. It happens to the best of us.”

“You’re too much.” Harry chuckles, rolling his eyes.

“I’m exactly enough.” Louis amends with a grin and Harry just shakes his head again and smiles.

“Anyway, back to the match tomorrow…” Harry steers the conversation back to where it was initially. “Is Raphael going to play as one of the celebrities?”

“Oh…erm no…” Louis falls silent, looking down in his lap.

“Doesn’t wanna embarrass himself.” Harry assumes. “Smart man.”

“No, I’m sure he wouldn’t mind embarrassing himself for a good cause… it’s just that we… we broke up.” Louis admits slowly.

Even from his side profile, Harry looks surprised and completely caught off guard by this news. “Oh… I’m sorry I uh didn’t mean to—I just assumed he was away for work or something…”

“No, yeah, he’s… I mean we’re… um over…” Louis doesn’t know why he trips over his words as he says that.

“Are you ok though?” Harry asks and Louis can tell by his voice that he genuinely cares even though he is trying not to pry.

“I’m alright, yeah. It was for the best I think.”

Harry nods in understanding. “I know it probably wasn’t easy or anything, but I’m glad you’re ok.”

“Thanks, Harry.” Louis answers seriously. It’s nice to know that Harry cares about him—adult Harry he means. It’s hard to know for sure sometimes because he can be so evasive and illusive when it comes to anything personally relating to them. But it’s good to finally hear it, no matter how small of a gesture it may seem.

“You know, I kinda want to play in the match, it sounds really fun.” Harry says offhandedly, not sounding too serious as he subtly nudges the subject of their conversation.

Louis flat out laughs, hunching over in his seat with his eyes squinted closed.

“Are you laughing at me?” Harry asks, lips quirked into a small grin.

“Oh, uh I kinda want to play in the match.” Louis repeats, mimicking Harry’s voice and cracking himself up even more. “Fucking hilarious—I’m just picturing you attempting to play footie with a bunch of professional players and it’s killing me! God Harry, you’re so funny!”

“I don’t sound like that, first of all.” Harry defends, sounding mildly offended. “And second, what if I’m actually a natural? It could secretly be my hidden talent; you don’t even know!”

“Oh, but I do know, Harry. I know very well.” Louis replies, still grinning. “You have two left feet. Getting taller and older couldn’t have helped out your coordination skills since the last time I saw you attempt to dribble a ball.”

“Don’t be jealous of my untapped gifts.” Harry tries to say seriously, but his face breaks into a suppressed chuckle halfway.

“Untapped gifts?!” Louis wheezes, full out cackling again. “Harry—and I so mean this with all the
sincerity in the world, you fucking suck at football.”

“Wow, ok. Great. Well, there go my dreams.” Harry sighs wistfully. “Thanks for that. I really feel the support.”

“I’m sorrrry.” Louis smiles fondly, reaching over to pat his shoulder in mock consolation.

“Oh, don’t apologize to me now, hater.” Harry narrows his eyes, shrugging his shoulder away. “I’ll prove you wrong someday.”

“Yeah mhmm sure.” Louis nods sarcastically. “I’ll be waiting.”

“Hater...” Harry repeats lowly, lifting his free hand from the wheel and casually flipping Louis off without looking at him, gaze trained on the road ahead.

“What was that, Harold? I didn’t quite hear that last part.” Louis cups a hand over his ear.

“Hater! I said you are a H-A-T-E-R! Hater!” Harry spells out exaggeratedly.

“A bit dramatic, don’t you think? If anything, I’m honest.” Louis defends smugly. “You can’t fault honesty.”

“What!?” Louis starts to giggle again, eyes crinkled as he turns towards him. “Are you really quoting *Pretty Woman* right now?”

“Um, of course I am, Lou.” Harry answers obviously with a slight shrug. “It’s an iconic line and there is no better way to leave a conversation that isn’t worthy of your time.”

“Buuut, you aren’t really leaving the conversation are you? Because you’re driving and there is nowhere for you to physically go…” Louis points out, holding back a smile. “Sooo…”

Harry side-eyes Louis bitterly, pouting a bit. “Leave me alone.”

Louis bites down on his bottom lip, trying not to start laughing again. Teasing Harry absolutely never, *ever* gets old. “Aww Harry.”

“Don’t ‘aww Harry’ me.” Harry sulks. “We are officially moving on from this conversation. It’s over, it’s cancelled, it’s dead.”

“Ok.” Louis smirks.

“Ok.” Harry shrugs, trying his best to appear unbothered.

Louis raises an eyebrow. “Ok.”

“Ok.” Harry repeats, this time with a succinct nod of his head.

“Oook.” Louis drags out slowly, teasing once again with a sly grin.

Harry tries his hardest not to respond or react, holding his lips together uncomfortably, suppressing a dimpled smile with teeth sinking into his bottom lip. And once again Louis just wants to laugh at him because he’s just so endearing and cute, trying and failing to keep his face neutral.
“Ok, but—” Harry bursts suddenly, surprisingly going a full thirty seconds before he just can’t hold it in anymore. “Do you know what I actually am good at though?”

“Hmm…I’m gonna take a complete stab in the dark here and maybe go with photography?” Louis guesses teasingly.

“Ehh, that’s just my side job.” Harry jokes. “What I really have a burning passion for is hypotheticals.”

“Oh right, of course.” Louis nods slowly as though he should have known. “So I take it you have another one then?”

“I do actually.” Harry grins, goofily raising his eyebrows. “Are you up for it?”

“I’m always up for it.” Louis answers seriously. “Hit me, Styles.”

“Ok.” Harry nods happily, looking briefly to Louis. “And no interruptions please, I have to properly set the scene.”

“Oh, here we go.” Louis sighs fondly, sitting back.

“Picture this, ok?” Harry starts, voice falling somber to fit the mood he is trying to create. “So you’re standing on the rooftop of a 70 story building—”

“70 stories?!” Louis disrupts Harry’s opening sentence instantly. “Why would I ever—”

“Lou, I literally just said no interruptions.” Harry reminds, interrupting Louis right back.

“Ok, yeah I know, but I just don’t understand the context.” Louis frowns, thinking to himself.

“I’m trying to give you context, if you’d only let me.” Harry tries.

“Fine, fine.” Louis sits back in his seat again, adjusting his feet on the dashboard. “Please, by all means, continue.”

Harry blows out a stream of air, clearing his throat as he slides his hands along the steering wheel. “Anyway, as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted…You are standing on the edge of said building. It’s dark out tonight, the city is quiet and a strong wind is blowing all around you. It’s a long, long, looong way down to the bottom and—”

“I just really don’t get why I’m hanging out on skyscraper rooftops for fun…” Louis mumbles to himself, once again disturbing Harry.

“Louis! Come on! Seriously!” Harry complains, failing to look truly upset as he laughs, sounding a bit endeared. “Will you please let me finish?”

“Sorry, Haz! Sorry!” Louis holds his hands up in surrender. “I just can’t picture it! I’m really struggling.”

“Well, if you’d only let me describe the scenario in its entirety, maybe you’d finally be able to.”

“Again, I do see your point—in theory, but I have so many questions floating around in my mind, I can’t help but ask them out loud. You know what I mean?”

“You’re impossible.” Harry sighs, shaking his head. “Ok, if you are quite finished with the questions, for now at least, I’d like to actually get on to the hypothetical part of my hypothetical.”
“Oh well please, don’t let me stop you.” Louis grins knowingly.

“Oh my god…” Harry half groans, half laughs, dimples appearing in his cheeks. “Anyway, just to reiterate, you are on a really tall building late at night, just enjoying the view. But then, out of nowhere, you hear a panicked scream coming from over the ledge. And since you’re ever sooo curious, you look over to see what’s happening and you gasp immediately; shocked to find that it’s your friend dangling off of the side of the building—”

“And why is this irresponsible friend of mine dangling off of a building in the middle of the night?” Louis wonders, expression puzzled. “Who does that?”

“Look, we don’t always know why people do things, ok? Who knows what their situation is. Just go with it.” Harry dismisses, pressing on with his developing story. “You’re the only person who can save your friend in time before they fall to their death. There is a giant inflatable landing pad thing set up at the bottom of the building at street level and—”

“Wait, wait, wait!” Louis stops him again, holding a hand up with a frown. “But who set all that up and why am I the only one who can save them?”

“Loouuueeeehhh.” Harry drags out in fond exaggeration, lifting one of his hands from the steering wheel to playfully slap Louis’ thigh. “I can’t believe you! You’re doing it on purpose, aren’t you? All I asked is for you to shut up long enough for me to finish explaining and you can’t even do that! But if you must know, the emergency responders set it up.”

“So…? They can’t save my friend?” Louis asks further, still frowning. “I mean, it’s kind of like… their job. And if they are already there then—”

“No! For the sake of this hypothetical situation,” Harry stresses pointedly, glancing at Louis again. “Only you can save them. They tell you that there is a 60% chance you’ll survive the fall if you decide to jump. So the question is, would you, Louis Tomlinson, risk it all and jump to save your friend from certain death?”

“Hmm, 60% chance. Interesting…” Louis pauses, thinking to himself as he stares out the front dashboard window. “But, I have a question.”

“No! For the sake of this hypothetical situation,” Harry stresses pointedly, glancing at Louis again. “Only you can save them. They tell you that there is a 60% chance you’ll survive the fall if you decide to jump. So the question is, would you, Louis Tomlinson, risk it all and jump to save your friend from certain death?”

“How do you do. I’d expect nothing less.” Harry shakes his head with a knowing sigh. “Yes, Louis? What is your question this time?”

“Are you the friend?” Louis wonders curiously, turning his head back towards Harry.

“I don’t know; do you want me to be the friend?” Harry asks back, glancing at him briefly. “Does that change the answer for you?”

“I just need to know who exactly I’m risking my life for before I decide something as grave as this, you know what I mean? I need all the facts.”

“Hmm that’s fair, I suppose. Ok, let’s say I’m the friend.” Harry decides slowly. “It’s me down there hanging off of a 70 story building, screaming for my life, pleading to be saved.”

“I would jump.” Louis answers without a moment’s doubt.

“You’d risk your life for me?”

“Oh, of course I would. In a heartbeat.” Louis promises, not bothering to even think it over.
“What if your chances of surviving were lower?” Harry questions further, upping the stakes. “Like 40%? Or 20%?”

“It doesn’t matter, Harry. I’d still jump for you.” Louis answers honestly, and he has never believed anything more. He would jump even if the odds were completely against him and he wouldn’t think twice.

Harry pauses, breathing growing a bit shallow as he takes in the genuine honesty of Louis’ answer. His gaze is focused on the road, brow furrowed in what appears to be silent consideration. Harry doesn’t say a word for several long moments and Louis starts to assume that maybe he is done with this conversation too. That is until, Harry starts to speak again, voice quiet, but certain.

“I’d jump for you too.”

△ ▲ △

By the time they finally arrive at Lucille’s Diner, Harry and Louis are beyond hungry.

Thankfully, the diner is indeed still open after all these years, although it doesn’t seem like there are many people that frequent the quaint eatery.

Walking inside the restaurant feels almost like walking through a time warp, everything looks exactly the same as though untouched by the changing of decades. The wallpaper, the floor tiles, even the juke machine that they used to spend hours dancing along to is still there, pushed against the same back corner.

It isn’t even a question of where they are going to sit, both of them sliding right into their booth in the back, right next to the jukebox. And, yes it is their booth, no one ever sat here but Louis and Harry, almost exclusively. Their initials are still carved into the grains of the wood, hidden under the napkin dispenser. It’s so weird because Louis feels like he just watched Harry painstakingly carve those letters out day in and day out. But now the engraved markings are weathered with age, softened and dulled into the wood. It’s strange to think how much time has truly gone by since the last time he’s been here.

“There’s only two boys I know who insist on sitting in this booth.”

“Lucille!” Harry and Louis both exclaim in unison as they look up at the older woman approaching their table. They slide right back out of their seats to greet her as quickly as they initially sat down.

“It’s so good to see you.” Louis says, hugging her first. He can’t believe Lucille still owns this place, and runs it. But she probably doesn’t have the heart to sell it, even though she’s so much older now.

“It’s lovely to see you too, Louis.” Lucille embraces him warmly before turning to hug Harry as well. “And you, Harry.”

“I can’t believe you still remember us.” Harry awes, speaking Louis’ exact thoughts.

“Oh stop it dears, of course I remember you. How could I not?” Lucille replies sweetly. “My, you both have grown so handsome now. Let me look at you.”

Harry and Louis both cutely spin around for her, spreading their hands out and ending with a
cheerful, “Tah-dah!”

Lucille laughs, still impossibly amused by the two of them, as she always was. “Harry, you’ve gotten so tall and Louis—”

“Oh, please just lie and say that I’m tall too.” Louis jokes, but he might be a bit serious as he stands on the tips of his toes. “I don’t know what happened, but I promise I’m still growing!”

“Aww Lou!” Harry coos, draping an arm over his shoulder, pushing him right back down to his normal height. “There’s nothing wrong with being a little on the short side.”

“You’re a bully.” Louis mopes, pinching Harry’s side, causing him to giggle and tighten his hold on Louis. “And for your information I’m not short, I’m average.”

Admittedly, Louis is still bitter that Harry is now taller than him. But no matter how many times he measures himself, the tallest his adult body can reasonably claim is 5’9”, which is average, but still. He’d kill to be taller than Harry again. Or at the very least, the same goddamn height. Fuck Harry’s long legs.

Harry grins really wide and Louis just knows he’s being a little shit. Or a big shit, rather. Because he insists on rubbing his taller stature in Louis’ face. Again, fuck those long legs.

Lucille smiles happily as she observes them, hand over her chest. “It warms my heart that you’re still together. You two were always the cutest little thing. Just so obsessed with each other.”

Harry looks like he is about to correct her before shutting his mouth and smiling warmly at her instead. “It’s really good to see you, Lucille. You haven’t aged a day.”

“Oh stop it, Harry.” Lucille swats him lightly.

“I’m serious, you’re one lovely lady.” Harry moves towards her, wrapping one of his arms over her shoulder as he leans into her.

“You cheeky boy.” Lucille pats his cheek dotingly. “You’re so precious. But I’m afraid I have more wrinkles than skin these days.”

“Nonsense, you’re totally gorgeous.” Louis chimes in, flanking her opposite side. She’s quite a bit shorter than him, fitting snuggly in between Louis and Harry, arms wrapped around their waists.

“You’re both such sweethearts. Oh, how I’ve missed you boys and all your antics.” Lucille answers, seeming delighted to be sandwiched between her boys. She’s always been somewhat of a maternal figure for them and Louis wishes that he’d kept in contact with her. “Anything—and I do mean anything you want is on the house.”

Harry and Louis both shake their heads. “Oh no, Lucille please—”

“No, I insist, please. It’s not everyday my favorite boys pay me a visit.” She smiles, hugging them around the waist affectionately. “How about your usual?”

“You still remember it?” Harry asks in total surprise, looking down at her.

“I forget a lot of things these days, but I don’t think I’ll ever forget your usual order. It’s three milkshakes—one vanilla, one banana, and one strawberry to split, with extra whip cream and a fresh basket of chips.” Lucille recites easily. “And if you’re really hungry, I’ll throw in a couple of burgers.”
“That sounds absolutely amazing.” Louis smiles down at her. “You’re incredible, Lucille.”

Lucille squeezes Harry and Louis once more before releasing them to scurry towards the kitchen. They settle back into their booth, sitting opposite each other as they lounge back on the worn leather of the seat. It hardly takes any time at all before Lucille is bustling out of the back kitchen doors, balancing a tray of food with one hand.

Louis and Harry make an absolute mess while splitting their strawberry milkshake, as usual; their method was never solid to begin with. But regardless of the mess, the food is just as good as it always was before, if not better.

As they eat, however, Louis can’t seem to stop thinking about how Lucille assumed they’d still be together, more so he can’t stop thinking about the concept of the two of them getting together in general. He and Harry together. As in a couple, an item, a thing.

She said it like it was the most normal thing in the world, like she assumed they were always together even as the young, stupid kids they were. Louis supposes it’s not much of a stretch if he thinks about it, considering the fact that they were practically glued at the hip at all times. It would be only logical to assume that some kind of pure puppy love was going on between them.

Louis stares at Harry from across the table, hardly registering as Harry rambles on about a random dream he had where he almost died. Louis was listening at first, but then he got caught up in how Harry’s mouth moves when he talks. How his perfectly shaped lips form and produce syllables, deep voice consistently warm and syrupy slow like honey. And Harry’s lips themselves are the loveliest shade of pink. Plump and soft, wonderfully kissable lips, framed by the most adorable dimples. Louis loves those signature dimples that beautifully crater his cheeks when he smiles freely or when he laughs. God, when Harry laughs—that happy tinkling little laugh that always seems to make his already bright green eyes shine brighter and cause his whole face to glow. He’s just so pretty and Louis feels like he could stare at him for hours and never get bored.

“What? Is there something wrong with my face?” Harry reaches absently for a napkin as he frowns at Louis.

“Huh?” Louis blinks, suddenly very aware of the fact that he has been actually staring and blatantly ogling Harry for the past few minutes. “No—uh no. Your face is perfect.”

Harry’s cheeks lightly flourish with rosy hues, quirked lips turning up at the corners.

“Oh, uh no…I mean erm…you are perfect—obviously, but no I uh meant that um…uh…” Louis stutters hopelessly, blushing a far darker shade than Harry. He can feel his face heating up and he has no idea how to explain himself. “…Never mind.”

Harry smiles softly, looking down to his lap as he tucks a stray curl of hair behind his ear. And Louis thinks he’s beautiful. Simply beautiful. Not only that, but Louis finds every single thing about him utterly captivating. Harry’s curls, Harry’s smile, Harry’s laugh, Harry’s voice, Harry’s smell. Harry’s dimples. Harry’s eyes. Harry.

And the more he admits that, the less strange it feels. All week Louis has felt a growing attraction to his best friend and not in the objective sense. But the funny thing is that the attraction he feels is starting to not feel weird at all, in fact it oddly feels…right?

“Lou?” Harry calls, his deep questioning voice commanding Louis’ attention.

“Hmm?” Louis startles back to reality again. How long was he zoning out while staring at Harry this
time? He has got to stop doing that.

Harry’s mouth spreads into a gentle smile again. “Everything alright?”

“Oh yes…yep. Yeah. I’m fine—great. Yeah, sorry.” Louis squeaks, nodding his head too frequently to pass as normal as another blush creeps up his neck.

Harry nods slowly along with him, still smiling. “Ok, good.”

“Um so…uh I wonder if this thing still works.” Louis tilts his head towards the jukebox, desperate to change the subject and divert the attention away from his painfully red, embarrassed cheeks.

Harry follows Louis’ line of sight to the juke, shrugging slightly. “I’d be surprised if it did.”

“Let’s see.” Louis slides out of the booth to fiddle around with the buttons of the juke’s cassette tape deck. The dated machine gradually hums back to life and it looks like the musical selection hasn’t been updated in nearly two decades.

Early on Louis and Harry had cheated the system and figured out how to play the jukebox for free by lightly tapping—*roughly slapping*—it in a certain spot two times in a row. The only thing that could get sort of annoying about their little cheat, was that it would make the juke automatically play out the entire catalogue without stopping after whichever song was originally selected. It would go on and on until all the songs were played and it was because of that that Louis and Harry easily memorized all the songs available. And nothing was better than being pleasantly surprised that the jukebox was finally updated with new music that was currently playing on the radio and MTV. It was a rare occasion, but it excited young Louis and Harry nonetheless.

Louis giggles to himself as he finds the absolute perfect song, thrilled that he recognizes all the songs on the old machine. He spins around and gives Harry a look, shit-eating grin spread across his face. “Oooh Harry, you’re going to *loooove* this!”

“You’re making me nervous with that face.” Harry worries, already looking like he is ready to bail.

Now there were two anthems in Louis and Harry’s repertoire, songs that could be played at any given time and both of them would know it’s go time. One of those songs, obviously, was *U Can’t Touch This*, Louis’ favorite. But Harry’s favorite was less about dancing and quick feet and more about the swift deftness of a skilled tongue.

So when the opening beats of *Waterfalls* by TLC starts playing from the jukebox, Harry immediately bursts into laughter, dropping his head down on the table. The kid was *obsessed* with this song, beyond obsessed really. Harry would have them sing this song all the time in his room, complete with all the motions and dance moves that TLC did in their music video. After awhile Harry easily ended up memorizing Left Eye’s timeless rap in its entirety and Louis would tease him about it and have Harry repeat the whole thing on the spot just for fun. When Harry performed that rap it was probably the fastest Louis has ever heard him talk in his whole life and he will never, *ever* get over it.

“Nooooo.” Harry lifts his head back up and outwardly groans.

Louis’ grin only widens, wiggling his eyebrows as he tiptoes back towards Harry. “Come on, Haz. You know you wanna…”

“I hate you.” Harry laughs, slapping both of his hands over his face and shaking his head. “I hate you so fucking much! How dare you!”

“It’s our other song!” Louis pouts, prying both of Harry’s hands from his face and pulling him to his
feet. “You can’t not sing our song, Harry! Pleeeaaase! For me!”

“What if I don’t remember it?”

“How many times do I have to tell you that there is no way in hell that you could have forgotten it. It’s not something you can forget.” With that Louis jumps right into singing the chorus. “Don’t go chasing waterfalls, please stick to the rivers and the lakes that you’re used to. I know that you’re gonna have it your way or nothing at all. But I think you’re moving too fast.”

Louis makes his way through the majority of the song by himself, belting out the lyrics unbothered as Harry simply grins and watches him. It doesn’t matter if Harry sings just yet, it only matters that he does his part of the song when it comes. Louis did not spend countless hours in Harry’s bedroom listening to him perfect those lyrics for nothing.

“Ok Harry, this is it. You’ve had plenty of time to warm up. This is your time to shine.” Louis encourages, hyping Harry up as his part finally nears. “Make me proud.”

It almost looks like Harry really isn’t going to do it, letting this opportunity to prove that his preteen talent is still useful as an adult pass him by. But then Harry takes a deep breath and starts to perfectly recite Left Eye’s rap with all the skill he possessed in the past.

“I seen rainbow yesterday, but too many storms have come and gone leavin’ a trace of not on god-given ray. Is it because my life is ten shades of gray? I pray all ten fade away, seldom praise him for the sunny days. And like his promise is true, only my faith can undo, the many chances I blew; to bring my life to anew. Clear blue and unconditional skies have dried the tears from my eyes, no more lonely cries.”

Louis can’t help but smile the entire time, happily watching his best friend animatedly perform the song just like it was yesterday. His brow forms a little indent as he concentrates on getting every single word right, each bar spot on. As slow and calculated as Harry usually speaks, it’s astounding how quick tongued he can be when he puts his mind to it.

“My only bleedin’ hope is for the folk who can’t cope with such an endurin’ pain that it keeps ‘em in the pourin’ rain. Who’s to blame for tootin’ caine in your own vein? What a shame, you shoot and aim for someone else’s brain. You claim the insane and name this day in time, for fallin’ prey to crime. I say the system got you victim to your own mind.”

“Dreams are hopeless aspirations in hopes of comin’ true.” Harry drapes his arm over Louis’ shoulder as he always used to do at the end. “Believe in yourself, the rest is up to me and you.”

Louis erupts into ample applause, looking up at Harry with his arm still curled around him. “I told you that you’d remember it!”

“I never said I didn’t remember it, I was just testing your faith in me.” Harry smiles smugly.


“No, I told you my secret talent is footie.” Harry argues, grinning stupidly.

“Stop lying to yourself and accept my compliment.” Louis swats Harry’s chest lightly.

Harry catches Louis’ hand in his. “I’ll do what I want.”

The juke catalogue continues to play and since they are already nice and warmed up, Harry and Louis go on just like that, happily making fools of themselves as they sing all their favorite songs.
from the best era the world has ever seen.

The 1990s.

“Yo, I’ll tell you what I want, what I really, really want!” Louis yells in Harry’s face, belting out the opening lyrics of *Wannabe* by The Spice Girls.

“So, tell me what you want, what you really, really want!” Harry shouts back with a goofy smile.

“I wanna! I wanna! I wanna! I wanna!” Louis jumps around Harry animatedly along with the song. “I wanna really, really, really wanna zig-a-zig, ahh!”

“If you wanna be my lover, you gotta get with my friends.” They sing in unison, less so actually singing, more so screaming. “Make it last forever, friendship never ends…”

The momentum keeps rolling as *C’est la Vie* by B*witched begins to play, both of them bopping and dancing around the diner to the Irish pop hit.

“Say you will!” Harry sings over his shoulder to Louis, using a collection of bendy straws as a makeshift microphone.

“Say you won’t!” Louis sings back, knocking hips with his best friend.

“Say you’ll do what I don’t!” They sing, backs facing each other.

“Say you’re true!” Harry points at Louis exaggeratedly.

“Say to me!” Louis holds both of his hands to his own chest.

“C’est la vie!” Harry and Louis cast their heads back and scream ridiculously loud, throwing their hands up in the air.

And they both get almost embarrassingly excited when *I’ll Be There For You* starts up next, playing through the juke’s stereo. Harry and Louis loved watching *Friends* together back in the day and the theme song is easily an unforgettable household favorite.

“It’s like you’re always stuck in second gear, when it hasn’t been your day, your week, your month, or even your year…”

“I’ll be there for you!” Louis jumps around, hands waving all over the place.

Harry dumps his collection of straws over Louis’ head. “When the rain starts to pour.”

“I’ll be there for you!” Louis tries to sing decently, but get distracted by the raining straws and ends up giggling.

“Like I’ve been there before.” Harry picks up a few of the fallen straws and throws them at Louis again.

Louis catches some of the straws this time and flings them right back at Harry. “I’ll be there for you!”

“Cuz you’re there for me too.” Louis and Harry croon in harmony, straws stuck to their hair.

*You Gotta Be* by Des’ree was always Louis and Harry’s time to prove who could make the most noise while singing the lyrics. Although they never really determined who the winner ever was, the
fun was always in the screaming and it still is.

“You gotta be bad, you gotta be bold, you gotta be wiser!” Louis exclaims trying to be louder than Harry.

“You gotta be hard, you gotta be tough, you gotta be stronger.” Harry somehow yells at a higher decibel than Louis, reaching pretty impressive levels.

“You gotta be cool, you gotta be calm, you gotta stay together.” They both scream at the very top of their lungs, definitely rattling a few glasses. “All I know, all I know, love will save the day.”

They slow down their wild uncoordinated dancing to belt out the more mellow lyrics of Oasis’ Wonderwall.

“And all the roads we have to walk are winding.” Louis whines, purposely yelling in an exaggerated, nasally voice.

“And all the lights that lead us there are blinding.” Harry matches the frequency of Louis’ voice, trying not to giggle.

“There are many things that I would like to say to you, but I don’t know how. Because maybe, you’re gonna be the one that saves me. And after all you’re my wonderwall!”

And Harry and Louis hype right back up again when Fantasy by Mariah Carey starts playing next, going right into their usual ridiculous routine for the song.

“Oh when you walk by every night, talking sweet and looking fine. I get kinda hectic inside.” Harry dramatically fans himself as Louis strolls past him, clutching his heart and stupidly acting out the lyrics.

“Mmm, baby I’m so into you, darling if you only knew all the things that flow through my mind, but it’s just a sweet, sweet fantasy, baby. When I close my eyes you come and you take me. It’s so deep in my dreams, but its just a sweet, sweet fantasy baby…”

When Finally by CeCe Peniston starts playing, Harry instantly reprises his impression of a runway model, strutting around like the diner floor is his runway. He used to steal Gemma’s oversized sunglasses, hair pulled into two tiny curly pigtails while rocking a feather boa as he paraded around his bedroom floor. And what makes it better is that there is photographic evidence of it happening because Louis would pretend to be Harry’s paparazzi and snap loads of pictures using Harry’s camera. Absolutely priceless.

There were always three songs Louis could count on Runway Harry blessing him and making an appearance and those were Madonna’s Vogue closely followed by What is Love by Haddaway. And of course, Finally.

“Finally! You’ve come along. The way I feel about you it just can’t be wrong.” Harry goes around posing wildly and screaming out lyrics, doing what Harry does best. “If you only knew the way I feel about you I just can’t describe.”

Harry flounces around Louis, hardly breaking character and Louis can’t even stop laughing long enough to sing along with him. It was always funny before, but something about Harry now being a grown man doing his little routine exactly the same way makes it sooo much better.

“Finaaaally!” Harry screeches in the highest falsetto, causing Louis to nearly fall on the floor in tears of laughter. “It has happened to me, right in front of my face and I just cannot hide it!”
Thankfully, Harry goes to the loo when *Kiss Me* by Sixpence None The Richer starts to play. It used to be one of Louis’ favorites—that is until he actually started to listen to the lyrics for once. And come to think of it, what the hell is up with these songs anyway? Obviously, he has heard them all countless times, he’s committed the lyrics and medleys to memory, but maybe Louis never really listened to them before, not like how he is listening to them today at least. They all seem to be calling him out or speaking to him in someway and it’s a bit unnerving. Especially this song in particular. Is the universe telling him something or…

“*Kiss me down by the broken tree house. Swing me, upon its hanging tire*” Louis hums the words to himself, getting unexpectedly caught up in the lyrics. “*Kiss me beneath the milky twilight, lead me out on the moonlight floor. Lift your open hand, strike up the band and make the fireflies dance, silver moon’s sparking. So kiss me…*”

He and Harry sang this song all the time to each other before and Louis never thought anything of it, but now it’d be absolutely…mortifying. Because before the thought of kissing Harry had never once crossed his mind. But now it seems to cross Louis’ mind every five seconds and the idea alone makes his heart beat sporadically and his skin start to heat up and his mouth go dry and it feels like he is dying! Honest to god, actually dying! What the hell is happening to him and why the hell is it happening?! Is having a crush on someone supposed to be this fucking embarrassing?

That’s what this is isn’t it? A crush. Louis has a stupid, dumb, embarrassing crush on his best mate. Fantastic.

And when Harry comes back, another one of their old favorites starts to play that Louis soon realizes is just as distressing and totally embarrassing. Are there no neutral songs on this jukebox? Better yet, are there no neutral songs from the ‘90s in general? Of all the songs, why oh why, does it have to be *Lovefool* by The Cardigans that happens to play next. The title alone makes him want to hightail himself off a cliff, but Louis decides not to overthink it and just have fun with Harry.

“*Love me, love me!*” Harry sings as he and Louis spin around in nonsensical circles, making themselves dizzy for no reason. “*You say that you love me.*”

“*Fool me, fool me.*” Louis nearly trips over his own feet as Harry twirls him around. “*Go on and fool me.*”

“*Love me, love me.*” Harry continues spiraling around, hair tumbling all over his face as he tumbles about. “*I know that you need me.*”

Louis stops spinning, and this time it’s Harry who trips on his feet, ungracefully falling into Louis’ arms. “*I can’t care about anything but you.*”

They go through every single track on the jukebox from *MMMBop* by Hanson to *Man! I Feel Like A Woman* by Shania Twain to DJ Jazzy Jeff and The Fresh Prince’s *Summertime* and everything in between. Anyone passing by would assume they must be drunk with how ridiculously they dance around, belting out lyrics and making right fools of themselves. It should be more embarrassing than it is, but Harry and Louis could not care less. Completely at ease with each other and having just as much fun together as the young boys they once were.

They laugh the entire time, giggling so hard that their sides actually start to hurt and their faces ache from the constant strain of smiling. Eventually the music stops and by that time Harry and Louis are completely worn out, the best kind of tired.

But before they head out, Louis and Harry make sure to help Lucille clean up the diner. Knowing that she won’t let them pay her for the food, it’s the very least they could do. They thank her
profusely for everything, showering her with hugs before they make the drive back home.

Louis must have dozed off sometime during the car ride, because the next thing he knows he is in Harry’s arms being carried up the grand staircase of his house. He doesn’t protest though, perfectly content nestled up to Harry’s chest.

Harry places Louis gently down on his king size master bed and he must not think Louis is awake at all because he proceeds to carefully take off Louis’ shoes for him, before tucking him under the covers.

“Goodnight, Lou.” Harry whispers, standing up straight.

“Haz.” Louis sleepily grabs Harry’s wrist before he turns to leave, startling him a bit. “Thank you. Not just for this…but for today…and for everything…”

“Yeah Louis, of course.” Harry smiles gently, face incredibly warm and soft. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Louis nods up at him, but he still hasn’t let go of Harry’s wrist. He feels him start to move away again, so Louis gives his arm a soft squeeze. “Harry, wait…”

“Hmm?” Harry hums quietly, looking down at Louis’ hand holding him back.

“Stay the night with me?” Louis asks softly, just like he always used to ask after spending the entire day together. It’s probably pushing his luck, probably asking too much, but it’s just that he misses it—god, Louis misses it so much. Just snuggling up against Harry in his cramped twin size childhood bed, having his unruly curls falling and flopping all over the tight space. The concept of personal space completely lost on both of them with Harry’s arms and limbs seeming to be everywhere at once, perfectly entangled with Louis’. Nothing felt better than being so completely surrounded only by Harry, Harry, Harry.

In his arms, by his side, Louis always felt safe and secure. It was so easy to push everything else to the farthest corner of his mind and let all his problems momentarily wash away. And more than anything, Louis just needs that again.

“Oh Lou, I…” Harry shakes his head, leaving his sentence open as his eyes implore Louis’ deeply. “I can’t…I… I mean— I have to get home…I have um…I…”

“Please…just for a little while…” Louis moves his hand down to slowly lace his fingers together with Harry’s, sensing his increasing hesitation. All he wants is for Harry to stay with him, stay and never leave. “Just have a cuddle with me.”

Even in the still darkness of the room Louis can see the confliction written all over Harry’s features. He stares down at their interwoven hands, appearing almost paralyzed by the simple gesture. He’s torn and he’s fighting himself; part of Harry desperately wants to, Louis can see it in his eyes, but part of him seems to always feel the need to guard and protect himself from Louis.

Today was everything. Today, Harry and Louis were 100% themselves again, completely at ease with each other. Today, there were no walls, no awkwardness, only two people who have more in common than most. Two people who get each other in every sense. And Louis wants them to stay that way, for as long as they possibly can, even if that’s only for tonight. He hopes with all his heart that it’s not just for tonight, that it’ll continue on like this and looming reality will never catch up to them, but all things considered, it’s hard to know what will happen.

But Harry somehow seems to get it, wordlessly understanding how Louis’ feels in this moment and
appearing to feel the exact same. And just like that, Louis can see the moment Harry concedes, nodding his head slowly as one ideal of want consumes the other ideal of need.

Harry slides his own shoes off and climbs into bed next to Louis silently. Louis curls up next to him and nuzzles his head against Harry’s chest, closing his eyes and sighing contently. Harry feels a bit stiff at first, hardly moving except the repeated rising and falling of his chest. But gradually he releases the tension held tightly in his muscles, body softening against Louis’. He rests his hand on Louis’ back, absently running his fingers along his spin soothingly as they lie cuddled up together.

It doesn’t take long for the accumulated exhaustion of the day to take over and soon they fall peacefully asleep in each other’s arms, Harry holding Louis snuggly against him, legs twisted together under the blankets.

And that night, Louis has the best sleep he has ever had since turning 30.
Chapter Ten

Louis wakes up to soft curls tickling his face, the easily recognizable smell of lavender and honey threaded into the fabric of his silk sheets. He doesn’t need to open his eyes to know that Harry is still sleeping soundly in his bed, body warm against him. Harry’s arms and limbs are wrapped snugly around Louis, holding him as though he’s afraid he might slip away. Even though Louis’ bed is massive, the two of them are twisted up together on one small portion of it, bodies interwoven together as close as humanly possible, leaving ¾ of the bed empty.

Louis adjusts slightly onto his side to shamelessly watch Harry sleep—which he knows is creepy, but there’s a comfort in it somehow. Harry sleeps like an angel, a beautifully sweet angel; all soft, relaxed features and long wispy eyelashes fanned out against delicate cheeks, expression worriless. Louis finds himself enthralled by the light huffs of gentle air escaping his slightly parted lips, breathing calm and steady.

Although Harry is usually quite a bit larger than Louis in everyday interactions, his body is curled up small towards Louis’ chest, slotting himself against him. Louis gently thumbs a long lock of Harry’s hair from his forehead, fascinated by Harry’s natural inclination to his touch, even while asleep. It’s almost instinctual how he seeks out the warmth of Louis’ palm, chasing the attention of his fingers.

If he had to stay here, in this bed, tangled up in Harry’s arms forever Louis would not complain. Louis watches fixatedly as Harry shifts in his sleep, his left arm coming to rest at an odd angle, held open. With his arm newly exposed, t-shirt sleeve bunched up, Louis looks over the seemingly random tattoos peppered along Harry’s peachy skin, trying to make sense of any of them. He’s never gotten a good look at them before, probably because Harry has always been conscious and awake, meaning that he’s always been carefully guarded.

Louis kind of feels like he’s intruding as he takes note of the mirage of markings trailing down his arm. He traces his finger slowly along Harry’s bicep in fascination, but Louis nearly screams out loud when he notices one in particular, gasping outright. The small tattoo instantly catches his attention, the letters jumping out at him, practically screaming right back.

*Hi.*

Right there, constantly concealed carefully under the cover of his arm, the word—*his* word, is permanently scrawled neatly along Harry’s skin. Louis stares down at the tiny inscription of ink in
disbelief. Without their history it would mean nothing, just a simple two letter word, a common
greeting, an everyday phrase. But with all that it stood for between them, for all the importance they
placed on it, those letters mean everything.

Harry has a ‘Hi’ tattoo. Harry has a ‘Hi’ tattoo. Harry has a fucking ‘Hi’ tattoo.

Louis’ brain is screaming, repeating the concept over and over in his head as he tries to rationalize it
to himself. He touches the tattoo again, needing to convince himself that it’s real and he isn’t just
imagining it in a sleep induced hazed. That the ink won’t just wipe off with a swipe of his finger.
Louis thinks back to when he had shoved his own tattooed forearm in Harry’s face, manically
seeking answers about his ‘Oops’ tattoo. Harry had denied any affiliation with it immediately, but
now that can’t be true knowing that he has the other half of their phrase hidden under his arm.

Roused by Louis’ repeated touch, Harry stirs awake gradually, adjusting to his surroundings through
adorably cute blinks and a sleepy yawn. He looks mildly disoriented, not remembering where he is at
first until his eyes settle on Louis and his whole face softens.

“Hi...” Harry whispers, voice throaty and not yet recovered from sleep.

Louis only gazes back at him with wide eyes, hand still resting on Harry’s upper arm, right over his
tattoo. Harry glances down at the point of contact and Louis can see the exact moment of recognition
on his features, color draining from his face as his whole body goes rigid.

“I...um I mean...it’s—that’s nothing.” Harry quickly says, a preamble to a question that wasn’t even
asked yet. He shuts away from Louis and awkwardly tucks his arm against his body, concealing
the tattoo once more, almost like he’s embarrassed by it for some reason.

Startled and confused by Harry’s sudden jerk away, Louis reaches out to him. “Harry, when did you
—”

“It’s not what you think it is.” Harry denies hastily, again dodging the proverbial bullet before it’s
even been fired.

And that makes Louis frown even more because how can that be true? What else could it possibly be
but the obvious? The ‘Hi’ to Louis’ ‘Oops’. A complimentary tattoo to match his own. “But Haz—”

“It’s nothing, ok.” Harry states in finality, not willing to budge at all on the subject. He gives Louis a
strong look that is practically begging Louis to just drop it already, bright green eyes desperately
pleading to just forget anything happened.

“Oh, ok. It’s nothing.” Louis agreeably nods, outwardly letting it go for Harry’s sake, but inwardly
screaming. It’s not nothing. He and Harry have matching tattoos. Matching. Tattoos. Louis may not
understand a lot of things but...how can that be passed off as nothing?

“What time is it?” Harry asks groggily as he rubs his eyes.

“Um 8:03.” Louis yawns, blindly glancing at the alarm clock on his bedside table. He’s hardly living
in the present, mind stuck on the fact that he and his best mate have had matching tattoos this whole
fucking time. Louis can’t be expected to just move on from information like that. Of course, he is not
going to bring it back up—not now anyway. But this isn’t something he can simply ignore forever,
Louis needs answers.

“Oh shit.” Harry curses, bolting all the way up in the bed and startling Louis again with how fast he
moves. His hair is a ruffled up halo around his head, strands sticking up in all different directions. He
runs both his hands though it, expression suddenly frenzied and filled with dread. “Is it really that
late?”

Louis sits up slowly after him, eyeing Harry curiously. “More like that early, but yeah, ‘m afraid so.”

Harry groans to himself, quickly sliding a hair tie from his wrist and knotting his untamed hair into a messy bun. He hops out of the bed next, stuffing his feet into his shoes left haphazardly on the floor the night before. “I um…I should go…”

Louis immediately slides out of bed after him, not knowing what to say, but feeling like he should say something. “Do you uh…want breakfast or…something? Maybe some tea? You already know I’m not the best cook, but I can make pretty decent eggs if you want?”

“No, I um…I just…I probably should get back home.” Harry decides slowly, voice torn within himself. He grabs his phone from the nightstand and then pauses to give Louis a genuine smile. “Thank you for offering though, that’s really sweet.”

“Are you sure?” Louis tries again, hesitantly stepping a bit closer to him.

Harry doesn’t answer at first, suddenly distracted by his phone. “Fuck.” He hisses under his breath as he looks down at the screen, seeming overwhelmed by all of the numerous missed notifications. He partially scrapes a hand through his disheveled curls again, completely messing up his already messy bun. He’s about to shove his phone back into his pocket when it starts to ring again, vibrating against his palm. Harry swears again lowly, wincing a little as he steels himself up to answer the phone.

“Hello…?” Harry answers timidly, before pausing for the response on the other end of the line. “No, I’m not dead—” Another pause. “Yes, I just saw your messages, but…I was uh…with Louis and…um it got late and I fell asleep and—”

The next pause is even longer than the last, causing Harry to sigh heavily, head lulling backwards as he listens quietly with his phone held to his ear.

“Yeah I know, I know. I should have called, you’re right.” Harry closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose, looking exhausted and nothing like the worriless angelic boy he just was in Louis’ bed. “I’m sorry, Zayn—” Pause. “No, I really do mean that. I am sorry—” Pause. “It wasn’t even like that, Z—” Pause. “You know that’s not true…” Pause. “But I—” Pause. “Yeah, ok…I’m coming home right now. Bye.”

“Fuck.” Harry mumbles again after ending the call. He pockets his phone, scrubbing his hands over his face before refocusing his attention on Louis. He looks utterly apologetic. “Erm…I’m sorry to just leave, Lou. I would have loved breakfast, but I’ve gotta go. Maybe we can do it another time or something? I don’t know…but I’ll see you at the stadium, yeah?”

“Yeah, yeah ok.” Louis nods. This is so not how he envisioned this morning panning out. A complete turn around in less than fifteen minutes. They had the best evening together last night and falling asleep in Harry’s arms was like the cherry on top of it all. But like all good things, it must come to an end at some point. Or so Louis has been told. And it looks like the unfairness of reality is back again to slap Louis over the head with its bullshit.
Meandering down the winding corridor of the stadium towards his office, Louis walks blindly, tapping out a few texts pertaining to the impending match set to commence in only a few hours. There are already tons of people bustling madly around him, carrying out orders and carting equipment, running around with their heads cut off. It’s a busy day and all hands are on deck trying to pull off the biggest last minute event Keepmoat has ever seen.

Louis is hardly paying attention to where he is walking, which is a very dangerous game to play with the amount of people flitting about in his path. It’s really only a matter of time before he accidently runs into someone. Or someone runs into him.

“Sorry, sorry!” Louis apologizes as soon as it happens, glancing up from his phone. “I should probably start watching where I’m going. Sorry!”

“Nah it’s my bad, mate. I didn’t—Oh! What up, Tommo!” The man seems to immediately recognize him, holding his hand out for a fist bump.

“Um…hi…?” Louis responds slowly, his tone sounding more like ‘Do I know you?’ as he tilts his head and eyes the person before him speculatively. He strangely looks so familiar, but Louis can’t quite place why. He’s wearing a Keepmoat Stadium custodial staff uniform, so maybe Louis has seen him around before in passing? But it can’t be just that, there is something so much more familiar about him. Louis stares deeper into the grey-blue eyes looking back at him and strangely he remembers those eyes. In fact, he has had countless dreams about those exact pair of eyes. He fantasized about them, he obsessed over them, he wished for them to one day look into his own eyes and want him back. And that can only mean that these eyes, these scarily familiar eyes, could only belong to one person in particular and that’s…

“Brady?” Louis wonders in shock, utterly confused. He tries to wrinkle out the frown shrouding his features, but it’s useless.

“How’s it goin’, bub!” Brady grins, slinging an uninvited arm around Louis’ shoulders.

“Oh my god…” Louis gasps avertedly, eyebrows shooting straight up, jaw hanging open. This man looks nothing like the cute boy Louis knows—knew. No offense to whoever Brady is now but…he did not age well. Like…at all. And that’s just the god honest truth.

For someone who should be about thirty-two right now, the man leaning into Louis’ side looks so much older. The long, enchanting teenage hair that Louis’ remembers is now morphed into a prominent widow’s peak. The bright eyes Louis once loved to get lost in now appear dull and faded, framed by dark circles of poor life choices. The tight and trimmed athletic frame Louis ogled from time to time during practice is replaced with wide hips and a pudgy midsection. And worst of all he smells like rank beer and stale weed and his uniform is dingy and riddled with grease stains and spilled alcohol.

“Have you uh…always been working here?” Louis asks, fighting hard to keep his face neutral and not scrunched up by the foul smell emitting from Brady’s direction. He hasn’t thought about him once since growing up, but Louis is surprised that he hasn’t run into him before now.

“Oh ha yeah, bro.” Brady nods leisurely with a cool laugh. “It’s a pretty chill setup, I guess. Not that I really care, I can’t be assed to give a shit about this job for real.”

Well that explains it, Louis nods to himself. “But I thought you were going to get signed? I thought that…” Louis drifts off as he thinks to himself again, trying to understand how the Brady he remembers evolved into the not so appealing old guy touching his shoulder.
“Apparently I was too lazy and arrogant to be a real footballer or whatever the fuck that means.” Brady laughs as though everything is so far beneath him, scoffing under his breath. “It’s bogus, man. I mean I could still take any of you on in my sleep if I really wanted to. They don’t know what the hell they’re on about, I’m a motherfucking legend.”

Louis chuckles awkwardly, still putting exceeding amounts of energy into controlling his facial expression as he eyes Brady skeptically. This dude can’t be fucking serious; it’s not even a joke how laughably embarrassing his pompous, yet baseless statement is. Louis is internally cringing. Lazy and Arrogant? Check and check. Whoever initially told Brady that must have had eyes.

Louis’ mind is truly and utterly blown. He adored Brady, worshipped the very ground he walked on and aspired to match his ‘skill’. Louis was obsessed with getting his approval and more than anything he wanted Brady to notice him and by some miracle fall in love with him. He dreamt of it every day since he met the guy.

And now it’s painfully obvious what kind of person he really is inside, Louis was just too caught up in the bullshit of it all to notice before. Without the boyish good looks and jock persona and amateur skills to hide behind, Brady is…well…lame.

Thinking back on all his interactions with the kid, Louis realizes that Brady had no real personality to speak of. He wasn’t very academically inclined either, failing just about every subject offered in school. He had downright horrid social skills and was basically a douche 98% of the time, just like Rusty, but not as quick-witted. As Harry always said ‘not the brightest tool in the shed, but still a tool nonetheless’.

The only thing that has remained physically unchanged about him for the most part are his eyes and even those seem far more of an icy and cold grey than they ever did before. Louis can’t think of a single reason as to why he liked this boy so much. Maybe he was blind as a teenager or maybe he really has grown up a lot over the past few weeks.

“Um well it’s uh…nice to see you…” Louis tries, pulling his lips into something that hopefully passes as a smile and not a grimace. Honestly, he could have gone a long time without seeing him.

“Yeah mate, you too!” Brady claps him hard on the back and Louis winces, ready to flee from this conversation and never look back. “Hey, when are we gonna go for a pint?”

Never, Louis thinks instantly, almost saying it out loud. “Uhh… I’ll text you…” Louis lies already sliding out of Brady’s reach and hightailing it backwards. To be honest, he doesn’t even know if he has Brady’s number, not that it matters anyway. He wouldn’t be caught dead sending a message to Brady. Not anymore at least. That ship has sailed. No, that ship has sunk.

“Alright sick! Catch ya later, Tommo! Don’t fucking suck today.” Brady calls, apparently his version of the usual ‘good luck’ sentiment.

Louis doesn’t even bother to respond, halfway down the hall and booking it to his office. He almost feels embarrassed to have ever had a crush on that guy in the first place. What the hell was he even thinking? Whatever rose colored glasses he was unfortunately wearing before have been utterly shattered. Hindsight is always 20/20 he supposes, but still. If he could have his humiliating crush on Brady struck from the history books of his life, Louis would. God, he really, really, fucking would.
The press is everywhere, polluting every hallway and hiding behind every corner like blood hounds. There seems to always be a camera or a microphone shoved into Louis’ face, asking question after question without pause, trying to get the biggest scoop first. And all Louis is trying to do is make it safely down the hallway and even that is practically asking too much.

“Are The Rovers just trying to use charity to cover up the scandal? And is it true that The Rovers may be up for full disqualification in The Premier if the investigation proves the rumors to be true? How much money are you trying to raise? Louis, is it also true that you funded this entire event yourself? What sparked your sudden interest in charity?”

They even go so far as to berate him with some personal questions, merciless in their verbal interrogation. “Have you split again from your longtime, on and off again boyfriend, Raphael Moreau? There’s a rumor that you cheated on him, is that true? Who with? When did it start? Do you think you’ll ever settle down or will you continue leaving behind a trail of hearts as a playboy? And on that topic, are you dating someone new? Is it the photographer you’ve been spotted with? Who is he? Is he your childhood sweetheart?”

Louis almost laughs because do they really expect him to willingly answer any of these questions? How does being a celebrity equate to little to no respect for privacy? It’s utterly barbaric and he could totally live without it.

The questions keep coming and Louis barely makes it past security alive. Thank all the powers that be that there is a restricted access zone. Only the people that are integral to the match are allowed beyond a certain point. Or basically anyone Louis granted an access badge to. It’s a level of security definitely needed especially considering the various celebrities involved in the match.

“It’s crazy out there.” Harry shudders as he makes it through security ten minutes after Louis, sporting his own badge hanging by a lanyard from his neck. He’s got a giant equipment bag slung over his shoulder. Louis didn’t even know Harry was here already, caught up in the hectic bustle. “I narrowly escaped with my life.”

“I know.” Louis sighs, wondering if the press recognized Harry enough to hail down overly intrusive questions. “It’s pretty intense. How’d you like the invasive question spree?”

“Oh no I didn’t get anything too invasive, just my full legal name, my address, my date of birth, my blood type and my sexual history.” Harry jokes, tone dripping with sarcasm as he ironically shrugs. “No big deal.”

“You got off easy.” Louis laughs in teasing. Not that it’s any of his business, by any means, but Louis sort of wonders about Harry’s sexual history. Seventeen years is a wide window of opportunity, who knows how many people Harry dated in that time. Somehow Louis doubts it’s been anything like his own alleged history, notoriously promiscuous in nature. But he also highly doubts that it began and ended with only Zayn—and why is this suddenly so important to him? He never wondered about any of this before? Oh yeah, probably because Louis has a bit of a dumb crush on Harry that only seems to get stronger everyday. And even that might be an understatement.

“Hey, so I’m sorry about this morning.” Harry says out of the blue in place of a usual greeting, snapping Louis back to the present. “I didn’t mean to rush out on you like that…I mean that I just um…I—”

“You don’t have to explain.” Louis interrupts, sensing the uncomfortableness rising in Harry’s tone. This morning was awkward enough, and Louis feels no need to rehash any of it. Harry doesn’t owe
him any sort of explanation and they definitely don’t need to discuss it. “Is he coming? Zayn I
mean?”

Louis isn’t going to lie, a part of him does want to know what Zayn said over the phone this
morning. He can pretty much guess, but he does sorta wonder what they talked about when Harry
went home. And it gets Louis thinking again about what Harry and Zayn’s relationship is like. He
hasn’t thought about it much since the dinner party at his house when he critiqued every perceivable
aspect of their dynamic in his mind out of jealously. But the more he thinks about it, the more he
doesn’t get it. Louis isn’t trying to say that his relationship with Harry is necessarily better than
Zayn’s, but it definitely has way more history and common ground to anchor it, rooted in years of
bonded friendship. Neither Harry nor Louis could ever deny how tied up their pasts are in each
other, and they’re hard bonds to completely severe. Even after all these many years spent apart.

“Oh, uh no.” Harry slowly shakes his head, rubbing the back of his neck. “He has a work thing that
he has to get settled before New York. But he said to tell you good luck and that he already donated
online.”

Louis mind falters at the mention of New York. Sometimes he forgets; it’s so easy for him to just
forget. Entirely disregard the fact that Harry is supposed to be moving to a whole new county in the
rapidly impending future. Something in Louis’ heart aches when he thinks about it, visualizing Harry
half a world away from him. It seems wrong on every level; the concept so unnatural and foreign.

But Louis forces his mind clear, focusing on the positive. He slaps a smile on his face and pushes
through it. “Oh really? That was really nice of him. Tell him thanks for me, I appreciate the support.”

“I’ll be sure to do that.” Harry answers, adjusting the strap of his bag on his shoulder. “So um…is
there somewhere specific you want me to be during the game?”

“No, I’m giving you full artistic liberty. As long as you wear your access badge you can take pictures
anywhere you want. So you can just—oh fuck me!” Louis gasps clutching his heart as he notices
who is clearing security next. “He’s here…he’s actually here…”

Harry frowns in confusion, looking behind himself curiously. “Who is ‘he’?”

“And he’s coming this way!” Louis hisses, grabbing onto Harry’s arm in a dramatic, though
childlike, manner. “I’m going to pass out! I’m gonna faint! I’m gonna die!”

“Louis, who are you talking about?” Harry asks again, suppressing an amused smile as he looks
down at Louis, who is slightly crouched behind him. Any lingering traces of awkwardness between
them now thankfully fizzled away. “Relax!”

“I can’t relax, Harry! How am I supposed to relax when I’m basically breathing the same air as
him!” Louis panics, gripping the material of Harry’s jumper. “What do I say, Haz!? What do I fucking say
to him!?”

Harry follows Louis’ line of sight, full on laughing when he spots the source of Louis’ anxiety. “Oh
Lou, you can’t be serious.”

“Like hell I can’t!” Louis spasms wildly.

“You’re embarrassing yourself.” Harry smirks down at him, getting an obvious kick out of it.

“I know!” Louis groans miserably. “Help me, Harry!”

“You need to stop this.” Harry decides, grinning mischievously as he manhandles Louis around and


uses all his upper body strength to shove a caught off guard Louis right into the man in question.

“Oh my god—Mr. David Beckham, sir—” Louis gasps outright, stuttering and shaking as he tentatively takes his idol’s hand in the most cherished grip. “First of all, I am so sorry for crashing into you like that. But it’s such an honor! I’m a huuuge fan! Probably you’re biggest fan in the world, if I’m honest.”

“Oii! You’ve got jokes today I see. Quit dicking around, Tommo you little shit!” David slings his arm around Louis’ neck, ruffling his hair in a big brother kind of way and Louis could die. David Beckham is treating him like a dear old friend and that news is overwhelming. Louis could truly fucking die. “It’s good to see ya, bud!”

Louis nearly has a conniption conceptualizing the fact that his all time fave’s arm is around his shoulders right now. He looks up at him with what can only be wide star-struck eyes. “It’s so good to meet—erm I mean see you too…”

“You know, I’m coming out of retirement for you, mate.” David jokes, giving Louis’ neck another affectionate squeeze. “I’ve been waiting to go head to head with you since we played at my house last year. Which I still believe ended in a tie. And don’t you dare try to give me a smartass rebuttal about that.”

Louis has been to his house!? He has set foot in the actual, physical residence of The David Beckham!? Louis could really faint. He feels so weak, he’s almost sure that he is only being held up by David’s arm around him. “No, no, never. If you say it was a tie, I believe you. I um…I well…I’m just so happy that you uh agreed to do this…for me…”

“Oh, of course, mate! Of course!” David smiles happily, hugging Louis’ shoulders a bit tighter. “I’m really proud of what you’re doing here, man. Fucking awesome. Charity work is really close to my heart, you know. I really try to give back as much as I can and I wish more players would get involved. I’m really honored to be a part of this.”

Louis knew he liked this guy. Fucking legend. A class act.

“That being said, prepare to have your ass kicked, Tomlinson. I only play to win. Charity or not.” David narrows his eyes at Louis in good natured challenge.

“Game on.” Louis says, but who is he kidding? He can’t possibly win now. Winning is David Beckham’s birthright, and he is not going to stand in the way of that.

David smiles warmly, pulling Louis in for one final hug before releasing him. “See you on the green, mate!”

Once David has walked off, Louis spins around to face Harry. He turns so fast he almost topples over with momentum, the biggest, most enthusiastic smile on his face. “Harry! Did you see that!”

“Beckham?” Harry question simply, biting back an amused grin.

“Fucking Beckham!” Louis confirms, practically bursting at the seams as he grabs Harry by the shoulders. “He called me mate! Three times! He hugged me! We hang out sometimes! At his home! Do you know what this means!?”

“Um…that you’re kinda sorta friends?” Harry wonders dumbly with his eyes narrowed in faux consideration.

“I’m actually fucking friends with fucking Beckham!” Louis enthuses, shaking Harry wildly by his
Harry laughs, allowing himself to wiggle around in Louis’ arms like a bobblehead doll. “You do know that you literally played together for England right? On the same team? And you’re still this star-struck over him?”

“It’s David Beckham, Harry!” Louis nearly shouts directly into Harry’s ears. “David Robert Joseph Beckham!”

Harry laughs openly again, endeared by Louis’ genuine excitement over his idol. “Oh, his team is sooo going to win over yours. At this rate you’ll probably just pass him the ball whenever he asks or better yet help him score.”

“You’re not wrong.” Louis admits, nodding his head. “It feels like a sin to get in his way you know? He deserves to win. It’s only fair. It’s my duty to make sure he succeeds. I love that man. Not in a marry-me-kinda-way, but in a I-would-lay-down-my-life-and die-for-you-kinda-way. But, to be perfectly honest, if he asked me to marry him, I wouldn’t say no either so…”

“You’re a mess.” Harry grins, knocking hips with Louis playfully as he rolls his eyes.

They start walking towards the archway entrance onto the pitch, heading to the sidelines. The stands are already filling up and several fans scream when they spot Louis. He waves back sweetly, touched by the sincere excitement of his numerous supporters. By some miracle, Liam told him that they were able to sellout the entire stadium for the match, which is bloody incredible to say the least. Louis can’t be sure whether people came out for the other celebs, for the good of charity, or just to catch a bit of gossip and see if the scandal rumors are true, but he is beyond happy with the overwhelming turnout regardless.

Louis feels a gentle tap on his shoulder and at first he thinks it’s just Harry, but when he turns around he’s pleasantly surprised to see his mother, proudly wearing the badge he reserved just for her.

“Mum, you came!” Louis smiles brightly, not hesitating for a moment before wrapping her up in a hug.

“Of course I did, baby.” Jay nuzzles her head against him, squeezing Louis tightly. “I promised I would when you invited me.”

It means more than the world to Louis to have his mum here to support him. And from the brilliant smile painted across her face, Louis can tell it means just as much to her too.

“Harry love, I didn’t expect to see you here.” Jay happily turns toward him next, embracing Harry like she did her own son.

“Oh, I’m working actually. Your son is forcing me to work for him.” Harry jokes, something a bit flirty in how he grins down at Louis. “I had no choice at all in the matter.”

Louis shoves Harry a little, unable to stop the grin matching Harry’s from spreading across his face. “I’m not forcing him. I hired him because he’s the best at what he does. But you already know that, isn’t that right mum?”

“Oh, I do know.” Jay looks between Harry and Louis knowingly, expression verging on delighted to witness their close-knit banter again that was seemingly an all but lost thing of the past. “I think Harry’s wonderful. In more ways than one actually.”

“Me too.” Louis wholeheartedly agrees with her and Harry’s face slowly colors under the praise,
smiling bashfully.

“Well, I’ll let you both get to it.” Jay smiles dazzlingly. “I just wanted you to know that I’m here for you if you need me, love.”

“Thank you, mum.” Louis pulls her into another hug, cuddling against her. “I’m really happy you’re here.”

His mother squeezes him back lovingly, kissing his cheek. “So proud of you, angel.”

Jay wishes them both luck before waving Harry and Louis goodbye, off to find her seat, promising she’ll catch up with them later.

“Well, I gotta go strategize with my team.” Louis announces to Harry, slowly grinning. “Gotta let ‘em know the new game plan is to forget about winning and help Beckham score all the points possible.”

Harry shakes his head with a chuckle, beginning to unpack his photography equipment. “Good luck with that, Lou.”

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Louis’ is quite fond of his charity match team, all suited up in matching jersey’s accented in red, contrasting the opposing team’s blue. For once he actually has fun with his teammates. During warm ups they joke around, already getting along smashingly.

Along with half of his properly trained Doncaster Rover teammates, Louis’ team consists of Great Britain’s alleged finest.

A red-haired singer named Ed Sheeran, who claims to not fuck with football, but loves a good charity, so he can fuck with it just this once. Then there’s Nick Grimshaw, some radio host, who talks way, way too much for Louis’ liking and complains about the idea of maybe getting dirty from the grass, but whatever. Sam Smith is also on Louis’ team, even though Louis has no idea who they are in the current world, a sentiment he shares about all current celebrities if he’s honest. But Harry knows of them and he goes absolutely star-struck when he sees Sam, claiming that they have the voice of an actual angel.

There’s Kit Harington, some guy from a show Louis has also never heard of called Game of Thrones, but it’s apparently really popular or so he has been told. And lastly an American who really wanted to get involved; a super cool DJ named Steve Aoki. Apparently he and Louis partied together in Barcelona a few times. He’s an absolute ball of energy and basically a great distraction on the pitch, with his long hair and manic jumping around, somehow always filled with a wealth of never ending energy.

All in all, it’s a pretty good team of lads and Louis is proud to share this experience with them and be their captain.

During their pregame huddle, Louis jokes—he may not be joking—about purposely letting David’s team win. His whole team collectively laugh in response, except Rusty who is unfortunately also on Louis’ team. He takes everything Louis says far too seriously, repeatedly saying it’s a horrible idea and serving as the wet blanket to Louis’ fire.
Rusty is basically a storm cloud the entire time, only opening his mouth to complain, not seeing the point in a game that has no distinct winners. It’s like he doesn’t understand the concept of charity. Throughout this whole ordeal he hasn’t lifted a finger to help out and he only agreed to play begrudgingly because he didn’t want to look bad as one of the only Rovers not playing in the match. Good thing Louis wasn’t really relying on his support alone, otherwise he’d be completely done for. As the game plays on, Rusty keeps disappearing, but nobody wonders where he is, or cares for that matter.

The whole point of this is to just have fun, there are no losers when it’s for charity. The match has been orchestrated so that no matter which team wins, both charities equally benefit from the funds raised. Really their only job as players is to keep the crowd engaged and entertained enough to want to donate money for the cause.

And Harry is all for entertainment, doing everything he can to give everyone a good laugh. Whenever there’s a timeout or a section break, Harry huddles up with Louis’ team, not only pretending like he is apart of the team, but parading around as some kind of stereotypical hardnosed coach, trying to either inspire or break them into being better players. His little performance not only makes Louis roll over laughing, but all the athletes and celebrities on the team.

“Alright, good work, boys.” Harry rallies them in, snatching Louis’ clipboard out of his grasp and acting like he’s the real one in charge here. “Huddle in, I’ve got some shit to say.”

They pack in close, arms linked over shoulders in a circular formation. “Closer!” Harry demands, ushering the team into an even tighter circle. “Closer!” He shouts again, apparently still unsatisfied even though they are all essentially toe to toe with each other, to an almost uncomfortable degree. “Closer!”

“For fucks sake, Harry! If we get any closer we will be one person!” Louis yells back, surpassing a giggle.

“We can’t let the other team hear our plans.” Harry stresses in a whisper, one arm slung around Louis and the other around Steve as the whole team cluster together.

“Oi, ‘ave we got a plan now?” Ed wonders teasingly. “I thought we were just kicking the ball around for show or summat.”

“No! This is serious, lads! I want you to put everything you’ve got out there! If you’re giving 100%, I want 200%! If you’re giving 200%, I want 500%!” Harry dictates theatrically, voice growing louder and louder the more he gets into it. “500% means I need 2000%!”

“What kind of math is he doing?” Kit frowns amusedly, hiding a laugh behind his hand.

“We don’t know.” Louis answers, looking at Harry fondly.

“Lay it all down on the line! Blood! Tears! Sweat!” Harry shouts, channeling his inner uncompromising, hardnosed coach. “I want all of it!”

Nick cackles, shaking his head. “I’m not giving you any of that, mate.”

“Goddammit, Grimshaw!” Harry erupts, dramatically throwing the clipboard down on the grass, papers and plays flying everywhere. “Show me how much you want this! You’re all a bunch of punk ass bitches! You’re embarrassing me out there! Pull yourselves together!”

Louis bursts weakly into a mess of giggles, resting his hands down on his knees as he laughs at his ridiculously silly best mate.
“You think this is funny, Tomlinson. You think this is a game!!?” Harry asks, mimicking outrage at the mere idea. “Lives are at stake here, how fucking dare you!”

Louis squeezes his lips together, trying to keep his laughter at bay and maintain a straight face. “I’m sorry coach. It won’t happen again.”

“You should be sorry! You gotta respect the team!” Harry shouts, pointedly making eye contact with each member of their circle. “A team isn’t a bunch of kids out to win! A team is something you belong to, something you feel, something you have to earn!”

“That’s from a movie innit?” Ed wonders, finding Harry incredibly entertaining. “Has he really been quoting movies this whole time?”

“I wanna say that’s from The Mighty Ducks?” Louis guesses, scrunching up his features as he tries to pinpoint where he’s heard that before.

“We are losing out there, boys!” Harry continues on his tirade. “Beckham and his team are wiping the floor with our asses! We can’t stand for this! I raised you better!”

“We suck.” Nick summarizes simply.

“Damn right you suck. Especially you!” Harry stresses, pointing directly at Nick. “Look at the scoreboard! The numbers don’t lie! You’re killing me, Smalls!”

“Oh, I got this one, yeah.” Kit pipes up, seeming proud of himself for recognizing it. “The Sandlot?”

“I loved that movie as a kid.” Ed nods happily in nostalgia. “A classic.”

“Same, bro same.” Steve agrees slowly, as though actually reflecting on it. “You know, those kind of movies teach you life lessons and shit. My mind was, like…expanded, metaphorically speaking. They don’t make movies like that anymore.”

Harry tilts his head towards Steve with narrowed, offended eyes. “Um excuse me, sorry to interrupt your little chat, but we are trying to win a fucking game here! You can small talk on your own time! Focus, Aoki! Focus!”

“Well what can we do? Do you have a plan, coach?” Sam humors Harry with a smile.

“Yes I’ve got a plan, thank you, Sam.” Harry’s face softens as he shows obvious favoritism. “You’re the only one out of this lot that I respect.”

A collective round of pouty “hey’s” sound from around the circle of teammates, all of them offended in their own right.

“Oh, I’m sorry? Maybe if you all would actually start seeking my approval, you’d start playing better and we’d be winning the fucking game!” Harry rants, stomping his feet in almost believable frustration. “Now as I was saying! Here’s the plan! We’re gonna do a Double Roundabout Pancake Upside-Down Shuffle Banana Split Surprise.” Harry somehow says all that with a straight face, not breaking his strict coach persona in the slightest.

“A what now?” Louis giggles, glancing at him incredulously.

“You heard me! I’m not saying it twice!” Harry yells, probably because even he has no clue what he just said. “Or we can do my other brilliant, award winning footie play, The Spiraling Ballerina Tango Meets Samba With A Hurricane Twist And A Double Barrel Roll.” Harry suggests,
obviously just spitting out some kind of word soup, as it’s absolute nonsense.

“Who is this guy?” Steve laughs, clapping a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “I know next to nothing about soccer—erm football, but I sure as hell know that’s not right.”

“Well I play footie for a living and I can assure you that’s not right.” Matty, one of the Rovers, pipes up, laughing alongside Steve. “He does pull off an angry coach quite well though, I’m kind of impressed.”

The overhead buzzer sounds and the refs along the sidelines all whistle, letting them know that their timeout is over. In essence, they wasted their entire break listening to Harry pretend to offer sound coaching advice, but no one is really complaining, more so happily entertained.

“Come on lads, it’s game time!” Harry claps, hyping up his players. “Get your Hanes on, lace up your Nikes, grab your Wheaties and your Gatorade and we’ll pick up a Big Mac on the way to the ballpark!”

“That’s definitely from Space Jam.” Steve realizes, recognizing the movie quote and laughing even harder. “Man, I love this dude. Your movie quote game is solid, brother. Fucking sick.”

“He’s great, isn’t he?” Louis smiles with pride, always ready to jump at the chance to brag about Harry even when he’s been an absolute idiot.

“Thank you, I’m kind of a movie guru.” Harry grins, giving a little head bow for his performance. “Ok, but in all seriousness guys, you’re doing so great and you’ve raised a ton of money so far for people who really need it. Which is something you all should be really proud of.” He praises in his normal sweet voice, holding up two encouraging thumbs up. “So fuck the rules and just have fun out there.”

And that’s exactly what they do. Some would argue that maybe they have a little bit too much fun. Louis helps score several goals for his team, earning a host of cheers from the stadium rafters. But he doesn’t ever try to outshine his fellow mates, always making sure to generously pass the ball around and share the spotlight with his team.

True to his heart and true to his word, Louis even assists Beckham in a score for his opposing team; which honestly was one of the most exhilarating moments of Louis’ life. Scoring an assist with Beckham? Oh, fuck yeah. That’s what dreams are made of.

Needless to say, it makes everyone in the stands hoot and holler, while Louis just shrugs innocently and shouts “It’s Beckham, it’s Beckham!” as they replay the filmed footage on a highlight reel on one of the giant screens above the pitch.

At one point Harry picks up a megaphone, which Louis immediately wonders where on earth he found that, and starts yelling sporadically at Louis’ team. And it’s always out of the blue, keeping them on their toes. One minute he is dutifully snapping pictures and changing lenses, the next he is shouting out of a megaphone, roasting celebrities like they’re his closest friends instead of strangers he just met and entertaining everyone who can hear him. And he definitely has far too much fun doing it.

“Move your guitar playing, popstar ass, Sheeran! You call that a hustle!? You can do better, you can do BETTER!”

“Aoki, you Tasmanian Devil! You just don’t quit and I appreciate that! I love the high energy approach! I know you’re unfortunately American, but you’re doing Britain proud!”
“You have to actually make contact with the ball to get it to move, Grimshaw! You're not here to stand around! It’s not cute! I don’t like it! You’re fired!”

“Aren’t you supposed to be a member of the Night’s Watch!? Or the King of North!? Well, winter is here, Harington! Winter is here on this pitch and you are failing us all! I want to see you bleed for me!”

“Sam, you know I love you, you have the voice of angel. You’re trying your best and I appreciate all you do for this team! Good job, buddy! Keep doing you, never change!”

“Tomlinson! Do you even know which goal is yours!? EMBARRASSING! This is utter sacrilege of the sport! Don’t quit your day job, mate. Oh? This is your day job? Yikes…”

“And you! You better be happy I’m not the coach of your team because I sure as hell know you can do so much better, Beckham! This isn’t amateur hour! Show me you know what ‘Bend it like, Beckham’ means!”

It’s all good natured and everyone has loads of fun, not only playing football, but hilariously entertaining the audience. The match easily becomes the most ridiculous game Louis has ever been a part of or witnessed. But it amuses the crowd whether watching online or in the stands, causing the donations to continuously pour in. And really that’s all that matters.

But the best part, even above running alongside Beckham, is looking over to the sidelines and seeing Harry cheer him on, poised camera in hand. Even while maintaining his job, he’s always there, never failing to show his support. Louis mostly makes a fool of himself in the name of charity the entire time, but Harry still smiles and waves nonetheless.

It takes Louis right back to their school days when Harry would scream and cheer for Louis endlessly during his games, waving a homemade sign and taking picture after picture. He probably didn’t tell Harry enough back then, but having his best friend there made all the difference in the world. Louis never realized how much he really depends on Harry, seeking out his support more than anyone else. Everything means more when it comes from Harry, everything has more weight, everything matters.

And maybe that’s because Harry is absolutely everything and more to Louis.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

hey! i still love you :) enjoy the second chapter!

love lex .x

Chapter Eleven

The match is a huge success, even more of a success than it was ever pegged to be. And that is a true testament to all the parties involved. Louis knows for a fact that he couldn’t have done any of it on his own, especially not in the ridiculously short time allotted to get everything in order. But miraculously, the charity game pulled through.

For the record, the game officially ended in a tie, but everyone keeps saying that Louis’ team should rightfully bear the throne as the true winners since the game was only tied thanks to Louis’ gracious score on the other team’s behalf.

It really doesn’t matter much either way, all Louis really cares about is 10 million pounds they were able to raise in support of the charities. The amount of good all that money can do for children who so desperately need it is overwhelming when Louis thinks about it. So it’s safe to say that hosting the match was more than worth the stress and exhaustion in the end.

And as for the gala, that’s also going brilliantly. Louis is absolutely honored to walk along the mini red carpet hand in hand with so many brave little kids. He chats with them, taking loads of pictures together as they play around with silly faces and goofy smiles. They’re the sweetest group of little darlings, dressed up like cute little princes and princesses. He gets so many warm, thankful hugs by tiny arms that can barely wrap around him completely and at times it almost makes Louis emotional. He obviously didn’t know any of this kids before tonight, but in his heart he feels like he’s adopted them in a way, and he would do just about anything to help them and others like them get the support they need.

The gala commences as the chairs of Believe in Magic and The Little Princess Trust, take to the stage to make heartfelt speeches, repeatedly professing their sincere thanks. A few of the braver kids even give their own adorable speeches about how much this event means to them, touching every heart in the room.

“Lastly, we would also like to give a special thank you to the lovely man who made it all possible, Louis Tomlinson. He not only planned this whole event, but he also personally donated 2 million pounds to our cause. We are all indebted to your generosity, Louis. You’ve done a world of good.”

Louis smiles shyly from his seat, dumbfounded by all the attention suddenly on him. He didn’t do any of this for the praise and if it could have all been done anonymously Louis would have preferred it. All he wanted was to do something good and make someone else smile. He could do without the recognition as long as that still happened for as many people as possible.

Everyone around Louis urge him onto the stage through ample applause and proud cheers, practically forcing him out of his seat. He warmly greets each one of the people in charge of the
charities, repeatedly getting pulled in for more hugs as he makes it down the line of spokespeople. When he gets to the end, a woman hands him the microphone and ushers him towards the glass podium. Louis blinks in surprise, totally caught off guard as he is repeatedly encouraged to give some sort of speech. He hesitantly raises the microphone towards his mouth, looking out over the sea of tables filled with smiling people.

“Well…funny story, I um obviously didn’t prepare any sort of speech for this. I guess it slipped my mind that maybe I’d have to talk at an event I’m hosting…” Louis jokes at his own expense and the seated partygoers laugh lightly from their tables.

“So because of that, I’ll just keep it short and sweet.” Louis continues, freestyling his sentiments from the heart. “I’m so incredibly thankful to everyone who donated or supported this cause in any way. All the celebrities that donated their time and showed up for basically the most impromptu charity game ever, you’ve been so amazing and I appreciate it so much. I’m totally blown away by all the support. And the success of this event wouldn’t be possible without all of you lot. So you should give yourselves a hand.”

The audience obliges, clapping along with him in a round of applause in their honor.

“Um…I’d like to send a massive thank you to my manager, Liam Payne and my fellow Rovers for their heavy involvement and support in all this.” Louis finds Liam at a front table positioned off to the left and he smiles appreciatively at him. “I showed up to Liam’s office about four days ago with the idea and he looked at me like I was totally mad, but he supported me anyway and now look where we are.”

Liam holds two proud thumbs up at Louis from his seat, giving him the widest, genuine smile, while everyone around the room applauds again.

“I’d also like to thank my tireless assistant, Niall Horan. No one understands more when I say that I am an absolute mess all the time, except that Irish lad.” Louis laughs a little as he turns to Niall next. “He puts up with me despite the daily catastrophes I put him through and he really put in soooo many hours towards this event. This never would have come together as beautifully as it did without him. I tell him everyday that I’d be lost without him and I sincerely mean that.”

The crowd joins their hands in applause again and Niall beams brightly from his seat next to Liam, giving Louis a knowing wink and a warmhearted smile.

“And lastly, I would also like to thank my…um…” Louis internally debates whether to call him by this title since it’s been so long since it was true for both of them. But he decides to go for it anyway. “My best friend Harry, who not only served as the incredible photographer for this entire event, but also my stress relief through the ups and downs of planning it. Some of you may have witnessed him being a bloody idiot during the match, well if you know him, he’s like that all the time and he’s the absolute best person I know.” Louis’ eyes lock with Harry’s and speaks solely to him. “I couldn’t have done it without you, Haz.”

Poised off to the side with a camera in his hand, Harry’s entire face glows with the brightest smile he’s ever given Louis as of late. His dimples deeply crater his cheeks and his eyes shine more intensely than any other light in the room. Everyone starts up another round of claps, cheering his name, but Louis can only pay attention to Harry.

Louis matches Harry’s brilliant smile with his own, finding nothing in the world more beautiful.
As the night goes on and the kids start to go home to meet their bedtimes, the gala turns into more of a party. A celebration of all that’s been achieved. And in the spirit of celebration, Louis has a few of his favorite drink ever, that he still doesn’t know the name of: the pretty blue fruity things with the cute mini umbrellas. But it doesn’t take long for the effects to pour into his unsuspecting blood stream, having a quicker and more impactful influence over his system than it would on any normal person.

“Harry! Harry! Harry! Harry! Harrrehhh!” Louis singsongs loudly as he saunters up to him, stumbling a bit over his two feet. When he finally catches up to Harry, Louis wraps his arms around his waist from behind, nuzzling into his back. “Do you waaanna dance with meee?”

“Lou, I’m supposed to be working.” Harry twists around in Louis’ arms, camera held up in his hands.

“Yeeaah, but you can take breaaaks.” Louis suggests, dragging out his words unknowingly.

“Says who?” Harry raises an eyebrow curiously.

“Says mee, your employer.” Louis slurs, peering up at Harry with heavy eyes.

“Are you…” Harry grins slowly, narrowing his eyes down at Louis. “…Drunk?

“I miiiight actually be the tiiiniest teeeniest bit tipsy.” Louis hiccups with a goofy, lopsided grin.

“The tiniest bit, huh?” Harry grins, steadying Louis with both hands to his waist.

“Uh huh, I blame the fruity in meee.” Louis hiccups again, grinning lazily with his head lulled to the side.

“There must be a lot of fruity in you.” Harry giggles, watching Louis in utter fascination. “How many did you have? It must have been a lot for you to be this…drunk…”


“Only three?” Harry tests, one eyebrow raised.

“Oooook, fineeeee! I had fiveeee. Whateeeever.” Louis admits like a child, pouting as though he’s just been caught. But his eyes light up again when he spots a hostess coming his way with a fresh new glass topped with a bright yellow umbrella. Louis grabs the drink eagerly off of the tray before the waitress even offers it to him.

“Taaaaste it!” Louis encourages, turning to practically force the magenta colored straw right between Harry’s lips. “Taste it, taste it, tasteeeee it!”

Harry chokes, caught of guard by Louis’ unexpected attack. “Ok, ok I will! Oh my god…”

Louis looks to him expectantly, bouncing on the tips of his toes as he waits for Harry’s reaction.

“It tastes like fruit.” Harry states obviously, not entirely understanding why Louis is so overly
enthused by a single drink. “I mean it’s really good…but yeah, it’s…fruit…”

“I know! It’s sooo fruity! I loooove it!” Louis snatches the neon colored drink back from Harry, moving to down it all himself.

“Oh no, I think you’re done.” Harry swipes the bright cocktail out of Louis’ grasp, holding it above his head and Louis starts pouting again, almost looking like he is about to cry.

“Haaarry noooo.” Louis whines sadly, looking up at the glass in longing.

“I don’t understand how you’re so drunk off of this. I never imagined you as a lightweight drinker.” Harry laughs amusedly, shaking his head with the fruity drink held high above Louis’ reach. “You really can’t hold your alcohol can you? It’s got to be at least 90% fruit, it’s practically a smoothie.”

“I knowww and I want it baaackkk.” Louis wails innocently, wide eyes still trained on the glass hopefully and he looks more and more like he might burst into tears at any moment. Alcohol has essentially rendered him a seemingly full grown toddler.

“You’re a cute drunk person.” Harry smiles in teasing, biting his lip.

Louis frowns crossly, pouting his lower lip out and crossing his arms bitterly over his chest. “You’re a mean regular persooon.”

Harry laughs fondly at the three-year-old minded insult before depositing the drink onto a passerby host’s tray. “I’m sorry, Lou. It’s for the best.”

Louis continues to scowl at Harry, but as he dutifully goes back to taking pictures, Louis suction-cups himself to Harry’s back, waddling around behind him as he walks. Harry goes about his photography work as though nothing is out of the ordinary, unbothered by what some may consider a hindrance. Louis follows Harry around everywhere throughout the venue, refusing to let Harry’s waist go for any reason. Until he suddenly has a new idea, giving him reason—sort of. So he releases Harry only to jump around in front of his face.

“Hey! Heeey! Hey Harrrryy! Hey! Heeey!” Louis bounces drunkenly, grabbing Harry’s hands and swinging them around as he bops about.

Harry laughs, watching Louis incredulously as he bobs up and down like The Energizer Bunny. “What? What is it?”

“You wanna play a game with mee?” Louis wonders eagerly, eyes wide and excitable in the most childlike way.

“I’m still working, Lou.” Harry reminds again fondly.

“Ooh poop.” Louis mopes adorably, dropping down to flat feet. He still holds onto one of Harry’s hands, playing with his fingers. “Hooow about I fire you? And…and then yooou can hang out with mee instead.”

“You’re a horrible boss.”

“I think I’m a weeeeee bit more tiipsy than I thought.” Louis hiccups, almost falling over on his wobbly feet. Harry reaches out to steady him, holding Louis gently by his waist again.

“Hey Louis, I need you for those interviews like we discussed.” Liam announces as he walks up to
Louis and Harry in a hurry. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

Louis just blinks at Liam as though he has no understanding whatsoever. He even decides to look over at Harry for a clue, but Harry just shrugs at him.

“Well, don’t just stare at me, Louis! Come on!” Liam grabs Louis by the hand and begins to pull him off in the right direction.

“I’ll bee back, Haaarry!” Louis shouts over his shoulder, toddling behind Liam. “Don’t go anywhereee!”

“Where am I going to go?” Harry giggles in question.

“I’ll find youuuuu.” Louis promises, holding the vowels of the word as long as he can, while Liam drags him backwards. “Harryyyy, I’ll be back for youuu!”

“Louis Tomlinson, are you wasted right now?” Liam asks seriously as he guides Louis’ stumbling feet across the venue.

“I uh weell… I maaaybeee uh…” Louis rocks back on forth on his heels like a drunken toddler, eyes falling closed as he lulls his head. Little giggles escape his mouth as he nearly collides with a table. “I dunnooo, I dunnooo…”

“Louis!” Liam admonishes as though he is Louis’ father reprimanding his young misbehaving son. “You know better than this! I’m very disappointed in you.”

“I didn’t meeean to Liam! I sweeear!” Louis professes sincerely, swaying on his feet. Liam told him several times that he needed to stay sober because of the press interviews and Louis really thought a drink or two or three or five wouldn’t hurt because, well, he doesn’t really understand how alcohol works. “It’s just thaaat the fruity drinks are soooo preeeetty! And the little mini umbrellas make me happyyy! I looove them Liam, I looove them! I’m sorryyy! Don’t bee mad at mee!”

“Well, you know what this means…” Liam shakes his head gravely.

“No! No, Liaaam! Noooo!” Louis shakes his head wildly, eyes animatedly wide. “Pleeease! I’m nooot that druunnnk! I prooomise! I’ll be gooood, I sweeaaar!”

“…You’ve got to drink the tonic, Louis.” Liam finishes and to Louis’ ears it sounds like a death sentence. The last time he saw a cup of that slimy green substance he practically projectile vomited at the sight of it alone. He will not be ingesting that heinous drink.

“Nooooooo!” Louis whines like a child about to have a hissy fit, throwing his head back.

“I can’t have you drunk and unfocused during these interviews. It’s too important.” Liam insists, sounding a bit apologetic on Louis’ behalf. “I’m sorry, Louis it’s for the best.”

“Nooooooo! Nooooooo! Nooooooo!” Louis continues to protest. His manager is going to have to take him down kicking and screaming because Louis will not give up that easily.

“Louis, it’s not that bad, alright? It’s just a nice healthy drink that helps speed up the detoxifying process in your body.” Liam explains slowly, pulling Louis by both of his squirming hands. “You’re going to be fine.”

“I don’t wannaaa! You can’t make meeel!” Louis refutes, twisting out of Liam’s hold and starting to take off in the opposite direction. He is not so steady on his feet which makes it so much harder to
run off in a straight line.

Liam catches Louis easily, hoisting him up and slinging his protesting childish body over his shoulder. He is surprisingly a lot stronger than he looks and he carries Louis without much effort.

“Come on, let’s get you detoxed.” Liam announces a bit too chipper for Louis’ liking. Louis scowls petulantly, hanging upside down as Liam lugs him towards his detoxifying demise.

Once sobered up enough to meet Liam’s standards, Louis spends the next two hours talking and giving interviews to reporters about the charity event. It’s mundane and monotonous being asked the same questions over and over and Louis just keeps thinking about how he’d rather be following Harry around instead. He even goes as far as to try spotting him out over the tops of the interviewers’ heads, looking over their shoulders in hopes of catching Harry’s attention. Not that Louis can even wave or interact with him in the middle of an interview. But it’s still makes it a little more fun and definitely more bearable.

So Louis dutifully answers questions and smiles when he should and tries not to get distracted whenever Harry appears in his line of sight. Although sometimes Harry will purposely walk by and do something foolish to try and get Louis to laugh and disrupt the interview. He makes stupid faces and twists his body into ridiculous poses all to get a rise out of Louis. One time Harry flips him off with both fingers as he stands off to the side and Louis can’t help but giggle, eyes crinkling fondly. But he has to immediately apologize to the confused interviewer for his unwarranted outburst and that’s when Liam steps in to whisk Harry away to avoid any more disruptions.

As soon as the last interview ends, Louis is out of there; scurrying off in eager search of Harry. “I’m hungry!” Louis announces as loud as he can when he finally finds him, jumping right in front of Harry unsuspectingly.

“Holy fuck!” Harry looks comically startled, hand over his heart, looking around like he can’t figure out where Louis materialized from. “You scared me! Also, I thought you’re supposed to be drunk?”

“Correction, I was tipsy not drunk.” Louis answers matter-of-factly. “But Liam sobered me up because being drunk in press interviews is bad or whatever. He forced me to drink the nastiest shit I have ever tasted in my whole entire life!”

“But it worked.” Harry points out positively.

“Yeah, it worked, but was it really worth it?” Louis shudders against himself. “I lost my soul in the process.”

“What’s in it?”

“Sadness.” Louis answers seriously, looking off into the distance as though having war flashbacks. “Pain. Suffering. Agony…”

“You’re so dramatic.” Harry giggles. “It couldn’t have been that bad.”

“It was that bad, Hazza. It was.” Louis stresses with wide serious eyes. “Don’t erase my pain.”
“Payne erased your pain.” Harry snickers, amused with himself.

“No, he *caused* my pain! Liam Payne is the literal embodiment of a buzzkill when it comes to anything business related! I guess that’s probably what makes him such a good manager. But still! I love him, he’s great…but he doesn’t play games.” Louis sighs heavily, shrugging off his miseries. “Anyway, back to what’s important…I’m hungry now.”

“What do you mean ‘now’? You’re always hungry.” Harry reminds and he does have a point, Louis can’t deny. “It’s like you never stop eating.”

“I burn a lot of calories training, ok? And I’m a growing boy. My body is a machine. It needs fuel.” Louis defends. “Don’t judge my eating habits.”

“Well, I’d say you’re in luck then because we are literally at an event filled with food.” Harry holds out both of his hands like he’s a presenter on a game show.

“Eh…I don’t want that.” Louis scrunches up his features with the shake of his head.

“What?” Harry laughs incredulously, looking at Louis as though he is the most ridiculous person he has ever met.

“I’m not in the mood for that kind of food, Harry! You see, I go through food moods.” Louis explains seriously, leaning into Harry’s side.

“Food moods. Ah yes, of course.” Harry nods his head, tilting back into Louis. “And what is your current food mood telling you you’re in the mood for today?”

“You know I’m not quite sure to be honest?” Louis thinks to himself for a moment and then links his fingers with Harry’s. “Come on, let’s go find out.”

“Wait, where are we going?” Harry protests marginally, still blindly following Louis’ pull.

“There’s a little store down the street.” Louis explains dragging Harry behind him as he heads towards the exit.

“Lou, but I’m *working*.” Harry stresses for the umpteenth time.

“I admire your work ethic, really I do. But Harold, you have done far *more* than enough. I hereby relieve you of your photography duties for the night.” Louis says, using a discarded silverware knife as an imitation scepter, knight each of Harry’s shoulders dramatically. “You are released, my good sir.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“A very hungry idiot.” Louis amends, grinning.

Harry smirks, nodding his head agreeably. “I guess I could go for a snack right about now.”

“Yes! Now let’s gooo!” Louis tugs hard on Harry’s hand until he starts to follow him. “My food mood waits for no man. Except you, I suppose.”

Walking hand in hand, arms swinging between them, dressed in expensive suits and posh shoes, Harry and Louis set off towards the store with hunger cravings to satisfy and food moods to conquer.
“Louis, when I said I could go for a snack, I didn’t mean I wanted to buy out the whole store.” Harry comments, gesturing to their overflowing shopping cart. They’ve been raiding the store for the past twenty minutes, all the while never releasing each other’s hands, almost like it’s a game. But truthfully, Louis doesn’t ever want to let go of Harry’s hand, loving the feeling of being physically attached to him in some way.

“Shhh, just go with it.” Louis dismisses tossing another bag of crisps to the already stocked cart.

“What are we gonna do with all of this?” Harry complains with pursed lips.

“Eat it, duh.” Louis answers obviously, half-shrugging. “Haz, when did you get so old and responsible?”

“One of us has to be the responsible one.” Harry reminds, giving Louis’ palm a little squeeze.

“Between you and me, you know good and well that there is no responsible one.” Louis grins, winking knowingly. They encourage each other to do the stupidest shit sometimes. All in the name of a good laugh.

“True.” Harry laughs as they turn into the candy aisle.

“Oh my god, Harry look!” Louis gasps in excitement, using his free hand to reach on the shelf for a FunDip packet.

“No way?” Harry’s eyes widen in genuine surprise. “They still make those things?”

Louis nods happily, he hasn’t had one of these in forever it seems and it’s exactly the thing to ease his specific food mood craving. “Well forget the basket, I just want this.”

“But that’s not food.” Harry points out.

“I don’t care, it’s what I want.” Louis states, looking down at the packet of candy in awe. “What defines food anyway?”

“Um…not candy.” Harry tries. “Food is supposed to have nutritional value and substance and—”

“So it’s settled, FunDip it is!” Louis decides, purposely interrupting Harry’s spiel.

“Louis, we can’t just leave the whole cart here.” Harry frowns down at the disregarded basket in front of them, filled to the brim with a litany of random snacks.


“You’re still such a troublemaker.” Harry laughs with a shake of his curls.

“Just back away slowly…” Louis whispers, taking gradual steps backwards as he tugs gently on Harry’s hand. “Don’t attract attention…”

Harry bursts into giggles, huddled up next to Louis as he obediently follows behind him, abandoning the basket. “You’re absolutely ridiculous.”
“You wouldn’t love me if I wasn’t.” Louis responds back easily with a wink, falling right into step with their favorite old saying.

Harry makes a face, expression nearly overwhelmed with fondness as he scrunches up his features attempting to neutralize it.

They sneak around the store like idiots, heading to the checkout line. Louis deposits his prized candy packet on the counter in front of the cashier.

“Just this for you?” The girl at the register asks as she begins to ring him up.

“Mhmm.” Louis smiles, a mischievous glint to his eye. “Just that yeah. Thanks.”

Harry pinches Louis’ side knowingly and Louis bites on his own bottom lip, leaning towards Harry as he tries to keep a straight face. They’re both fighting guilty giggles, smiling dumbly at each other. Harry drops his head down to rest on Louis’ shoulder, hand still having never left Louis’ since they left the gala.

“Are you two newlyweds?” The girl behind the counter asks, curiously taking into account their increasingly close proximity, open body language and elegant formal suits. To anyone they probably do look like they just escaped a wedding. “You’re really cute together.”

Louis blushes immediately, glancing over at Harry who also turns a lovely shade of red, neither of them saying anything, only grinning stupidly at each other with hands clasped tightly together.

The girl doesn’t wait for an answer from them, instead smiling warmly. “Aww congratulations.”

“Keep the change, love.” Louis hands her a £50 note from his wallet to cover the candy, giving her extra to cover the inconvenience they left in one of the aisles of the store.

The young girl’s eyes go wide in surprise as she stutters out her thanks and they happily wave goodbye to her as Louis’ guides Harry out of the store.

“That poor girl is going to have to put all that shit away now.” Harry shakes his head disapprovingly as they step outside.

“I gave her 50 quid for a packet of candy, she’ll be fine.” Louis shrugs off like it’s no big deal, holding up the candy in question cheerfully. Harry snatches it out of his hands, already setting about opening it as they continue to walk down the sidewalk.

They split the FunDip packet just as they always used to do every single day after school. Louis takes the Red Cherry and Harry, the Purple Grape and they share the last and best flavor, Blue Raspberry. For being allegedly grown men, they make quite a mess, spilling powdered sugar all over the sidewalk, leaving a trail of bright colors everywhere they go.

“Harry, I have very serious question, ok?” Louis turns his head towards Harry, as they stroll along leisurely the cobblestone path.

“Ok, shoot.” Harry encourages, sparing a glance at Louis.

“What color is my tongue?” Louis holds his tongue out as far as he can for Harry to inspect, eyes going cross-eyed as he tries to look down at it.

“What?” Harry laughs in surprise, furrowing his features as he tilts his head at Louis oddly.
“Come on this is serious, Hazza.” Louis tries again, jumping in front of Harry to halt him from walking any further.

“How could this possibly be serious?” Harry continues to chuckle, candy stick hanging out of the side of his mouth.

“Because it is.” Louis insists, sticking his tongue out again. “What color?”

Harry sighs fondly and inspects Louis’ candy-coated tongue. “Umm… I’d say it’s a good, healthy mix of blue and green.”

“A healthy mix.” Louis giggles happily. “What would an unhealthy mix look like?”

“I dunno, really? A mess.” Harry grins with a small shrug. “I meant that I can clearly see the blue and the green.”

“Hmm. Interesting.” Louis nods before placing both his palms flat against Harry’s chest, looking up at him expectantly. “Ok, now show me yours.”


“Harry!” Louis whines, grabbing onto his arm, attempting to pull him to a stop.

“No! I’m not showing you my tongue! Why?”

“Come on, Haz! I showed you mine!” Louis shakes Harry’s arm up and down, wagging it around as he begs.

“Did I ask to see yours?” Harry retorts with a small grin.

“Harold, I need to see your tongue.” Louis pouts, standing firm.

“Mm mm.” Harry shakes his head defiantly with his mouth screwed shut.

“Harry Edward Styles! Your tongue! Now!”

Harry stares down at Louis for several moments before he reluctantly pokes out his colored tongue, squeezing his eyes shut to make a silly face.

Louis giggles, tapping Harry’s cheeks lightly. “Aww Haz, we’re matching in our favorite colors. Your mouth is a ‘healthy mix’ of blue and green, as you would say. But your lips are purple…”


“Yeah, pretty much.” Louis offers him a genuine smile. “Those are all your best colors.”

Harry blushes a little, white candy stick still hanging out of the corner of his mouth.

“Harry, why do you still have that stick of candy in your mouth?” Louis asks as he notices it disapprovingly. Louis finished his ten minutes ago like a normal person. It doesn’t take days to eat it.

“You know exactly why I still have it, Louis.” Harry answers in challenge.

“Bite the stick or I’ll bite it for you!”

“I don’t like to bite it! You know that!”
“Oh my god!” Louis groans, trying not to laugh at how annoyingly stubborn Harry is. “Harry! Bite it!”

“Lik-A-Stix, Louis! Lick, Lick, Lick!” Harry emphasizes repeatedly to make his point. “It was never meant to be bitten! The truth is in the name!”

“I don’t care what it’s called, it sure as hell wasn’t made to be sucked on for hours at a time!” Louis argues defiantly; he can be just as stubborn as Harry when he wants to be. “Bite it, Harry! Bite it right now!”

“Nooo! I refuse! Bite me!” Harry threatens playfully, sticking his blue and green tongue out at Louis before sprinting off down the sidewalk.

“Don’t tempt me!” Louis jokes, running behind him.

Laughing the entire way, they chase each other to a nearby park, coming upon a nice grassy pitch. Louis catches up with Harry easily; he may have long legs, but he has nothing on the rigorous hours of training Louis has been enduring for the last few weeks.

“Did you bite it? Is it finally gone?”

“I lost it…” Harry cracks up, leaning over his knees as he catches his breath through his laughter. “It fell out of my mouth while I was running.”

“You’re embarrassing.” Louis giggles with the shake of his head. “That was fate. The FunDip gods saw you disrespecting their treasured candy stick and they struck it from your mouth because you’re underserving to eat it if you’re going to eat it wrong.”

“Oh shut up.” Harry knocks himself against Louis as he stands up straight again.

“This is nice pitch.” Louis observes as he fully takes note of it for the first time since chasing Harry here.

“Hey, you know what we should do?” Harry questions as he picks up an old discarded ball from the grass.

“What’s that?” Louis raises an eyebrow in wonder.

“We should let Harry demonstrate his footie skills.” Harry suggests with a stupid shit-eating grin on his face.

Louis frowns in confusion. “Is there a reason you switched to third person or…?”

“Legends can only be spoken of in third person. It’s a respect thing. You’ll get it someday when you reach legendary status.” Harry explains, holding his chin up pompously.

“Right, right, sure.” Louis nods sarcastically. “Then I’d like Harry to show me what he’s got.”

“Harry is gonna prove his secret skills once and for all.” Harry boasts with a dumb smirk on his face. “Prepare to be wowed.”

“Well, this should be good.”

“Be the goalie, ok?”

“Alright, but there will be no mercy.” Louis warns as he struts off towards the goalkeeper’s net. “Just
“Good, because *Harry* doesn’t need mercy. *Harry* is a natural.” Harry calls after Louis, causing Louis to roll his eyes.

“We’ll see about that, won’t we?” Louis places himself in the middle of the goalie’s net right below the crossbar. He doesn’t usual play goalie, but to be completely frank, he probably won’t need much actual skill to defend the goal against Harry.

Harry places the ball down a good, fair ways away from the goal in a solid position to easily score. Too easy in Louis’ opinion. There is absolutely no reason for him to miss this shot. It’s wide open, there is not a soul to defend him. All Harry basically needs to do is kick it in a straight line.

“Any day now, Haz.” Louis teases after waiting for Harry to kick the ball for several quiet minutes.

“Shhh, I’m thinking.” Harry whispers, staring down at the slightly deflated ball as though it holds the very keys of life.

“All you gotta do is kick the ball.” Louis reminds. “Don’t overthink it.

“It’s a bit windy…” Harry comments, looking around the pitch. “Doesn’t it feel windy?”

“What are you goin’ on about now?” Louis laughs, holding his hands up. “Just do it!”

“I feel constricted in my suit…” Harry complains next, twisting his shoulders around in the material. “And these definitely aren’t the right shoes—”

“Stop making excuses and kick the damn ball, Harold!” Louis shouts, voice echoing out over the field.

“Alright, alright!” Harry yells, taking a few steps back as he finally readies himself. For real this time, Louis hopes.

Harry hikes his leg back and kicks the ball so dramatically that he ends up tripping, brought on by an interesting combination of nothing but air and his own two legs. He flops backwards onto the grass in utter defeat, limbs splayed out ridiculously. For all the drama and theatrics Harry put into kicking the ball, Louis would think it would at least sail through the air pretty far. But no, it hops and flops and rolls its way slowly coming to a stop a little ways away from the goal.

Louis chuckles under his breath, walking the few paces it takes to reach the ball and kicking it the rest of the way into the goal on Harry’s behalf.

Harry finally composes himself, peeking his head weakly from the grass, body splayed out in all directions. “Did I win? That was my very best.”

“Uh huh…yeah, yeah, you tootally won.” Louis lies, leaving the ball in the goal as evidence of Harry’s ‘win’.

“Did you let me win?” Harry lifts himself halfway up from the grass, hair flopped over his face adorably as he narrows his mostly concealed eyes at Louis.

“What? No, Harry! I would *never*.” Louis bites back a growing smile as he shakes his head repeatedly.

“Nooo, you let me win!” Harry sees right through him falling back down theatrically. “I was trying
really, really hard and now it’s totally invalid. I’ll never be a footballer now. There goes my dream. Again.”

Louis drops down next to him on the pitch. “No, I think you won cuz you had an unfair advantage.”

“What?!” Harry barks out a surprised life, twisting to look up at him with one arm slung over his forehead.

“Yeah, I mean I’ve obviously never played this game before in my whole entire life.” Louis teases with a shrug. “I’m a complete novice.”

“Shut up.” Harry smacks him across the thigh.

Louis giggles happily, rolling over to nestle himself against his best friend. He lays there for a while, head resting on Harry’s chest as it rises and falls with each new breath. He never wants to move, content to lie here indefinitely. Louis thinks about how the girl at the register earlier mistakenly took them for newlyweds. It should be embarrassing because it’s not true, but somehow it’s not. In fact, the thought alone makes him instantly smile again. The thought of him and Harry getting married, committing to a whole life together, growing old by each other’s side, makes Louis so incredibly giddy inside. It’s the happiest feeling he’s ever felt. He never knew he wanted that. Never realized that spending forever with the same person, his person, could sound so intoxicating.

And oddly enough, it doesn’t scare him. Louis doesn’t feel a sense of dread or unease when he thinks about sharing that level of commitment with Harry. All he feels is blissful exhilaration and overwhelming happiness.

Louis lifts his head, chin resting on Harry’s sternum as he watches him intently. “Are you happy, Harry?”

Harry looks taken aback, flicking his gaze down to Louis with a slight frown. “Umm I dunno, I could be…who knows I guess?”

“No, stop. Seriously, Harry. I really want to know. Are you happy? Like right now…are you?”

Harry is quiet for a long moment and Louis listens to the thump of his heart, contently riding the hills and valleys of his rising and falling chest. “Right now, here in this moment, with you…” He utters gently, pausing again. “I am happy, yeah…”

Louis smiles, slow and warm, feeling that same warmth spread throughout his entire body, radiating from his chest to his toes. He drops his head back down to rest atop Harry’s chest again as he hugs him tighter.

“Are you happy, Lou?” Harry turns the question right back to him, palm splayed out against Louis’ back.

“I’m always happiest when I’m with you.” Louis confesses, surprising himself with the unabashed honesty of his answer. But it’s true, so undeniably true. A moment spent with Harry is never a moment wasted. “Wanna know a secret?”

“Always.” Harry murmurs against the crown of Louis’ head, tucked into the crook of his neck.

“You’re the sweetest guy I’ve ever known.” Louis admits softly in a whisper, not lifting his head. And when he says those words, he can feel Harry’s heart skip a beat underneath him, his chest falling still for a moment.
Harry partially lifts himself up to roll them over in one smooth motion. His face looms only inches above Louis’, hair falling down to tickle Louis’ neck as their eyes lock with one another. Harry’s arms bracket Louis’ head, knees aligned to his hips.

“You’ve got goosebumps...” Harry whispers, breath hitching as Louis slowly runs his hand along his forearm.

Louis nods faintly, staring up and getting lost in the overwhelming green of Harry’s eyes. “So do you…”

And he feels so nervous all of a sudden, raptly staring up at his best friend’s face. Harry is so beautiful, haloed beneath the luminous glow of the moon and it nearly knocks the very breath from Louis’ lungs. His heart is threatening to pound its way right out of the confines of his chest and just like that it hits him. Realization dawning on Louis like it never has before, staring him right in the face…and he knows.

He can’t believe that he didn’t know before, that he’s been so obliviousy blind to it this entire time. The magnetism between them, the charged sparks that fly just by looking into Harry’s eyes. Everything about Harry ignites a piece of Louis in some way, the lure of his voice, the enticement of his smell—Louis could go on and on and still never reach the end of his always growing list.

It’s not just attraction, it’s not just giddy feelings and anxious energy nor comforting familiarity. And it’s definitely not just a dumb crush.

It’s love.

Louis is hopelessly and completely in love with his best mate.

And perhaps he always has been and he never took the time to realize it, to feel it. But now Louis can’t possibly feel anything else. Louis has loved Harry since they became inseparable at five-years-old and that innocent childhood love evolved with him as they grew up, manifesting in ways Louis never imagined would happen. But looking back on it now, it all makes sense. All of his strong feelings and looming jealousy, all of his wandering thoughts and unexplainable emotions. It all points back to the same obvious truth. Louis loves Harry with all of his heart.

Louis tentatively moves his hands from Harry’s arms to gently cup the sides of his face, tracing his fingers along his cheeks. The tips of his fingers get tangled up in Harry’s cascading curls, their eyes still locked on one another. Harry gradually lowers himself down, pressing his slightly purple tinged lips against Louis’. And it’s the most gentle first kiss. An agreeable contradiction, a paradox in nature. It’s a kiss not at all forceful, but one so utterly transfixing. Not timid, but still so very coy and soft. A kiss somehow so electrifying and magnetic, but yet calming and grounding all at once.

It’s a kiss that could inspire dozens more kisses, each one better than the last, but all still memorable in their own right. The feel of Harry’s tender lips pressed against his own emits a deep, tingling warmth, flickering out from his innermost soul, flushing hot in his veins, nearly sparking his entire bloodstream alight in an intoxicating fire.

Harry pulls back, breaking the overpowering spell between them to search Louis’ eyes for a long, drawn out moment. Louis hides nothing back as he stares up at him, hands still holding Harry’s face above his. He leaves nothing hidden, putting his heart on his sleeve as his strong feelings of love for his best friend pour out of his affectionate gaze. Louis knows Harry can feel the intensity of the look in his eyes, he knows because Harry is giving Louis the same look back, a look of absolute wonderment and awe.
But then something foreign flashes in his eyes, muddling the usual bright emerald of his irises, a stormy haze cast over his gaze. Harry leans back, sitting all the way up in the grass. He hugs his knees to his chest, wrapping his arms around his drawn up legs and resting his chin down on the tops of his knees.

“I’ve missed you...” Harry whispers honestly, facing out towards the night sky. His voice is strained and saddened, a heaviness to his tone. And he looks so small curled up against himself. “I mean… I knew deep down that I did…but I guess I never let myself realize how much. I didn’t want to miss you and I kept telling myself I was over it…I was over you…I told myself that none of this means anything but…I...” He gradually turns to look at Louis over his shoulder. “I really missed you, Lou.”

Louis sits up and nuzzles his head down against Harry’s shoulder, sliding an arm around his waist to hold him as close as possible.

“The tattoo…my ‘Hi’ tattoo…it’s not random.” Harry admits quietly, looking straight ahead again, still hugging his knees. “It’s for you.”

Louis lifts his head, nonverbally asking the question in his eyes. But Harry doesn’t need to meet Louis' eyes again to feel the unasked question in the air between them.

“It was Christmas time—your birthday…about twelve years ago...” Harry gradually starts, eyes trained ahead. “I was coming home from uni and...I didn’t expect to see you. You hardly ever came home for the holidays by that point. My mum asked me to run something over to your house, but... instead of your sisters or your mum, you answered the door. And just seeing your face was already too much of a shock—I didn’t know how to react or what to say...but...but then none of that even mattered once I saw it on you.” He recounts quietly, voice so eerily low. “My word inked on your skin, written along your forearm. It was just...there...”

Louis’ mind whirls with the implication of all Harry just said. He got his first. Louis got his tattoo first. Sometime when he was around 18, newly signed, out on his own for the very first time in his life. Probably scared shitless about being alone in it all after isolating himself and not wanting to admit it to anyone. Louis can practically picture it; he can easily see himself secretly missing his best friend, agonizing over the loss of the one person who always understood him. Longing for the closeness and support they once shared; probably realizing just how much he actually cared for him. All those built up feelings no longer able to be hidden, drowning in years of pent up, denied emotions not knowing what to do with them.


“We didn’t talk, you didn’t offer any sort of explanation and I stormed away before that could have happened anyway.” Harry continues, cheek held down against his knees. “And later that night I saw you through my bedroom window and you were messing around with some boy...and...I don’t know...I just...couldn’t deal with it. I got drunk out of my mind that night. I was mad at you for getting it without me, when we weren’t even friends anymore, when we hadn’t talked in years.” He shakes his head, letting out a slow gush of air as he reflects back on a painful time in his life. “But I was even more mad at myself for caring so much, for not being able to just let you go.”

“So I went out on Christmas Eve and...I did it. I got the other half tattooed under my arm.” Harry holds onto his bicep tightly even though the ink is concealed by his suit, as though being burned by it. “It was reckless and irresponsible and I told myself it was in spite of you, but I...I knew what it really meant. I knew that we’d be matching and...I liked it. I liked the idea of it...” He admits, still
clasping his left arm. “The older I got, and the more time that separated us, the more I started to regret it. I thought so many times about having it removed but…I think I just…I missed you so much that it was kinda like having you there in a way. And I wanted to keep you. Just a small part of you. A part of us.”

Louis’ heart feels so impossibly heavy, like his chest cavity has been replaced with immovable stone. All he can do is hold Harry tighter, curve his own body closer and closer to his favorite boy in the whole world.

When Louis first woke up in his 30-year-old life, it should have been Harry in his apartment with him not Raphy. There should have never been another boy or any other random relationships or affairs or flings. It should have been Harry and only Harry from the beginning. They should have grown up as best friends and through all their connection to each other, all those warm feelings and cherished memories, inside jokes and tender touches, through all of those things that undeniably pulls them together, they should have eventually fallen helplessly in love with each other. They should be together right now. Still indivisible best friends, but also devout lovers. Married and happy. Painful memories shouldn’t have ever taken root in the story of their lives. Harry shouldn’t have to miss him so terribly, agonizing over what was. They should have never, ever been apart. It doesn’t make any sense.

“Harry, please just tell me...what happened to us?” Louis whispers finally, chin resting on Harry’s shoulder. He’d stopped asking for awhile, almost too afraid to know the truth. But he needs to know, Louis needs to hear it fully.

Harry shakes his head, shrugging his slumped over shoulders a bit. “I don’t know…I can’t remember…”

“Yeah, you do. I know you do. I know when you’re lying to me.” Louis reminds, carding his fingers through the hairs at Harry’s neck gently.

Harry turns slightly to glance at Louis before dropping his gaze right back to his lap, fiddling with his loosened tie, dangling from his neck. “It’s in the past, Louis. Just leave it.”

“No, I can’t anymore. What happened to us, Harry?” Louis presses further, still speaking in soft tones. “You keep hiding it from me and I really need to understand. I have to know.”

Harry sighs, looking up as he pushes his hair from his face. “Uh…well, I guess it all pretty much started with your 13th birthday party…”

That’s the last thing Louis’ remembers. The last lingering memory of the time before he was suddenly a full fledged adult, living in a world turned upside down. But Louis doesn’t understand how all of this wrong between him and Harry can be tied up in a simple birthday party. How can years of separation be pinpointed on a single event?

Harry shakes his head again, interrupting himself as he chances another look over his shoulder at Louis. “We really don’t need to...I mean this was such a long time ago—it doesn’t even matter anymore…”

“It does matter, Harry. It matters to me.” Louis encouragingly rubs Harry’s back. “Please tell me.”

“Ok...” Harry agrees quietly, twisting around to properly face him. He chews on the inside of his cheek for a few moments before he starts to speak. “Well, I had left to get my camera next door and um...when I came back to your house everyone was leaving and Rusty told me it was no big deal, they were just playing a game. And I didn’t really think much of it, didn’t really know what was
going on but...um he told me to go in the closet because you were waiting for me in there...and I...uh...

Harry pauses and Louis can tell this whole subject is making him so uncomfortable. The anxiety is etched all over his face and he can’t even stand to look at Louis anymore, instead picking at a loose thread along the seam of his blazer. “I opened the closet and...and you really were in there, with a blindfold on over your head and I always—well I just...I...”

“You kissed me.” Louis remembers slowly, gasping at the forgotten memory as he finishes Harry’s sentence. Harry had kissed him in that tiny dark closet. He vaguely remembers the soft floral scent that filled the cramped space, the timorous brush of nervous lips against his. But...what happened after that? Why can’t he remember? It’s all so fuzzy.

Harry swallows heavily, breathing shallow and anxious as he nods in confirmation. He dares to lift his head just enough to meet Louis’ eyes, holding his stunned gaze until he can’t seem to bear it anymore.

“Uh...so um then...you completely freaked out on me and you got so upset that everyone was gone. You blamed me for it and locked yourself in the closet by yourself. And I banged on the door for a while, trying to apologize and make sure you were ok...but you ignored me.” Harry explains, trying very hard to keep his voice in a neutral and even tone. “I remember being so scared that you’d never want to talk to me again—that you’d hate me forever...and that I’d ruined our friendship and...well...”

Harry pauses again, his features are so adolescent and timid, like a scared little boy. “I waited for you for hours outside of the door, just sitting against it quietly because I...I wanted to be there for you. Even if you were mad at me, I still just wanted to be there for you.” His words are soft and heartfelt, yet pained and Louis can’t stand the diminished glow of his features. He would do absolutely anything to wipe that horrible look from Harry’s downcast face.

“And when you finally came out hours later, you were pissed that I was still there. You started screaming and cursing again, saying over and over how much...um how much you hate me and...that I ruined everything and fucked up your life and um...a lot of other things I’d rather forget to be honest and then...you uh...you threw the photo album I spent weeks making for you at my head and told me to get the fuck out of your house.”

Louis sucks in a heavy, painfully shocked breath. He feels a strong sting pool at his eyes as his hands start to tremble in his lap. He shakes his head in disbelieving dread. “Oh Harry, I’m...I...”

“You kinda tried to apologize a few weeks later, but we were never the same after that.” Harry continues, still fidgeting anxiously with his tie. “You became distant and avoidant. We stopped walking home from school together and we stopped going to Lucille’s and there were always excuses about why you couldn’t hang out with me anymore. From that point on, you always chose Rusty and Brady over me. They replaced me. We just got more and more distant until we were practically strangers. You made the starting football line up at school and it kinda took off from there. You had a whole new group of friends and we just...” Harry’s voice dies out, but Louis get’s the picture. “You got professionally signed by the end of sixth form and after graduation we never talked again. I went to uni and you started with The Rovers. And that was that.”

“Haz, Harry...I...I? I don’t know what to say...” Louis eyes are burning now, a sting so intense he feels as though he could go blind, picturing the whole scene Harry described. It aligns exactly with what his mother had told him about his teenage years, but with more gaps filled in, it only makes it all that much more horrifying. “I’m...I’m so...sorry...I...”
Louis has never felt worse in his life, stomach lurching and twisting as he tries to come to terms with the person he chose to be. How could he ever treat Harry, his Harry in such a cruel, heartless manner? How could he ever make him feel like this? His very best friend, who has been with him and known him since the beginning just about. And what’s worse is Louis knows Harry is probably sugarcoating it for him. Who knows what hateful, damaging words really came out of his mouth? Or what’s worse, what if Louis played a hand in bullying Harry through the finally years of grade school?

Louis thinks back to all the damaging things Rusty and Brady have said about Harry, all the ugly names they’ve called him and Louis just stood aside and watched or brushed it off as not being that serious. Harry never forgot the things said about him, he moved on eventually yeah, but he never forgot. Ugly words have a way of taking hold, wedging themselves inside the root of a person’s character. Even if baseless, even if untrue, it’s so hard to completely ignore the blow, it’s hard to pretend words don’t hurt, when in reality they hurt the most.

If the roles were reversed, Louis can only imagine how broken he would feel if Harry said any of that to him. How shattered his self confidence would be, self esteem crushed to unrecognizable pieces. Hateful things are always horrible to hear, but for it to come from the person you are closest to in the world, from your very best friend, from someone you love, there is no stronger damage. And it completely altered Harry’s life.

It’s in every time Harry shuts down. Every time he cuts a sentence short or evades what should be a simple question. It’s in all the times Harry had to physically remove himself from Louis to keep it together. It’s in Harry’s change of worldview, in the cynicism that’s stained his perception of life. It’s behind the reason he didn’t fully pursue his dreams, why he cuts himself short half the time and denies praise at every turn. It’s in every insecurity, every doubt, every flicker of uncertainty and hesitance.

All this time Louis has been wondering who broke Harry’s heart to such an extreme, who hurt him to this extent, and it turns out it was him the whole time.

“Just forget about it, Louis.” Harry shrugs, shaking his head out as he fights to keep composure, still not allowing himself to be totally vulnerable. “It’s whatever…”

“It’s not whatever. I mean…fuck look at you, Harry! You can barely talk about it without getting choked up! Don’t tell me it’s whatever. It’s not! I hurt you, Haz. I…I really hurt you and I—” Louis shakes his head painfully, biting down hard on his lower lip. He feels so sick with guilt and unease, a bile so strong building up in the back of his throat, he could vomit. “I’m the person that broke your heart and I can never forgive myself for that.”

“Hey Louis, come on, it’s ok. That was ages ago.” Harry tries, reaching to hold Louis’ hand, to comfort him. And somehow that simple statement makes everything worse for Louis. Harry has every right to be angry, to cast blame and call Louis out on his bullshit, but he doesn’t. Instead he still wants to make sure Louis is ok, just as he always has. Just like he did as a kid, putting aside his own hurt and treating Louis’ wellbeing like protecting it is his sole mission in life.

“No, no…” Louis shakes his head defiantly, moving away from Harry’s touch. “That’s just it? It’s not ages ago, Harry. It’s right now. I’m still that person. Only…worse…”

Harry tilts his head at Louis as though he doesn’t quite understand what he means, eyebrows starting to pull together.

“The kind of person I am now scares me, Harry. He scares me.” Louis admits through a pained
whisper, still shaking his head at a loss as he looks down at his lap. “I don’t recognize myself. I’m rude to people, to nearly everyone it seems. My teammates, my assistant—which I unnecessarily replaced over seventeen times. I don’t spend any time at all with my family, I’m so distant—my younger siblings hardly know who I am at all. And…I’ve broken my poor mother’s heart so many times.…I broke your heart…and fuck, who knows who else’s…” Louis’ swipes at his eyes angrily as more and more negative traits swarm his mind. “I have virtually no real friends, no one actually likes me, except maybe Raphy, but I even betrayed him too. God! I’m a home wrecker! I went behind my own boyfriend’s back with a married man when he has been nothing but good to me. Who does that?”

“The choices I’ve made—the things I’ve done…I’ve stepped on so many people…I have no regard for anyone. And…I’m not…good.” Louis stresses, struggling to find his words, fingers pulling at his hair. “I’m not a good person. I’m not even a happy person. And the scariest part is that this is the life I wanted. I wished for this life every day, thinking it would make me happy, thinking everything would be perfect. I chose this for myself. And I can’t blame anyone but me for being so selfish.” He hangs his head as his breathing weakens. “I tried to make it better, I tried so hard to fix it, to undo all the shit I’ve done, but…no matter how hard I try, I can’t run from this or hide from who I’ve become. This is me now and I’m not thirteen anymore, I’m thirty years old and whether I like it or not I have to accept what I’ve done.”

Louis stands to his feet abruptly, feeling the urge to just get away from here. He can’t possibly bear to face Harry any longer. He feels so ashamed, remorse tearing at his insides like a jagged knife.

“Louis, wait—you don’t have to go.” Harry grabs Louis’ hand again, looking up at him from the grass.

“I’m sorry, Harry. I’m so, so sorry. For everything. I know that’s not enough but…” Louis doesn’t even bother to finish his sentence, because what is the point? What more can he possibly say at this point? Words can’t make this right, so what is left for him to do?

Louis stands there motionless, looking down at Harry and for a moment it’s like looking into his childhood best friend’s eyes, seeing that same free-spirited young boy that he loves with everything in his heart. He sees memory after memory, late nights and early mornings spent together, always together. Flashes of wild untamed curls and floriated skin. He sees silly inside jokes and laughter that could cure any bad mood. Secrets whispered behind cupped hands, crinkled eyes and toothy grins. Louis sees the emotion behind it all, he feels it, he embraces it. For a moment everything is at peace, everything is normal and they’re just two young boys wildly obsessed with everything about each other.

But the good times didn’t last and the memories faded and the clock kept ticking against them and these aren’t the eyes of his innocent childhood best friend anymore. They’re the eyes of the man he’s become. A beautiful, silly, smart, goofy, witty man with underserved pain constantly locked away in the darkest shadows of his chest. Heartbreak shrouding so many aspects of his life like a dark cloud, hovering behind him no matter how hard he fights to escape it. A truly beautiful man, who grew up without his best friend, betrayed by his best friend, trying his best to conceal deep-rooted insecurities and move on with his life regardless.

And Louis loves him, he truly loves him. But how can he ever claim to love someone who he hurt so selfishly? There’s an ocean of hurt separating them, a mountain of heartbreak at their feet, mistake after mistake built up so high it doesn’t seem possible to ever overcome the wall of broken trust dividing them.

“I’m sorry…” Louis mumbles weakly one last time, voice cracking awfully as tears streak his cheeks.
He says it hoping that Harry will understand, hoping Harry can feel just how much he truly means it, in every sense of the phrase.

“Louis?” Harry says his name so softly, so delicately, still holding his gaze.

And even though Louis loves him, with all the pieces of his pained heart; right now, Louis feels like he has no right to.

So he leaves. Louis turns on his heel, tearing his eyes away from Harry’s, severing the short fleeting moment they just shared, ignoring the gentle, worried calls of his name passing through Harry’s lips. Louis builds himself up enough to take the first unwilling step away from this place where he experienced pure happiness as well as bitter remorse and…he leaves.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

hi loves! happy new year! :) 

Ok so….well…its about to get a little angsty up in here yall. Its gonna be ok though, im promising you that but uh Im sorry in advance. whats done is done. push through you can make it ill see yall on the other side… (of hell)

love you! :))
lex .x

Chapter Twelve

Louis has been sitting in the exact same spot, on the exact same couch, in the exact same clothes for the past three days.

He has been holed up in his house, stationed to his living room couch, completely isolated and shut off to the world. Louis sits on his couch of self loathing in baggy, stained sweatpants and a jumper that once smelled of a sweet boy’s curls, but now reeks of anything but. He’s cocooned himself in a blanket, wrapped over his head and draped over his body so only his blotchy face is exposed. There is no natural light coming into the room, drawn curtains shadowing the entire space in preferred darkness.

It’s not a very welcoming sight in the slightest. And to top it all off, Louis’ unmoving, blanket swaddled body is completely surrounded by utter filth. Empty wrappers litter the floor, disregarded, half-eaten cereal bowls cover the coffee table, dozens of cereal boxes are carelessly strewn on any available surface and Louis is positive there is a carton of milk somewhere in the room that is certainly spoiling. Not to mention his own ungodly stench from not having graced a shower in days.

But Louis doesn’t care. Not even a little bit. He doesn’t have the mental faculties available to care when all his mind can do is replay the same, horrifying story Harry told him on that quiet grassy pitch. Recounting it and revising it so many times in his mind, it’s almost like he has original memory of all the events Harry described to him.

And it hurts, everything hurts so much and he doesn’t know how to move past this place. He doesn’t know how to make his chest stop aching and his head stop pounding incessantly.

The best Louis can do is drown out the constant onslaught of his thoughts with mindless television, zoning in and out as the screen drones on. He feels so depressed, a despondency like he’s never felt before. He’s missing practice and the final days of training for the championship so his phone rings off the hook, constantly buzzing and beeping. Probably all messages wondering where he is or why he has suddenly fallen off the grid, everyone demanding some kind of explanation. But Louis neither reads nor answers any of them.

Although on the bright side, Louis has gained a new talent while isolated by himself. He can now relate any and all things back to Harry in some way and he can subsequently make himself cry on the spot. An Animal Planet documentary about giraffes? More like Louis’ monologue over the
documentary about why Harry has all the mannerisms of a baby giraffe. A cute, adorable toddler appears on the screen and how does Louis respond? By crying about how Harry was the cutest little kid ever and this random baby actor on the TV has nothing on his curly, little, bright-eyed five-year-old Harry.

And probably Louis’ biggest reach of the morning, seeing an innocent commercial about fabric softener and thinking that Harry is the best kind of fabric softener because he always makes every jumper feel soft and warm after he wears it and he always smells so sweet like lavender and honey. It’s safe to say that watching TV nonstop is hurting him more than it’s helping him. And because he really hates himself, Louis doesn’t turn off the TV or even change the channel when Titanic starts playing, knowing fully well that it’s Harry’s favorite movie. He can practically hear Harry saying “It’s a timeless classic, Lou” in his ear and to no surprise Louis is bawling before the opening credits have properly started.

Even though Louis has seen the first half dozens of times, he’s hardly ever seen the second because Harry would always insist that it’s far too sad. And since Harry’s collector’s edition set came in two separate VHS tapes, Harry would just replay the first tape over and over again, refusing to watch the depressing second half of the movie.

But this time Louis sits through the entire film, all three hours and fifteen minutes of it and he ends up sobbing way more than watching. By the time Celine Dion starts singing My Heart Will Go On, Louis has completely lost it. He keeps thinking he should have run out of tears by now, but apparently that is not the case.

“They’re s-supposed to be together…” Louis sobs with a hoarse voice, crying into the pillow held tightly against his chest. He is usually not this emotional when it comes to this movie, it’s not usually him crying over this tragic love story. Louis leaves that up to Harry for the most part, but this time he can’t stop his eyes from heavily leaking and he can’t seem to separate his own emotions from the film, once again demonstrating his new talent of making everything about Harry.

“J-Jack and…a-and Rose are supposed to be together f-forever… Just…j-just…like me and… H-Harry…” Louis cries, more like ugly cries—a snotty nosed, blotchy red, lip quivering mess.

It turns into a marathon of romantic themed movies Harry loved and Louis pretended to hate. Even the more light-hearted ones hardly get Louis to smile, like Pretty Woman and When Harry Met Sally. Instead Louis spends the entire movie attempting not to break down every time he hears the name Harry.

And then Louis figures since he has already hit rock bottom, he might as well keep it going so he decides to finally watch The Notebook. Which turns out to be a huge mistake because Harry was right and the film is so breathtakingly beautiful, Louis can hardly stand it. He finds himself rooting for Noah and Allie the entire time, watching them with tearstained cheeks as they build a whole life together against all odds. And when they have that last moment of lucidity together in the final scene, wrapped up in each other’s arms as the life leaves their bodies, Louis swears he has never cried so hard over a goddamn movie.

“Oh my g-god…she said she w-wanted to be a bird….and he said if you’re a b-bird, I’m a bird… and t-then now they…they j-just…” Louis rambles incoherently though his tears, staring at the large HD screen as countless birds fly over a gorgeous warm-hued sunset. “They just w-wanted to be together f-forever and their love can do a-anything and it took t-them away together cuz they’re true s-soulmates and, and n-now it’s like they’re both b-birds together and…a-and—oh my god!” Louis weeps emotionally into his now soggy bowl of coco puffs.
“I wanna d-die with Harry…” Louis bawls, blowing his nose. It sounds so morbid when he says it like that out loud. But he doesn’t mean it in that kind of way, he means it in the hopeful sense. Living out a full life with his soulmate and never having to take another breath without him. And Louis knows they’re soulmates, he knows there will never be another love for him like Harry. “When we’re o-old…I… I want our l-love for each other to be so s-strong that we can’t e-ever be apart and live without e-each other…I…I wanna die with my s-soulmate…”

By the fourth day of wallowing around uselessly, Louis forces himself to, at the very least, get up and take a much needed shower. He stands under the shower jets for hours, letting the spray fall over him, flattening his untrimmed fringe to his forehead and shielding his eyes. Louis stays in the large glass shower until the hot water runs lukewarm and eventually fizzes out to a numbing cold. The change in temperature hardly bothers him, in fact it oddly pacifies him, briefly giving him something else to focus on.

After his ridiculously long shower, Louis’ skin is more creased and crinkled than a prune, but he pays no mind to it and decides to go for a walk to think. Maybe the fresh air will do him some good and it’s a far better idea than setting up his home on the couch again for who knows how long.

As Louis walks along the grounds of his massive estate, he has never felt so small, so alone. He remembers back to the night of his dreaded thirteenth birthday, when he laid side by side with Harry. His best friend had asked him curiously if the life he wanted so badly was going to be a lonely one, if maybe he’d want someone to spend it with. If only Louis knew then, what he is realizing now.

Somehow Louis finds himself in his gardens, always dawn to the serene simplicity of his floral haven. It’s more soothing than anything else and that is because it is familiar and comforting in oh, so many ways.

The roses are numerous, some vibrantly shaded red, others brushed in a delicate pink and some left white as winter’s snow. Carnations clustered of bright rippled petals, blooming in sunshiny yellows. Violet lilies standing tall and prominent, bold in their presence and vibrant in the brush strokes of their palette. Marigolds so warm and sun-kissed, gentle in spirit but aromatic at heart. Tulips tinted so dark and deep, rich and royal hues dripping from their pillowed, bulbous petals.

Louis would never hesitate to admit that all the colorful flowers that adorn the hallowed grounds of his treasured garden are magnificent. But despite the overwhelming splendor that surrounds him, despite all the effervescent floral beauty blooming at his fingertips, it all pales pitifully in comparison to Louis’ favorite missing flower.

Harry Styles.

For the first time in days, Louis finally prepares a meal for himself that doesn’t consist of cereal and questionable milk. And to be fair he didn’t exactly prepare it and it isn’t exactly the healthiest option, but ordering pizza is still a pretty positive step up. At least he is making steps to take care of himself.
somehow, instead of surviving on a diet almost solely sustained by coco puffs.

When the doorbell rings a little earlier than expected, Louis opens the door to the very last person on earth he expected to see at his doorstep.

“You’re not pizza.” Louis frowns, holding the heavy door open in confusion. If Louis was going to place bets on who from the Rovers would perhaps check up on him, all his money would be on Liam. He would never, ever in a million years bet on Rusty. “Um…what are you doing here? If this is because I’ve missed practice all week, tell Liam I’m really sorry. I’ve been—”

“It’s over, Louis. Drop the act.” Rusty interrupts harshly, pushing past Louis to walk into his house uninvited.

“What?” Louis turns from the door to face Rusty again. “No, I’m serious. I—”

“It was really you the whole time…” Rusty laughs ironically without a trace of humor in his tone. “I can’t believe you would stoop this low. Honestly, I’d be impressed if I wasn’t so fucking disgusted.”

“…What are you talking about?” Louis questions, hating how Rusty seems to know something he doesn’t.

“Stop, ok? Just stop. You can cut the shit, I know everything.” Rusty spins on his heel to say. “I get that you wanted to move to another team, but damn—I at least thought you’d go with a semblance of decency, not screw over the team that fucking built you in the process.”

Louis couldn’t possibly be more confused if he tried, everything Rusty is saying goes right over his head. “Another team? What other team?”

“Do you really need me to spell it out for you? You can’t play dumb anymore, Tomlinson. I’m not bluffing, I really do know everything.” Rusty threatens, looming over Louis. “You made a shady under the table deal with Arsenal and you agreed to sabotage your own team in exchange for the promise of Arsenal Team Captain next season. You wanted us to lose the championship and you were doing everything within your power to make sure we did. You set up that whole illegal use of money charade just to fuck us up.”

Louis gasps in shock, immediately shaking his head in denial. For fucks sake, is there anything in his sad life that he is handling even marginally well? “No…no... but I would never. I’ve only ever wanted to be a Rover. It’s been my dream since I was a kid and—”

“Yeah whatever, Louis. Go push that sob story on someone else who cares.” Rusty bites, interrupting him without a single care. “It must be nice getting a paycheck from two teams at once. What were you gonna do with that kind of payout?”

“No, but I…I wouldn’t…I…” Louis’ sentence dies in his throat because the sad thing about all this is that…he would. The adult version of Louis Tomlinson he has come to know would absolutely pull a stunt like this and not blink twice. Louis can’t even defend him or try to act like any of this is so outrageous.

“God, you’re really something else. And to think you had everyone fooled last week. Practically all of fucking England thought you were so good and giving and selfless by helping out those sad little charities. Saint Louis and all his helpless, needy, charity kids.” Rusty patronizes, shakes his head bitterly. “It’s total bullshit.”

“That part was real…” Louis tries, speaking truthfully. “I really care about those kids—about those charities. I only wanted to make a difference…try and make up for some of the bad things I’ve
“Wow. You really never stop with the lies. You’re quite good. It’s kinda perfect you know? Fuck us all over while pretending to be a decent human being. Buying us over and throwing money around so we’d turn a blind eye to it. Oh, bravo Tommo. Bra-fucking-vo.” Rusty claps with belittlement, eyes narrowed flatly. “You almost got away with it.”

Louis lowers his head dejectedly, not knowing how else to respond to all of this. It’s all so hopelessly unfortunate.

“Liam didn’t even want to believe the initial investigation reports at first, he just couldn’t understand. He’s been going on about how you’d never do such a thing and that there wasn’t enough evidence. But I knew it was you, because I fucking know you—I made you.” Rusty reminds, cold eyes staring down at Louis knowingly. “And you didn’t even think to so much as clue me in on your little plans. So I finished the job and found the missing proof in your emails to expose you.”

“You hacked my emails?” Louis asks in shock, lifting his head back up. He hadn’t even known he had an email to hack in the first place, maybe if he had known he could have stopped some of this. Or at least confessed to Liam early on, before it got this far.

“And it was almost too easy. You really should be more careful these days.” Rusty confirms, smug grin plastered on his cocky face. “It makes sense that you’d want to be on Arsenal’s team, all you’ve ever been after is the fame and pompousness of it all. Of course you need to be captain on the best team in the league to feed your fragile ego. And you aren’t afraid to step on whoever you have to in order to get there…that’s definitely the Louis Tomlinson I know. But god…screwing Jack of all people? I mean I’ve done some pretty low shit in my lifetime but fuck, mate…that is baseline low. You really scrapped the bottom of the barrel with that.” He cackles mockingly, shaking his head. “Honestly, how pathetic can you be?”

All the signs had pointed to this, everything was pointing to the uncomfortable fact that Louis was not only cheating on his relationship, but also his team. It’s all connected and it’s all so, so disastrous. But Louis feels impossibly numb, nearly void of tangible emotion. Since he was a kid, Louis has been seeking the approval of snakes, stupidly trusting them more than anyone and now he has turned into the biggest snake of them all.

“Liam said he is going to announce your suspension tomorrow morning and since I’m apparently the hero in this story, he has no other choice but to name me as team captain in your place. At least Donny will finally get the team captain it deserves.” Rusty smiles proudly, sighing contently to himself. “And you know what really warms my heart? After all this comes out in the press tomorrow, Arsenal won’t even want anything to do with you. You’ll be lucky to be on any team as the fucking waterboy after all this shit hits the fan. Your career is over. And to think you had such talent, such potential.” Rusty looks Louis up and down with distaste, shrugging his shoulders carelessly. “Mmm. Pity.”

Louis remains unmoving and stunned. Not that this is happening, no, but once again by the person he has become. Everything he knew and valued about himself has been tarnished. He wasn’t raised as a sell out? Or a cheater? A liar? He has become a shell of a person, self-centered and selfish and it’s so unsettling, it’s beyond words. Louis has been putting a Band-Aid on his problems, but unfortunately it’s clear that it’s all so much more deep-rooted than that.

“Well, best of luck to you, Tommo. Really. You’re definitely gonna need it.”

Louis watches as Rusty struts right out of his house with his chin held high and chest puffed out, pleased beyond belief with himself. Louis stands and watches unseeingly as the vast door of his
mansion shuts and he is once again left all alone. There’s so much, so much floating around in his mind, so much lingering on his tongue, so much he can try and do or say to stop this but...

All Louis can possibly think and meditate on in this moment is that...this isn’t him.

Louis is on the verge of losing his entire career in a manner of hours, every good thing his name has ever stood for will be shredded apart, all titles stripped, all respect lost, but he can’t do a damn thing about any of that. And he should be freaking out. Louis should be freaking the fuck out right now because this is his dream. This is his whole life’s work crumbling apart at his feet. Everything he ever wanted, everything he ever envisioned falling like fragile glass on hard stone.

But funny thing is, it’s not his dream anymore. It’s not what Louis wants for his life anymore. It all clicks together in his mind in a moment of rare clarity and he just doesn’t care. Louis doesn’t care about any of this.

When Louis longingly pictured his fabulous future life as kid he was happy. When he mapped out exactly what he wanted and the steps he needed to take to get it, it all made perfect sense. The complete formula to success.

Huge career, overwhelming wealth, coast-to-coast fame. Nothing more, nothing less.

According to his fantasies, Louis has everything he could possibly want. Rich beyond belief, household name, adored by millions, dozens of cars, extravagant house. The works. Except now that he is no longer just a kid picturing his fabulous future life, now that he is an adult living it out exactly as he dreamed...he isn’t happy.

His hilltop dreams and wild fantasies of life have a very key flaw, and that is that it’s all reliant on the wrong things to make him happy. Material things, disposable things. Neglecting the true joys that really make life worthwhile.

And now there’s a divide. There’s a huge divide between the person Louis is right in this very moment and the person his life has made him out to be. The person that built this life is devastatingly lonely. A hollow and shallow soul who has trampled on just about everyone to get to the top only to find out it’s empty. It may look like he has it all, it may appear as though everything is perfect and not a single thing is out of place. That is until taking a step closer to see that his perfect life is filled with cracks, numerous, porous holes exposing the real charade of his lifestyle.

There’s been a steep learning curve for Louis over these past few weeks. He’s faced some hard truths as of late, harsh realities and bitter realizations have repeatedly altered his ideals, forcing him out of his old mindset. It’s because of all of this that Louis knows without a shadow of a doubt that this isn’t him. This isn’t what Louis wants for his life. This is no longer his primary dream.

When Louis pictures his future life now, his beautifully, colorful and vibrant future life, all he can picture is Harry. Harry laughing at his dumb jokes, cackling so loud he has to slap a hand over his mouth to contain himself. Harry smiling back at him over routine date night dinners that are anything but routine. Harry holding Louis’ hand, dragging him on random adventure after unplanned adventure, falling more in love with each other along the way. Harry curled up in Louis’ arms listening to Louis tell him repeatedly how much he loves him and then saying it back just as many times. Harry meeting him down the aisle, pouring out vows and promises of forever under twinkling lights. Harry as the most loving father any child could wish for, silly and spontaneous but so, so caring. Harry growing older and wiser with age, more forgetful and scatterbrained than ever, but just as beautiful as he ever was to Louis.

Louis’ future dream is so wrapped up in Harry because…Harry makes him happy, so inexplicably
happy. No matter where he is in life, no matter what he doing, or where he is going all Louis knows is that for his dream to truly be the ultimate dream, he wants the person he loves by his side.

Louis wants Harry in his life. Now and forever.

That’s what he wants. That’s all he wants. Sure, Louis wants to be successful in his career and provide a comfortable life for himself. But if Louis has learned anything, it’s that he can have the entire world at his fingertips, but without the people he loves beside him, it’s all worthless.

There are more things wrong with his life than right, to an overwhelming degree, but Louis doesn’t care about any of that right now. Because right now, what Louis truly wants most is halfway across town about to make the biggest change of his life.

“Oh, fuck this.” Louis declares suddenly, snapping right out of it and marching straight out the front door towards his garage.

It’s risky and probably not at all safe and god only knows how uncomfortable Louis still is about driving any of his cars again, but he doesn’t have time to wait for a car to come pick him up or Niall to drive him. He needs to go now, he has wasted enough time already moping around and crying nonstop. The time has come for Louis to man up and try to take back some of his life. Who knows what tomorrow may hold? For all he knows, Harry could refuse to see him or reject him instantly and he would be well entitled to do so. And it would consequently crush Louis in ways he doesn’t even want to think about, but he has to try. At the very least, Louis has got to try.

Louis picks the Range Rover because in his mind, since it’s bigger, it’s gotta be more sturdy, right? And if he were to crash the car—god forbid, he’d theoretically be ok—maybe—because there is so much room in the vehicle. Plus, it might feel a bit more like his mum’s van and he’s driven that before with mild success. It’s an odd logic, but it makes sense to him and that’s all Louis needs to force himself to drive it. Anyways, it’s technically legal for him to drive because he technically has a valid license—even though he has no recollection of obtaining it…but whatever. His mind is made up and he is going to do this.

Refusing to make the same mistake twice, Louis is careful to make sure he is all set to go before pushing start on the keyless car and shifting the gear into drive. He successfully navigates the SUV out of the garage and past the gates of his estate without a hitch and it kinda does feel a bit more akin to driving a van. But as he starts to drive among everyday traffic, Louis soon discovers how stressful driving can be. The last time he was on the streets joyriding with Harry it was two in the morning and the streets were empty, but now it’s late afternoon and people are getting off of work and the streets are busy. Too busy.

“Fuck!” Louis curses as he slams on the brakes, nearly missing a four-way stop and driving straight through oncoming traffic. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” He says repeatedly, as though the other cars and drivers can somehow hear him from inside his car.

And when a truck merges out of Louis’ blind spot, he nearly has a heart attack, clutching the steering wheel for dear life. “Oh my god, oh my god, oh my goooood!” Louis whines in high pitched squeal. “I’m gonna die today! I’m really going to fucking die on this day! AHH! What the hell was I thinking! This is suicide! I don’t even know the laws of the road!”

There is a lot of stop and go in Louis’ driving technique and it is hardly what anyone would ever consider a smooth ride. But by some unworldly miracle, Louis actually makes it to his destination marginally unscathed. There may be a scratch or two or twelve on the side bumper from when he accidently swerved against the center divide, but that’s only a small casualty considering he still has his life for the most part. Although his heart rate is utterly sporadic and his hair is a complete mess
from tugging at it anxiously and his palms are so sweaty they can hardly grasp the wheel anymore. But no matter, Louis has “successfully” parked alongside the curb in front of his and Harry’s childhood homes, and all the rest can be forgotten.

The whole area is swarming with people, wedding guests filing in and out of Harry’s house while service people of all sorts bustle the last of the flower arrangements and catered food. Louis can see glimpses of beautifully decorated tables and chairs arranged artfully in the backyard under a gazebo adorned with an array of blush toned flowers. There’s a quartet of stringed instruments playing softly from the back and the whole atmosphere feels so lovely and light.

Louis pops open the center console, searching the compartment for something to conceal his face from people who might recognize him, especially his mum or Anne. He can’t risk running into someone he knows before he finds Harry. Louis curses under his breath when he finds nothing, but luckily there is a hood attached to the sweater he’s wearing which is better than nothing.

Louis slides out of the car, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible as he ducks behind massive flower arrangements and huddles behind random hired staff. It makes it all so much worse that everyone is dressed in proper wedding attire, fitted suits and gorgeous dresses, while Louis has on light wash jeans and a hoodie, making him stick out like a sore thumb. He slides past the front door, grabbing a disregarded tray off of a table to hide behind. Louis is doing his best trying to avoid being seen and it reminds him of all the times he has snuck carefully into Harry’s house, tiptoeing past Anne in the middle of the night.

As expected he spots his mum in the living room, happily chatting with Gemma over cocktails. Gemma’s three little boys are providing distraction enough as they mischievously weave their small bodies around the room, allowing Louis to make it undetected to the banister. He sprints up the stairs as fast as he can, praying to god that Harry is indeed in his bedroom and that by some precious miracle he’s alone. Louis hasn’t seen Zayn anywhere, but he has seen a few beautiful girls who share his features and Louis assumes they must be his sisters, so Zayn must be around here somewhere. And come to think of it, since it is bad luck for a couple to see each other before the wedding, Louis knows Harry has to be alone. Harry is far too silly and superstitious about those things for him to not honor such a tradition, so Louis braves on down the hallway towards Harry’s door. And he almost reaches it, only a meter or two away when the door swings open and Louis is forced to throw himself into the bathroom across the way.

“You look dashing as always, sweetheart.” Louis hears Anne’s soft voice echoing down the hall as she leaves Harry’s room.

“Thanks, mum.” Harry answers quietly and Louis thinks his voice sounds off and a little distant. “I just uh…I need a minute…if that’s alright…”

“Take your time, dove. I’ll stall a bit for you.” She promises understandingly. “Just know that I love you, H. No matter what. If you need me again, I’ll be right downstairs.”

Louis hears the shuffle of feet and the blur of Anne’s silhouette passes by the bathroom. He waits a few minutes just to make sure the coast is truly clear before rushing out to Harry’s room once again.

“It’s second nature for him to just barge right into Harry’s room, unannounced and unexpected and Louis does just that, hardly thinking about it. But when he gets inside the bedroom, shutting the door behind him, Louis has to pause for a moment. This room is filled with so many memories and to be standing in it again is overwhelming to say the least.

The bedroom has essentially been preserved through time, still clean and orderly, which is probably
expected because Harry was so oddly organized even as a child. All the posters are still up, a mirage of heartthrobs Louis recognizes like Marky Mark and Chad Michael Murray plastered over the walls. And there are still hanging lights strung up from the ceiling and Louis remembers all the times they laid side by side under those lights, sometimes talking, sometimes content just being together in the glowing silence. Harry’s collection of vintage cameras are arranged atop his bookshelf against the far wall and the shelves are full of carefully organized vinyl albums. The bed is a bit bigger, to account for how much Harry grew over the years and the bedspread is a neutral stripped blue instead of the cartoon sheets he used to have. The room feels so familiar and warm and Louis nearly gets lost in the welcomed nostalgia of it all.

But then Louis’ eyes fall on Harry and the whole universe seems to stand still. As though no one else in the world exists except the two of them in this moment. The hustle and bustle of noise echoing throughout the house falls silent, the commotion going on outside of these four walls seems to fade off into a nonexistent realm.

“Hi.” Louis exhales quietly into the still room, staring at Harry with baited breath as he removes the hood from his head. It’s so good just to see him. Just to be near him again after so many long days spent agonizing over a moment like this. And god, Harry looks so gorgeous in his tux. Tailored blazer streamlined to his trim waist, legs further elongated by the impeccable fit of his charcoal trousers. His curls fall in chestnut ringlets to his broad shoulders, tousled heavily to one side, the other side neatly tucked behind his ear. He’s the perfect groom. A vision.

“Hi.” Harry repeats gently, staring right back at Louis with the same expression, seeming to also be holding his breath. He’s standing near the window, hands pressed deep into his pockets. Somehow he doesn’t look shocked to see Louis barging into his childhood bedroom on his wedding day, almost like maybe a small piece of him expected it—hoped for it. “What are you doing here, Lou?”

“I…well…I…um…” Louis stumbles, mouth suddenly chalky and uncomfortably dry. He came here with such an urgency, having so much to say with no time to say it. And now with Harry standing across the room, he can’t seem to find the right words, or any words at all.

Harry remains quiet, patiently keeping his eyes trained on Louis. He is standing so still, like he is scared to move. The only reason Louis knows he’s still with him is because of his eyes. Harry’s incredibly soft, warm eyes have always had the key to Louis’ soul and they stare so deeply, repeatedly knocking Louis off his feet.

“Harry.” Louis whispers his name as though exhaling a breath for the very first time in days, lacing his name with every anxious feeling he has bottled up inside. He takes a few careful steps forward, feeling compelled to close some of the space between them. And Harry still stands frozen, seemingly paralyzed by Louis’ gaze on him.

“Haz, I know this probably isn’t the best time—well, I’m sure it’s not…” Louis sighs, fidgeting anxiously with his hands. “But I really need to talk to you—I’m here because I have to tell you something.”

Harry drops his head, slowly opening his mouth to finally speak as he takes one small step forward. “Louis, I shouldn’t—”

“Please, Harry.” Louis begs earnestly. “Just let me say this. Please.”

Harry falls silent again, nodding his head slowly and permitting Louis to speak. Louis takes a deep breath and inches further into the room.

“Haz, I’m really sorry for running off and disappearing that night. I just…” Louis shakes his head
remorsefully, letting all those feelings rush over him again. “It hurt, it really hurt. I’ve done a lot of horrible things in my life and I’ve made so many selfish choices and it hurt to realize how all my choices affected the people I care about. Especially you. Hearing it all back—seeing how much I hurt you I…” His voice dies in his choked up throat and he takes in another breath to get himself through it. “Oh Harry, my heart aches knowing that you’ve carried that hurt with you all this time and that I’m at the very center of it. I’m sorry, Haz. I’m so sorry. And I know that doesn’t change what happened—I can’t change it…but I really am so sorry for the person I was.”

“I’ve been thinking a lot this week…about us and about me and who I want to be from now on and I…well…I’m not that person…” Louis tries to explain, jumbled thoughts crowding his brain. “The awful, selfish person I was describing to you the other night. That’s not me. I don’t accept it as me. Not anymore. I know I was selfish before and I know I’ve done some inexplicable things but…I’m not choosing that. I finally understand what’s important and I’m fighting so hard against the old me and I’m choosing to be better. And in my heart I know that you can see that. I know that you can see beyond what I was and see…me…”

Harry nods slowly, expression still so soft. He looks at Louis as though he can only see Louis as his best self, not a trace of resentment lined in the emerald tint of his irises. “I know, Lou. I know.”

Louis holds his gaze for what feels like an eternity, but also only mere seconds of time. He knows what he wants to say, what he needs to say and as he looks into the most beautiful clear green eyes, he finds all the determination to do it.

“You’re my favorite person, Harry.” Louis professes, heartfelt and sincere, smiling openly. “I would tell you that all the time when we were kids, but I didn’t even know what I was saying. But I know now. You’re the first person I want to talk to when anything happens. The person I can’t wait to see when I wake up. I get excited when you’re excited and when you talk about your passions, I love how much your whole face glows. I could sit and listen to you talk all day and never once get bored. I can’t stop smiling when I’m around you and I could laugh and joke with you about nothing for hours at a time. When I’m not with you, I’m thinking about the next time I’ll be with you again. And time seems to drag on forever when we’re apart.”

Louis’ eyes are shining now and his heart is rattling against his ribs, but he feels more alive than he has all week. “Harry, you’re the person that makes everything mean something. You’re what’s missing. It’s you. It’s always been you. I thought I had everything I could ever want in my life but…without you, it’s all meaningless. You mean more to me than anything else in the world.”

Harry’s lips part slowly, a slight inhaling gasp escapes his mouth. His chest rises and falls perceptively as he tilts his head softly at Louis, utterly taken aback. “Lou, I…”

“I’d give it up for you, Harry. I’d give it all up for you in an instant. The fame and the money and the cars and…and the house and—all of it.” Louis promises openly, feeling himself getting more and more emotional as he talks. “You’re the love of my life. I don’t want to have everything if it means I can’t have you.”

Harry stands breathless, arms limp at his sides as he seems to be able to do nothing but stare at Louis, emotive eyes wide. He looks as though he has been waiting for Louis to say these words to him his whole life.

“We belong together, Haz. It’s always been you and me. You give meaning to the concept of soulmates; no one in the world understands me like you do and even though we’ve been apart for so long, I still know you better than anyone else ever has.” Louis pauses for a short moment, preparing himself for his next words. “Harry, marrying Zayn would be a mistake…and um…if you know what I’m saying is true then you shou—you should be marrying me instead.”
Harry tears his gaze away, running both his hands through his hair as he turns to look out of his bedroom window. He still remains painfully silent, but Louis can practically hear the conflicted gears turning and twisting inside Harry’s mind, his soundless thoughts are so loud they fill up the entire room.

“You can’t say that you don’t feel it too.” Louis utters gently, watching Harry’s brooding back.

“Of course I feel it.” Harry whispers, finally turning his head up to meet Louis’ eyes again. “God, I—I feel so much for you, Lou. I have so many unresolved feelings tied up in everything about you. It’s all I can think about. Last week I kissed the person who I thought I left in my childhood and it didn’t mean nothing…it was so far from nothing. It was…it...” He trails off, shaking his head without knowing the words. “I can’t even express how much I’ve really missed having you in my life all these years. And for the past few weeks, I let myself really feel all that—feel things I never thought I’d feel again…and…”

Harry pauses for a long moment, searching Louis’ eyes so deeply as if trying to memorize all the forest flecks of green trapped within his sapphire eyes. His gaze is so intent, Louis feels exposed under it, yet utterly transfixed by it.

“Louis, you give me goosebumps.” Harry’s face breaks into the most blissful smile, a little happy laugh escaping his lips as though he’s coming up for fresh air for the first time. “And you make me feel butterflies in my stomach. My heart skips beats just to keep up with yours. I’m the happiest I’ve ever been in my life when we’re together and it’s true, you understand me more than anyone else I’ve ever known. Every moment I spend with you I start to feel more myself, I feel…free. You make me want to risk it all.”

Louis smiles back, wildly nodding his head along with Harry because he knows just what Harry means and he feels the exact same way. And there is nothing in the world like that feeling. That indescribable feeling of being weightless and invincible, like nothing could possibly touch them and they have all the time in the world. Just the two of them.

Together forever and ever and ever…and…

No. Not forever. Because then Harry’s face suddenly falls and the spark of his eye fizzles out and the contagious brightness illuminating his entire expression dims somberly back to reality. “But we can’t, Lou. We can’t risk it all, it’s too late for us…”

“What?” Louis’ heart plunges down to the very pits of his stomach, an abrupt hollowness pitted deep in his chest. “Haz, it’s not too late, I—”

“Louis, I’m getting married! Today! Right now!” Harry shouts suddenly, lifting his arms up. “My whole family and his whole family are down there right now waiting for me. I can’t just up and leave and abandon my fiancé because you suddenly know what you want. I have a responsibility, I made a promise. Zayn and I—we care about each other, you know? We’re in it together.”

Louis shakes his head frantically, taking a small unsteady step backwards in disbelief as he finds it harder and harder to breathe. His worst fears are being actualized right before his very eyes and all the words he wants to say get caught in his throat. “But…”

“Time doesn’t stop, Louis.” Harry bows his head at a loss, pushing a wavering hand through his curls. “It doesn’t stop and we can’t just roll back the clock and pretend it all didn’t happen. It happened. All of it happened.” He reminds gravely and Louis knows he’s struggling with himself. “It’s been so many years and…I moved on and…you moved on. We built separate lives in separate worlds and…this is our life now. I’m getting married today and moving to New York. And you’re a
famous celebrity athlete with your whole career ahead of you.”

Louis is still slowly shaking his head uncontrollably, and he knows he couldn’t stop if he tried. This is all so very wrong, for so many reasons and Louis can’t seem to process any of it, each of Harry’s words hitting him like a brick.

“These past few weeks with you have been…everything. And I…I’ll never regret getting to know you again and reliving all our greatest memories...” Harry smiles but it’s a sad smile, not even a bittersweet smile, as though he is pained by his own words. “But in these past few days away from you, I had to force myself back to reality. I had to remind myself that this isn’t how life works. We don’t always get everything right and we don’t always get everything we want, but we have to learn to live with our choices, Louis. We aren’t the kids we used to be anymore. As much as I wish we were…with all my heart I wish that we were but…” His gaze falls sadly down to his polished shoes. “We aren’t…”

Louis lets out a shaky breath, willing himself not to break down, to keep himself standing on suddenly weak legs. How did this happen? How could Louis possibly let this happen? Harry is the most important person in his life, he always has been from the very beginning and Louis was too caught up to see it before. If he had only noticed it sooner, if he had only stopped just for a moment. Stopped trying to please people who never gave a shit about him, stopped seeking approval and status and material things that amount to nothing, stopped ignoring all the beauty surrounding him and realized what was right in front of him the entire time. And now that Louis finally has stopped, now that he has realized all he had to lose…it’s too late.

Harry walks over to a bookcase positioned on the far wall of the bedroom. He reaches up to the top shelf and slides out a thick leather-bound book. As soon as Louis sees it in Harry’s hands, he recognizes it, causing more tears to prickle at his already blurry eyes.

“Oh Haz, please…can I…can I have it?” Louis asks weakly, voice barely above a whisper as he looks longingly at the custom photo album. He hasn’t seen it since his birthday, when they sat in his basement and Harry nervously presented it to him. And Louis had sat in awe of the replica tree sprouting from the bound pages, collaged of captured memories, sprinkled with pine scented glitter. Louis knows, now more than ever, that the book held tightly Harry’s hands is everything, absolutely everything. “Please, I…I really w-want it.”

“You won’t chuck it at my head this time?” Harry tries to tease, but his voice breaks a little bit as he tilts his head.

Louis shakes his head seriously, biting down hard on his lower lip as the tears brimming at his eyes start to heavily fall down his cheeks. “Never. I promise.” His voice crumbles out of his mouth sounding hoarse and broken, reflecting everything he feels inside.

“Lou, please don’t cry, love.” Harry whispers softly, as though the concept of watching Louis cry is far too much to bear. He sets the heavy book down on the bed before immediately walking over to Louis. And before Louis knows it, Harry is wrapping his long arms around his body, pulling him in for a warm embrace. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry…”

“Don’t be sorry.” Louis murmurs sadly, head buried in Harry’s neck, arms lifting to encircle his broad back as tight as he can. “It’s not your fault. I understand…really I d-do…”

Louis doesn’t want to let go, he never wants to let him go, holding on for dear, precious life. Louis inhales the smell of soft skin—lavender and honey, always lavender and honey—nose nestled in the crook of his favorite boy’s neck, letting the scent of Harry, Harry, Harry, miserably wash over him in painfully calming ways. Harry’s arms feel like a safe heaven, a shelter against the harsh realities of
the world around him. And Louis can’t bring himself to let him go, dreading the moment that Harry releases him, fearing that the instant Harry unravels his sheltering arms from Louis’ body is exactly when he is going to completely fall apart.

After a few minutes of desperately holding each other, Harry slowly pulls back, gazing at Louis with his hands cradled to Louis’ cheeks. There’s saltwater lining his own eyes as he gently thumbs away a few of Louis’ stray tears. Harry searches his eyes, expression filled with grief-stricken worry, not at all convinced that Louis will be ok.

And he’s right.

“I’m…I—I’m ok…I’m fine. R-Really. I just…I want you to be h-happy…” Louis tries, offering a watery smile, but the tears keep coming, falling even harder than before. He can feel himself slowly crumbling in Harry’s arms. “You d-deserve to be so, so happy, Harry.”

Harry leans forward to press a gentle kiss to Louis’ forehead, lingering for a while before reluctantly letting him go completely. Looking down, Harry swipes at his eyes, clearing his throat as he tries to compose himself. He reaches over to the bed and picks up The Dream Album, staring down at it meaningfully for several moments before offering it over to Louis wordlessly.

Louis takes it in his hands, instantly hugging the heavy book against his body. His eyes fall closed as he tries to grasp the finality of this moment, tries to come to grips with what this really means for them.

“I—I love you, Harry.” Louis chokes out in a shattered voice, not bothering to wipe away his ever-falling tears as heartbreak rips through his chest. “I l-love you so much.”

“Louis…” Harry breathes tragically, head shaking as if at a total loss for words. “I…I have always loved you.”

“I know.” Louis nods his head slowly, eyelids falling closed again as Harry’s gentle words only serve to encourage his steady tears to fall. He clutches the album even closer to his chest, knuckles white around its edges; it’s the only thing keeping him grounded, the only thing keeping him standing upright. “You’re my best friend.”

Harry delicately takes one of Louis’ hands in his, carefully unfurling his white-knuckled fingers and turning his palm upwards. His green eyes never leave Louis, and with Louis’ hand spread out flat, Harry silently scribbles an invisible word to Louis’ skin. It feels like it’s been so very long since he last did it, but Louis doesn’t even need to feel it to know what the word is. He feels it in the very makings of his heart. Harry takes his time with each and every letter, affectionate and gentle in every practiced stroke. And every soft press of his finger breaks Louis’ heart.

Oops…

Louis fights back a fresh wave of hot tears as he flips Harry’s hand over with all the care in the world, scribing the answering word back in the flesh of his best friend’s palm. Louis matches the tenderness of Harry’s parting caress and he pours his entire soul into those two simple letters.

…Hi

He wants to write more, Louis wants to sit and hold Harry’s hand and draw on it for hours. Create an unseen story along the treasured lines of Harry’s palm. Louis wants to watch as the adorable indent appears on Harry’s brow as he struggles to accurately guess Louis’ unpredictable scribbles. He wants more time; they were supposed to have so much more time. And Louis wants to scream about how
incredibly wrong this feels, he wants to fuss and yell and curse and do whatever it takes to fill the
growing black pit of his sinking chest.

But instead, Louis closes his own hand and tries to immortalize the drifting feeling of Harry’s fingers
tracing along his skin. He tries so hard to preserve the gentleness of his last fleeting touch, the timed
loop and precision of the letters and all that they stand for.

“Goodbye, Lou.” Harry whispers almost inaudibly, as though it’s all his voice could possibly muster.
He gradually takes a step back, putting already unbearable distance between them.

“Bye Hazza.” Louis murmurs forcing himself to turn his back with the realization that this goodbye
isn’t at all temporary. Their goodbye tradition was never meant to be permanent, it was never a solid
ending. Oops and Hi was the start of it all, it was their beginning. They only said it to each other with
the promise that this wasn’t the end, that they wouldn’t be apart from each other for long. That there
would always be a next time, another time. Never an end, never an end.

But so it goes, every beginning must have an ending.

An ending to all that is them means that Louis will never exchange goodbyes with Harry again. He’ll
never be able to climb dear old Martha in the middle of the night and slide into Harry’s bed when he
needs him. He’ll never get to tear open the packet of a FunDip to split with Harry and complain
when Harry purposely takes his time eating the white candy stick. Louis will never have to fight off
the invasive lens of Harry’s camera, documenting everything at all times, or listen to his random
hypothetical questions or his endless wealth of movie quotes. He’ll never again get to sing and dance
and make a complete fool out of himself at Harry’s side to the tune of their favorite songs or split a
strawberry milkshake at Lucille’s and laugh at the huge mess they’ve made. All of the simple things
Louis once took for granted are now things of the past.

This goodbye is final.

Louis barely makes it back to the safety of his car before he completely falls apart, chest heaving as
tears splinter his vision. This isn’t the ending they should have, this isn’t how their story should close
its chapters. This isn’t right, it isn’t, it isn’t.

Louis sits in his car crying, hugging The Dream Album to his chest, cheek resting on the spine. He
tries to settle his breathing but he can’t seem to focus on anything but the gaping hole in his heart.
But as he squeezes the sturdy book for dear life, Louis remembers that he never actually finished
looking at it. Another pang darts from his heavy chest as remembers how he’d thoughtlessly
prioritized his stupid party and guests over finishing Harry’s heartfelt gift to him. Louis never even
got to see how it ended, he’d shoved the album carelessly in the closet before Harry could show him.

As Louis slowly opens The Dream Album now, several recent pictures slide out onto his lap, slotted
between the cover of the book. Louis recognizes them as the unexpected photos Harry had snapped
of him the day he came to his office at the stadium. And Louis can’t help but smile a bit at the fact
that Harry actually took the time to have these photos developed, even though they’re so random. In
the pictures Louis is half shielding his face, attempting to look irritated, but obviously anyone could
tell that he is hopelessly infatuated with the man behind the camera.

Louis tucks the loose photographs back into the cover before flipping to the final unseen page of the
album. The second he reaches the right page, Louis sharply inhales, holding a shaky hand over his
mouth in shock. Slow, quiet tears trickle from the rims of his eyes as he stares down at the open book
in pained awe.

It’s them. Just them.
That last minute picture Harry snapped of them on the early morning of Louis’ 13th birthday, the one Louis had protested tooth and nail. Harry is smiling so, so wide, dimples eating at his baby-faced cheeks while Louis is pouting at him in the fondest way. Their faces are pressed together, not an ounce of space between their bodies and they both look so incredibly young and at ease with each other. They look…happy.

But what really leaves Louis gasping for breath is the fact that the picture itself is cut with so much care into the shape of a perfect heart, laid over a bed of pressed flower petals. They’ve all dried out of course, but they are still beautiful, softly embellishing the simple picture of them. And underneath the hearted photograph is a small caption, written neatly in faultless cursive:

My world is all smiles whenever I’m with you.

You will forever be in my heart.

Always with love,

your Haz.

“Oh Harry.” Louis gasps tragically, crying harder as he reverently touches over the page. Harry put so much of himself into this book, he wore his heart on his sleeve. It’s his first profession of love for Louis. It’s not over the top or dramatic. It’s sweet and innocent, endearingly pure and so filled with thought, so filled with Harry.

This could have been the start of it all for them, this could have been what jumpstarted their relationship as early teenagers. Everything could have been so different between them. None of this had to happen, none of this should have happened.

The car starts to smell more and more like Christmas the longer Louis leaves the book open. The leftover pine scented glitter blown up by the air vent’s constant stream. It triggers back memories for Louis, memories of a time before all this, a time before a rift so grave, before unforgivable mistakes were made, a time when there was still hope.

Louis tried so hard to make it better, to make it work. But his life is too far gone. He tried to live honestly and give back and do right by the people around him, but the damage has already been done. Nothing can erase all the hurt he has caused. Harry is right, Louis can’t pretend it all didn’t happen, time doesn’t ever stop.

But oh, how he wishes with all of his heart that he could turn back time. That he could unwind the twisted chain of events that sparked a lonely life he dreads with his whole being. If he could only turn back the clock and relive the most pivotal moment of his life.

“I wanna go back.” Louis sobs openly, throwing his head back against the headrest with his eyes squeezed closed. “Please, I wanna go b-back…let me go back. It’s not supposed to be like this. It’s not r-right…it’s not, it’s not…” He sniffs, teardrops falling onto the open book in his lap. “I need him. I need h-him so much. I’ll do it right this time… I…I promise. I’ll do e-everything right. Just let me go back…please…p-please…”

In his heart of hearts, Louis knows it to be true. If given the chance he would make everything right again. He only needs one more chance, just one more chance. And he wishes like he never has in his entire life, hoping that his fervent wish will come true.
“I wanna go back…”
alright, here we are my friends. At the end of the line, I can’t believe it’s coming to a close. I loved writing everything about this story and making one of my favorite movies come to life in a new way. Thank you to all of you who have read this start to finish. I appreciate every comment and message and I’m so thankful for all the support. I love you all :))

so what’s a final chapter from me if it’s not ridiculously long, am I right?? Lol so this ending chapter is just over 27k? honestly wtf i know...?? and just for clarity’s sake, there is a bit that’s written in past tense and it’s sorta like a flashback. It’ll make sense when you get to it but I’m just letting you know now just in case

Anyway! Thank you all for everything, feel free to come and chat, scream, or cry about anything under the sun with me on tumblr.
Love, love, love you!
Lex. x

Chapter Thirteen

The radio is playing in the background, heavily muffled by the thick wood of a door. But the song playing through the door, although distant, is familiar, too familiar. Far too familiar to be some new age song of the 21st century, if judging by the telltale signs of classic ‘90s synth notes echoing into the tight space. And it’s even more familiar because Louis begins to recognize the song to be *I Love You Always Forever* and he only knows that because he owns a copy of this record on cassette tape. He’s listened to it countless times because it’s Harry’s favorite song off of Donna Lewis’ newest album *Now In A Minute*.

And furthermore, Louis has the strangest feeling that he has been here before. Not just in this place, but in this exact moment. The dingy, musky air smells vaguely like moth balls and peppermint and there is a subtle, understated humming coming from the radiator. But every categorized observation Louis makes only adds to the nerve-wracking familiarity of this moment in time.

Louis sits with crisscrossed legs on the floor, hearing a distant rumble of commotion outside. The sound of voices talking, he thinks, but it’s hard to know for certain when masked by the music. He twists slightly to the left and unsuspectingly bumps his head into some kind of shelf.

“Oh!” He winces, realizing he can’t see anything at all even though his eyes are open. For a brief moment of panic, Louis wonders if he’s somehow gone blind all together. After all, stranger things have happened to him. He reaches up to touch his face and breathes a sigh of relief when he feels a strip of fabric covering his eyes. Louis anxiously yanks off the blindfold, having a pretty hopeful idea about his current whereabouts, but needing to see it to confirm it’s really true.

“I’m back...” Louis gasps through a grin, smiling even wider when he hears his creaky adolescent voice again. He touches both of his hands to his baby smooth cheeks, sliding them up to his over-styled fringe. Frantically, he looks down at himself, slapping his hands against his much smaller, hardly developed body. Louis goes through a mental checklist in his mind. Asymmetrical overalls.
Oversized shirt. Geometrically patterned socks. Bulky sneakers. No tattoos. “Oh my god! I’m really back! I’m me!”

Louis could physically jump for joy, smiling so hard his cheeks nearly ache. A minute ago he was in the absolute worst place of his life and now, in the next minute he has the once in a lifetime chance to make it all right. That nightmare he just lived doesn’t have to be his life. It’s not too late. He can change it. All of it. And Louis knows exactly where to start.

Fluffing his hair back out from the blind fold, Louis anxiously sits up against the wall of the cramped closet just as the door knob begins to twist and jiggle. Hardly able to contain himself, Louis is up and bouncing on his feet by the time the closet door creaks open.

“Harry!” Louis squeals excitedly as soon as he sees his best friend’s nervous baby face. He has never in his entire life been so happy to see someone and he really doesn’t know what to do with all of his excitement, eagerness bubbling up inside. Louis pounces, colliding into Harry with such momentum that he falls backwards, completely caught off guard. They tumble onto the floor outside of the closet as Louis lands on top of Harry’s chest.

Harry frowns, that cute, adorable indent folding his brow as he blinks up at Louis in confusion. “Umm Lou, I—”

Louis doesn’t hesitate to lean down and press his lips softly to Harry’s, shutting his best friend up right away and kissing him in a way he never has with anyone before. Why waste any more time? Too much precious time has already been carelessly wasted as it is.

When Louis slowly pulls back, Harry is positively stunned. He lies motionless under Louis’ weight, comically wide eyes partially concealed by his loose floppy curls falling over his stupefied face. “Whoa...”

“I was waiting for you.” Louis brushes the wild hair from Harry’s forehead tenderly, resting a hand on his round cheeks. Louis loves those chubby dimply cheeks and he has to enjoy them now because sometime in the future they morph into the sharpest jaw to ever exist. Which, of course, Louis would never complain about. He will take any Harry—all the Harry’s.

But this Harry, the one laying compliantly underneath him, with soft eyes and soft cheeks and a soft dimply smile is specifically his. And what’s better is he can always be his. Louis gets to properly grow up with this Harry and watch him blossom and flourish into such a beautiful man. Just thinking about it makes Louis’ heart continually overflow; he can hardly wait.

Harry still hasn’t moved a single muscle and Louis isn’t quite sure he’s still breathing. Louis leans in again and gives him a short chaste kiss, a light brush of tender lips.

“Y-You’re a really good kisser.” Harry squeaks awkwardly, a slow smile breaking through his face, dimples appearing in his cheeks. And Louis thinks he’s the most adorable person that he’s ever seen. He kind of just wants to sit and pepper Harry’s cute face with gentle kisses and watch him giggle as his cheeks redden into brighter and brighter shades.

Louis is the one blushing though, as his brain finally catches up to what Harry just said. He has definitely had a lot of very recent practice when it comes to kissing, too much if he’s honest. But no one ever has to know about that. As far as Louis is concerned it was all a bad dream.

“I missed you so much, Haz.” Louis lays his head down on Harry’s chest, squeezing him tightly and inhaling his scent. It’s the same scent that was missing from his favorite jumper, the same scent that always makes his feel warm inside, the same welcomed scent that never fails to bring him right back
“Missed me? But I’ve been here the whole time.” Harry frowns, perplexed. “Well, I mean I left to go
next door and get my camera, but I was only gone for ten minutes.”

“It felt like forever to me.” Louis sighs, eyes closed against Harry’s not so broad chest. His body is
so much softer and cuddlier, a bit pudgy in all the right places and Louis absolutely loves it. Harry is
perfect, in all his forms he can be nothing but perfect.

Louis remembers how Harry had only left to get his camera because Louis had so rudely made a
joke at his expense to please his party guests. God, he was acting so fucking stupid back then—
which apparently equates to only ten mere minutes ago. Trippy. But no matter how much time has
passed, literally or figuratively, in this life or an alternative one, Louis knows the kind of person he
never, ever wants to be. He instantly feels a deep sense of responsibility and remorse for all the times
he remembers not coming to Harry’s defense. But that ends today.

Lifting his head, Louis looks seriously at Harry, guilt in his eyes. “Listen Harry, I’m so sorry for
being such a dick earlier with the whole play-by-play thing. You didn’t deserve that…I hope you can
forgive me. I feel so awful about it—I feel so awful about it—about everything.”

“Oh erm…it’s ok, Louis.” Harry shrugs it off easily, dismissing himself. “It’s not that big of a deal…I
know you didn’t really mean it, so it doesn’t matter. And those are your friends so…”

“No, it does matter, Harry. It matters a lot.” Louis insists adamantly, not allowing Harry to let this
slide. He has got to keep himself accountable for his actions this time around and nothing will stop
him from doing so. “And those assholes are not my friends. And those are your friends so…”

“But sometimes it’s true, Lou.” Harry admits quietly, tucking his head down a little in what Louis
can only identify as embarrassment or worse, shame. “I…I am soft and I am kinda girly sometimes,
they’re right. It’s just what people think of me, I guess…”

No, this has to stop and it has to stop right the fuck now. The lack of support and validation about
who he is, is what led future Harry to not fight for himself and his dreams. All he ever heard was
useless negativity and insults all throughout his formative years, stunting his overall mental growth.
But not this time around. Harry should never be mocked for his femininity and soft spirit, instead
praised.

“Fuck what people think!” Louis bursts suddenly and Harry’s eyes widen in shock as he looks up at
him. “It’s ok to be soft, Haz. It’s ok…it’s what makes you, you. Paint your nails, wear flowers in
your hair, talk about fashion…If those things make you happy, then do them and do them proudly.
Seeing you happy, makes me happy.” He admits gently, eyes never leaving Harry’s so he knows just
how serious Louis is about this.

“You’re always building me up and telling me how great I am even when I don’t believe it and I
want to do that for you.” Louis promises, holding a hand to his cheek. “Harry, you are so smart,
totally brilliant in so many ways and you’re ridiculously talented, no one captures photos like you do.
And you’re effortlessly funny and just so…unique and if people can’t see that, fuck ’em cuz you’re
too good for them anyways. You’re such a beautiful person, an inspiring person…and you should
never let anyone diminish important pieces of you. I want you to always be unapologetically you…no
matter what…and I’ll always be here to support you and stand up for you and fight for you. I
promise.”

Harry breathes heavily, mouth held slightly open as he gazes up at Louis in speechless silence. If
possible, his already wide eyes seem to grow even wider and once again his body is left utterly motionless.

“Saw the last page of The Dream Album.” Louis tells him next, playing with a lock of Harry’s curly hair.

“You…y-you did?” Harry stutters nervously, turning beet red in only a manner of seconds.

“Mhmm and I love it, Hazza. I really, really love it.” Louis whispers happily, nodding his head.

“R-Really?” Harry peeps weakly in disbelief.

“Yes really, you sap.” Louis kisses Harry gently on the tip of his nose. “It made me cry, if I’m honest. It’s the best gift I’ve ever gotten in my whole life.”

The smile Harry gives Louis in that moment could light up the entire earth in an instant, beaming so bright Louis can’t look away. “I’m…uh…I’m really glad you liked it, Lou. You…you mean the world to me.”

Louis bites his lip bashfully as the corners of his mouth tug into an uncontrollably wide grin. His heart is beating so fast, thumping as loud as a steel drum and he feels so ridiculously nervous all of a sudden. And he knows exactly why he’s nervous, it’s because of how much he cares. Louis cares to no end about the bright-eyed boy beaming at him and he knows that a future without Harry is not a future he ever wants. It’s not a future at all.

“Harry, this might sound like a lot right now. But I have to say it, ok? I have to say it or it’ll bug me and…and I won’t be able to think about anything else and—I dunno I’ll just be a huge sodding mess.” Louis rambles, words passing from his lips before he even identifies them. “So I have to say it…”

Harry nods slowly, remaining quiet as he waits for Louis to get the words off his chest.

“Ok...” Louis takes another deep breath, trying to ignore the increasing pitter patter of his anxious heart. “I know we’re young—so young and uh…well the future is kinda uncertain and far away, yeah? So much can change in our lives but...um...I just...I want you to know that I want you in it. I always want you in it, no matter what. You’re my future, Haz. Now and forever.” Louis stares openly into his eyes, feeling so much for the beautiful boy beneath him. “I love you.”

Louis has told Harry that he loves him countless times. He’s laughed while saying it, joked and teased. He’s thrown it out carelessly, whispered it to Harry in friendly ways as solely his best friend. But this time Louis means something else entirely. This time Louis says it like he’s never once said it before and from the look on Harry’s face and the slight hitch of his breath he knows it’s not just any other ‘I love you’. It’s a real one.

Harry looks completely overwhelmed, as if he might burst into tears at any moment. To be fair, he’s been looking like that since Louis kissed him the first time, but now Louis is almost sure he is going to pass out or something.

“I love you too.” Harry finally whispers back, after he has regained control over his body. He slides both of his hands up to Louis’ cheeks, just holding his face in his palms for a while before sitting up again to initiate their next kiss.

And it feels like everything. Happiness fizzling up from inside him so strongly, Louis almost feels the need to cry with relief. There was a moment when he could have lost Harry. Lost him forever. It was real and Louis lived it; he felt it in every raw, broken piece of his heart and now he will never have to
feel that feeling of tremendous loss ever again.

Life isn’t always perfect, Louis knows, but sometimes you get lucky and somehow end up with everything you wanted. And sometimes…all you ever wanted was right in front of you the whole time.

“Hey guys, get a load of this.” Rusty calls from the stairs of the basement. “Ha! Oh, I fucking knew Princess Peach was gunnin’ for Tommo. But I never thought he’d actually bite.”

Louis’ entire body goes rigid at the sound of Rusty’s annoying, unwelcome voice. He sits up in front of Harry defensively, instinctually shielding his boy.

“Shut up, Rusty. Don’t call him that.” Louis grits through his teeth. He feels Harry sit up behind him, placing his hand on Louis’ arm as a silent way of telling him that he doesn’t have to, that he doesn’t need to defend him. Oh but, Louis is definitely going to anyway.

“Stop calling who what? Oh, you mean Cinderella over here.” Rusty nods his head dismissively in Harry’s direction and that’s all it takes for Louis to snap.

“Rusty, I swear to god.” Louis clenches angrily, standing to his feet to face him. He is so not in the mood for this, especially not when there are so many better things he could be doing, like snogging Harry for instance. “I’m warning you. Shut the hell up.”

“Or what? Are you gonna stop me, Tommo?” Rusty tests, looking down at Louis in a way he thinks is threatening. “I’ll call him whatever the fuck I want.”

Louis narrows his eyes up at Rusty, not at all scared. After dealing with the adult version of him for so long, this teen version of him is frankly…a fucking joke. “You know what, Rusty? You’re nothing but a pathetic, insecure kid, who gets off on degrading people that are actually smarter and better and far more interesting than you.” He speaks easily, not stumbling once. “And I actually feel a bit sorry for you, because you project your sad insecurities on everyone else, but I know for a fact that bullying people won’t ever make you happy and I hope one day you can grow up and accept yourself for who you really are. But until then, why don’t you mind your goddamn business and leave Harry alone.”

Rusty scoffs outright, face scrunched up in offense as he attempts to shrug it off. “Who the fuck do you think you are?! Talking to me like that?!”

“Yeah, that’s my co-captain you’re talking to, brat.” Brady speaks up next to Rusty, sporting the same self-righteous, entitled expression. “Come off it and show some respect.”

Louis rolls his eyes irritably and turns to face Brady next, giving him a bored once over glance. “Look Brady, you may be cool and hot right now or whatever, but one day your dumb ass won’t be doing anything but mopping up floors after people with real talent. So you can get fucked too.”

“What…” Brady and Rusty gasp at the same time, taken aback by Louis’ suddenly brazen attitude.

“Oh, you heard me.” Louis says, lifting a single eyebrow, so beyond over it. “Or do I need to talk slower so you both can understand? Let’s try it again, yeah? I. Said.” He drags the words out in belittlement, enunciating each syllable. “Get. Fucked.”

“Have you fucking lost it, Tomlinson!?” Rusty bursts out, filled with outraged disrespect. “No one talks to us like that! No one!”

“I just did.” Louis shrugs offhandedly, totally unfazed and rapidly growing in boredom. There’s no
real bite behind their angry bark and he knows it.

“Don’t you care about being on the starting line up? You’ll never get signed if you have no solid playing time on the league, you little shit. And you need us, we run that league.”

“I don’t need you and your wannabe elitist posse to play football. I have everything I need right here.” Louis holds his hand out to Harry still sitting on the floor, pulling him up to his feet. He tucks Harry to his side, still holding on to his hand. “So you can suck my ass.”

“You’re really choosing this little curly-headed Gerber baby over us.” Rusty blurts in disgust, touching a hand to his own chest in furious disbelief. “Get real, Tommo. He can’t get you where you wanna be. He isn’t worth it.”

Louis has had enough, if he was over it before, he is about to surpass his maximum now. He will never again sit idly by and listen to Harry be disrespected and taunted. That is a promise not only made to himself, but one he just made to Harry moments ago. And if he doesn’t do this now, Rusty will keep on attacking Harry and the cycle will never be broken.

Louis lets go of Harry’s hand momentarily, striding up to Rusty confidently with a slight smirk to lips. He knows he is about to absolutely destroy Rusty’s pumped up, overly inflated ego once and for all, so out of the kindness of his own heart Louis decides to lean in close to his ear so only Rusty can hear what he is about to say. And fuck, does Louis have a lot to say.

“Oh please. Don’t act like you don’t drool over him when you’re alone and wank yourself to sleep every night over his pretty little curls and perfect pink lips. And let’s not pretend that you wouldn’t jump at the chance to be with him if you could. That is, if you could ever get over your huge lack of basic communication and interpersonal skills, tragically mixed with a crippling sense of insecurity. You hide behind a facade of masculinity and you make cruel jokes at the expense of other people just so they won’t have the chance to notice the overwhelming immaturity that makes up the very essence of who you are.” Louis bites, holding nothing back this time. “Oh, but I see you, Rusty. I see you and it’s pathetic.”

Rusty’s stunned, blank face is more than enough response, obviously scared shitless. He has not a single rebuttal or reply and it does Louis’ heart good to have finally shut him up.

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“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” Louis whispers smugly with a knowing grin after Rusty still offers no reply. There’s nothing like proper use of the English language as a power move for a good roast. And English is still Louis’ best subject, thank you very much. “Talk shit about Harry again and I promise it’ll be the last thing you ever do.”

Louis has been waiting a long time to put Rusty’s irritating ass in his place and it feels so good to finally do it. It almost feels as good as knowing that Louis is literally in the process of changing the ultimate course of his life for the better with each moment that passes. LMAO—no, it doesn’t. And come to thing of it, when does LMAO become a thing anyways?

“Oh, and just so you know…Harry would never do you anyway.” Louis adds with a pleased smirk. It’s kinda funny, because he originally learned that line from the older Harry when he roasted Rusty into oblivion. And Louis knows adult Harry would definitely approve of him using it again now to defend his younger self’s honor.

Satisfied, Louis holds up his middle finger as he pulls away, fierce eyes never wavering. “Go fuck yourself, Rusty.” He says at full volume for the rest of the room to hear.

Everyone loitering around the basement gasps at the exchange, waiting for Rusty to retaliate but of
course he never does, instead standing frozen with his mouth hanging open so wide, he could catch flies with it.

Louis returns back to his rightful place at Harry’s side, holding his hand out again. Harry looks back at him in absolute astonishment and wonder, totally in awe of Louis. “Come on, Harold. I’m super hungry and I could really go for a burger or something.”

“Uh…yeah, me too…” Harry smiles slowly, linking their fingers together as he begins to follow after Louis. “Split a strawberry milkshake with me?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” Louis grins happily, walking hand in hand up the stairs of his basement. He looks over at Harry, gasping in relief as he notices the compared heights of their brushing shoulders. “Oh, thank god!”


“You’re shorter than me.” Louis smiles enthusiastically, as though it’s the best news in the world.

“Lou, you’ve always been taller than me…” Harry frowns like he is missing something, brow slightly furrowed.

“Yes, exactly! And never, ever forget that!” Louis says, looking Harry dead in the eye. “Seriously, promise you won’t forget. Even when we get older and…uh I don’t know? Maybe I get cursed or something and I never get any taller, but you do and, and—just promise you won’t forget!”

“What?” Harry laughs through his confused frown.

“Promise me, Haz!” Louis shakes his shoulders violently.

Harry giggles, loopy curls tumbling over his face as Louis urgently rattles him around. “Ok! Ok, I promise! I won’t forget you’re taller me!”

“Good.” Louis nods, releasing Harry and going back to holding his hand.

“Hey, so what’d you say to him anyways?” Harry wonders curiously.

“Who are we talking about?” Louis blinks back at a loss.

“Rusty…?” Harry reminds.

To be honest, Louis had already forgotten he still exists. “Oh, it doesn’t even matter.” He shrugs, hardly interested in anything having to do with that dickhead. “You won’t ever have to worry about him any more though.”

“You’re very…different…” Harry decides slowly, eyeing Louis closely. “A good different. But still…”

“You’d be different too if you lived the pure hell I did.” Louis mumbles incoherently under his breath.

“What?” Harry questions, brow still creased.

Louis snaps his mouth shut and shakes his head. “Nothing.”

Harry frowns at him, giving his fingers a little squeeze. “Is everything alright, Lou?”
“Yeah, everything is great.” Louis squeezes Harry’s hand before resting his head down on his shoulder. “Everything is perfect.”

17 Years Later

“Louis! Louis, can we have a minute?”

“Yeah, yeah sure.” Louis pushes his champagne soaked fringe up from his slightly sweaty face, smiling happily at the interviewer standing before him.

“Hi, I’m Jenna, BBC Entertainment News.” The interviewer happily introduces herself, holding out her hand for a shake.

Louis grips her hand politely. “Hello Jenna, how are you, love?”

“I’m good, very good.” Jenna smiles, seeming overjoyed that Louis is actually giving her his first official interview of the night. “That was one hell of a championship game. You guys have been ranked as the underdogs of the league for some time now; how does it feel to finally bring The Premier Title to The Rovers?”

“Absolutely incredible.” Louis responds instantly, smile widening. “I’m totally buzzing and I’m still...a bit? I dunno? Shocked about it, really. It was a joint effort by the whole team—we’re like a family and everyone worked so, so hard. I love those lads and I’m sure there’ll be a little emotional moment in the lockers, have a bit of cry. Yeah.”

Jenna nods her head understandingly. “That’s so great. What I love most about The Rovers is how genuinely close-knit you all are.”

“Yes, yeah definitely.” Louis agrees, clasping his hands together in front of his body. “We’ve been through a lot together, for sure. A lot of ups and downs in the league stats over the years...so to finally win The Premier is so unreal. A dream come true for a lot of people, I’d say.”

“So inspiring.” Jenna commends admirably. “And I hear your husband has a reserved spot at all of your games in the front row. Some of the more superstitious fans say that he’s your good luck charm or even the good luck charm for all The Rovers.”

“The whole team? Is he really that lucky?” Louis chuckles, smiling fondly. “No, but um yeah really...he’s been my very best friend since day one. I know I wouldn’t be here without his never-ending support. Just having him here with me, by my side is...” He shakes his head at a true loss for the right words, still smiling. “Whenever I second guess myself or have doubts or anything, all I have to do is look over to that same spot and he’s always there cheering me on no matter what. And it never fails to make all the difference. So yeah...you could definitely say he’s my good luck charm, yeah.”

Louis reflexively touches the ring hanging on a chain from his neck. It usually never leaves his left
ring finger, but he has to wear his wedding band as a necklace when he plays football because it’s always slipping from his finger. One time it fell off during practice and Louis literally stopped the entire scrimmage game and had everyone scour the pitch just to find it. He would just not wear it at all during games, but there is something about having it physically with him that grounds Louis.

“You two are quite the power couple, I mean Harry is the most sought after fashion photographer in all of England.” Jenna says next, keeping the interview going.

“Oh, he’s absolutely brilliant, yeah. There aren’t enough words to express how proud I am of him. He’s the real breadwinner in our household.” Louis laughs, feeling his face scrunch up with uncontrollable fond. “He is, without a doubt, my favorite person. Everything he does blows me away.”

“Maybe you’re also his good luck charm.”

Louis grins, tilting his head a bit as he rocks side to side on his feet. “Yeah, well you’d have to ask him about that.”

“Oh 100% yes, he is. It’s totally mutual, we’ve discussed it countless times.” Harry comes up behind Louis out of nowhere, surprising him as he snakes his arms around Louis’ waist. He plants a sweet kiss to Louis’ cheek and moves to gently nibble on his ear, whispering softly. “Congratulations baby, I’m so proud of you. I knew you could do it.”

Louis melts into his arms, happily resting his own hands on top of his husband’s still wrapped around his waist, trying his best not to encourage Harry into too much PDA since the cameras are still rolling. He’d rather not give the world complete access to their relationship. Harry doesn’t care though, he’d do just about anything with Louis on camera and not even blink. In fact, they’ve done their fair share of risky hook ups in public at Harry’s insistence. So Louis secretly thinks his spouse is somewhat of an exhibitionist, but it’s an evolving theory.

“Oh, hello Harry!” Jenna greets warmly, turning towards the camera. “Look BBC, we’ve got Harry Styles here as well joining us!”

Harry sways Louis from side to side as he envelopes himself around his husband. He nuzzles his cheek against Louis’ getting him to giggle, neither of them hardly paying the slightest bit of attention to anything Jenna is saying.

“So you must be so proud of your husband, Harry.” Jenna remarks, attempting to refocus the interview.

“Yes, always. I’d be proud of him even if they lost.” Harry replies genuinely, holding his winning boy close. “I don’t think anyone has a true understanding of how hard he works, day in and day out. Louis never gives up and I think that alone warrants a sense of pride, you know? I’m always in awe of him.”

“You’re both so openly supportive of each other’s careers.” Jenna comments with a smile.

“Yeah…” Harry grins down at Louis, whole face beaming with pride. “I mean, we have to be. It’s such a rare privilege to be able to watch the love of your life grow up and also be able to grow along with him through all of the ups and downs of life. We’ve always been each others’ support system in everything we do and that will never change. I would do anything for him without question and I know he would do the same for me.”

Louis gives his husband an adoring smile in return, eyes crinkled at the edges. “I couldn’t have said it
better myself, my love.”

“Oh stop it, you’re melting the hearts of England, you two.” Jenna gushes. “You’re almost making me blush.”

“Hey, I bet if I keep going I can get Louis to blush on camera for you.” Harry grins mischievously, winking at Jenna. “Ooh he hates it, but I love embarrassing him.”

“Well, I love a good exclusive.” Jenna encourages eagerly.

“And between you and me, I’m really, really good at it.” Harry pretends to whisper to Jenna, but speaks loud enough that it’s obviously not a secret.

“Don’t you dare.” Louis warns, ready to rudely abandon this interview to save himself at all costs if necessary.

Harry’s dimpled grin only widens as he presses closer to Louis, dropping his lips down to Louis’ ear so only he can hear him. And Louis knows this is about to be bad when Harry starts off by pouring a filthy, desperate moan right into his ear. “God, your ass looks so fucking good in these shorts, baby. Mmm, I can’t wait to have you all to myself…I’m already sooo hard for you.” He practically groans the words into Louis’ ear, sounding utterly undone and Louis is literally on fire. “Feel it baby, it’s all for you…”

He nudges his hips closer, pressing against Louis’ backside, fingers brushing Louis’ thigh lightly in a smooth, calculated manner. No one would ever notice, Harry is so subtle and tactful about it that it’s hardly perceivable…except, of course to Louis, who feels like he’s about to fucking die.

Louis can feel just how hard his husband is and as if on cue, Louis’ cheeks flare up with a reddish glow, eyes widening as tries impossibly hard to keep in the surprised little whimper threatening to escape his mouth. But how was he supposed to not react to that, especially with so many eyes watching him, not to mention the entire fucking country watching on telly. He could kill Harry. Louis spins around and gives Harry his best ‘Oh-if-we-weren’t-on-fucking-live-television-right-now-I’d-kick-you-in-the-balls-goddamn-you-Styles’ stare down and Harry just smirks like the chaotic devil he is, exceedingly proud of himself.

“Look, he’s so cute when he blushes, isn’t he?” Harry coos to Jenna as Louis glares at him, completely unamused. “Aww Lou, you’re sooo precious.”

“I want to know what you said to him to get him to blush like that.” Jenna laughs in amazement. “That’s quite a trick.”

“Some things have to remain a mystery. And I think our newly victorious Donny captain would be very cross with me if I repeated it out loud.” Harry smiles charmingly, arm slung around the mortified man in question.

“Oh, I can confirm that he definitely would be.” Louis nods obviously, attempting to shake off his still reddened cheeks. He can also confirm that he definitely married an exhibitionist and he hasn’t quite decided whether that’s a horrifying or exhilarating fact.

“You guys are the cutest.” Jenna giggles, smiling at them both. “Ok, last question and I’ll let you two lovebirds go and celebrate. So Louis, now that you’ve successfully led your team to victory, what’s next for you? It’s hard to top a career like yours.”

“Actually, I’m taking a little step back for a short bit, my husband and I are starting a family.” Louis announces, looking up at Harry affectionately.
“And as you can see I’m clearly carrying twins.” Harry jokes, patting his tummy in exaggeration. “No, obviously, I’m not serious…this is clearly the bump of triplets, who am I kidding?”

“Please excuse my idiot husband, don’t encourage him. He thinks he’s funny and he likes to laugh at his own dumb jokes.” Louis smiles fondly, hugging Harry’s waist. “The truth is our surrogate is due in six weeks.”

“Aww congratulations to both of you! That’s wonderful.” She applauds, looking beyond overjoyed that she gets to break the news to the world first. Scoring herself a real exclusive.

“Thank you, we’re really excited.” Harry gushes, squeezing his husband even closer. “I’m very lucky, I’d say.”

“No, I’m very lucky.” Louis counters, knocking his hip against Harry’s.

“See, I told you it was mutual.” Harry reminds, giving Jenna another wink.

Jenna giggles before shaking each of their hands goodbye. “Louis, Harry, thank you so much for your time. Enjoy the big win and the new baby.”

“Thank you for having us.” Louis smiles back. And the very moment the cameras and the news crew turn away from him, he is dragging Harry backwards by his upper arm until they are relatively alone on the field.

“Harold, you wanker!” Louis bursts, whacking Harry’s shoulder. “I’m going to kill you! How fucking dare you rub your hard on against me on bloody national news!”

“Oh hush.” Harry cups Louis cheeks and shuts him up with a kiss. “It could have been so much worse. I was very nice, that was mild. And anyway, no one knows but you and me.”

“You’re the worst.” Louis tries to pout, but he can’t help the happy grin spreading across his face.

“Aww thanks Lou, my little sunshine.” Harry beams as though Louis just gave him the best compliment. Then he takes Louis completely by surprise and hoists him up off the ground. Louis laughs happily, lifting up to wrap his legs around Harry’s waist, locking his ankles behind Harry’s back. “You were unbelievable today, baby. You’re always incredible but…fuck, I’ve never been so proud watching you play out there. I’m married to a legend.”

Now it’s Louis turn to beam, grinning down brightly under Harry’s praise. He cradles his love’s face in both his hands, stroking his cheeks affectionately. “That means everything coming from you. Thank you, my love.”

“Did you see me screaming for you?” Harry asks curiously. “Cuz I went pretty hard.”

“How could I not have seen you? They put you up on the screen when you started running around yelling ‘that’s my best friend’ out of your megaphone.” Louis reminds with a little laugh. “And when did you get that shirt?”

Harry has a jacket over it now, but during the game he was parading around in a t-shirt with a blown up picture of Louis’ face on the front while the back is plastered with the words, ‘LOUIS’ #1 FAN’.

“Oh yeah, did you like it? I had one made in basically every color.” Harry tells him proudly. “I may have gotten a bit carried away.”

“No, never. I loved it. I love you.” Louis leans down and presses against Harry’s lips, and it doesn’t
take long for their simple kiss to turn into a full on make out. Heads tilting to and fro wildly, tongues absolutely everywhere, sliding around almost frantically. Louis fingers are twisted and tangled up in Harry’s hair and he desperately whines a little bit as Louis tugs on his curls. And with his legs straddled around Harry’s hips, Louis grinds down slightly against Harry’s crotch, repeatedly moaning Harry’s name through their passionate kiss.

And Louis knows they’re basically in the middle of an open field with people all around them. He is vaguely aware of the cameras and news teams everywhere, probably already snapping pictures that will be sure to be all over the internet in a manner of seconds. But maybe his husband’s exhibitionist ways have rubbed off on him a bit.

Someone clears their throat from behind them, which is ultimately for the best, stopping Harry and Louis from doing anything they might regret in public. “Well, I hate to be the one to break you up, but can I borrow him for a moment?”

“No Liam, go away.” Harry answers, without even sparing a glance at Liam, full attention still on Louis. “You can’t have him, he’s mine.”

“I promise I’ll give him back.” Liam chuckles. “Louis, I need you for—”

“Oh, the press conference, right.” Louis remembers, nodding his head knowingly. “You definitely told me about this before. Sorry, I’m coming right now, I promise.”

Louis kisses Harry a few more times before untangling his legs from behind Harry’s back and sliding down to his feet. However, even though he is back on the ground, Louis still doesn’t unwind his arms from Harry’s waist, and he also doesn’t stop Harry from pressing even more kisses to his willing mouth.

“Babe, don’t forget I’ve got a reservation for us.” Harry mumbles against Louis’ lips, refusing to let him go completely. “Just a nice, quiet dinner with me to celebrate.”

“Oh, I’d never forget.” Louis promises against his mouth. “After this, I’m just gonna shower and change and then I’m all yours, baby.”

“Ok.” Harry smiles privately, pecking both of Louis’ hands goodbye before releasing him. Louis still doesn’t really start to move away, even though they aren’t touching anymore, so Liam does what he often has to do as his manager and physically drags Louis away.

Harry is dressed in an elegant designer suit, leaned up against his Range Rover while texting away on his phone. He looks like a live advertisement for either Gucci or Range Rover or maybe even an interesting combination of both.

If anyone were to ever ask Louis if Harry’s ample success changed him in any way, Louis would deny it instantly. Citing that Harry, in all his success and popularity in the fashion world, is still the same oddly endearing boy he always was and therefore still found it exceeding important to give a personal name to his car.

They have quite a few expensive cars between them, but this one is Harry’s absolutely favorite because Louis specifically bought it for him as a birthday gift a few years back. It’s a completely
custom design through and through, from the deep tan of the interior leather upholstery to the sleek olive green exterior, a very similar shade as Harry’s eyes. It’s got every bell and whistle that could physically fit, and it can basically do just about anything but fly.

But Harry adamantly said that the signature color of his treasured Range Rover is not why he decided to name the car Olive. “I’m naming her Olive as in Olove as in I love you”, he’d whispered to Louis after they’d effectively christened the back seat of the luxury SUV several times. And Harry adores Olive, nearly refusing to drive any other car, finding them all impossibly inferior. But they make a good match, Harry and Olive, Louis thinks.

“I hope you know that you look like you’re posing for an editorial spread in a magazine.” Louis comments as he strolls up to Harry casually.

“Um…and you don’t? Harry quips back, looking up from his phone and eyeing Louis’ equally posh fitted suit, polished shoes and freshly washed, smoothly slicked back hair.

Louis looks down at himself and nods his head gradually side to side. “Ok, fair.”

Harry grins taking Louis’ hand and lifting it to his mouth to press a light kiss on the platinum band, newly returned back to his ring finger. “You look absolutely stunning, baby.”

“You look so good I could eat you.” Louis leans in and licks against his lips.

“Please. Be a gentleman.” Harry touches a graceful hand to his chest as if scandalized, gasping at the insinuation. “Dinner first. I have standards.”

“What?” Louis barks out a laugh. “I thought it was you who was supposed to be taking me out to dinner?”

“Details, details.” Harry shrugs offhandedly, opening the passenger door for Louis.

“Wait, before we go…I have something for you.” Louis reaches out to lightly tug on Harry’s hand.

Harry closes the door and leans back against the car, raising an eyebrow curiously. “Oh, is that so? Are you gonna make me close my eyes and guess what it is?”

“Yes actually, now that you suggested it.” Louis grins teasingly. “And while you’re at it, hold out both of your hands.”

“Ok.” Harry laughs, dutifully doing as instructed.

Louis fumbles around with his breast pocket until he finds it, pressing the small gift into Harry’s open hands for him to guess. Then he stands back a bit so he can watch his husband’s full reaction.

Harry furrows his bow slowly as he closes his palms around the object. “Um…is it a ring? Another ring? Baby, you know you’ve given me more rings than I have fingers and I love every one of them but—” His voice cuts out as he opens his eyes to look down in his hand, shock coating his features. He lifts his gaze up to Louis questioningly. “Your championship ring? But Lou…”

“I want you to have it.” Louis says softly, closing his hand over Harry’s. “I’ll never stop saying this because it’s the truest thing I’ve ever known in my entire life, but I couldn’t have ever made it to this point without you. It’s your win too, my love. It’s yours too…and it feels only right that my first championship winning ring should go to the man who made it happen.”

Harry stares down at it in his hand for awhile in silence and he looks so genuinely touched, as
though he might start crying. He takes a moment before looking back up to meet his husband’s eyes and the brightness of his smile could put the sun to shame. “Louis Tomlinson, I swear I’ve never loved anyone even half as much as I love you.”

Louis leans up and presses his answering love for Harry against his lips, sweet and slow and purposeful. He pulls back marginally to look into Harry’s eyes again. “You don’t have to wear it—”

“You’ve gone absolutely mad if you think I’m not going to fucking wear it.” Harry interrupts pulling back a bit more. “It’s probably gonna be take a little expert level creativity, but I’m gonna make this work.”

“Oh please, let me. I got this.” Louis assures confidently, ready to work some magic. “Spread ‘em for me, babe.”

Harry happily spreads out both of his hands and Louis goes to work on readjusting all his many adorning rings. Harry isn’t even wearing all of them, because it’s physically impossible, but the ones he is wearing are his favorites, having a special place in his heart. Louis doesn’t touch his wedding band, leaving that one where it has never once moved on his left hand, but he fiddles around with his various anniversary rings that physically date the story of their love.

Louis slides the last ring into place before looking up at Harry. “Ok, how’s that feel, Haz?”

Harry wiggles his fingers, a slow, bright smile spreading across his face. “It feels like it’s always belonged there.”

Louis kisses Harry’s ringed knuckles tenderly until Harry opens his palms to cradle the sides of Louis’ head with both hands. He pulls Louis’ face towards his own to kiss him again and like so many of their kisses today, it quickly becomes more and more passionate and lustful, a charge building up between them.

“How important is it that we make our dinner reservation?” Louis asks lowly as their kiss grows even more desperate, Harry’s hands moving from Louis’ face to his still slightly wet hair.

“Very…” Harry mumbles weakly as Louis slides his eager hands down his suited back to rest on Harry’s ass.

“Mmm… but baby, we could just climb in the back…and…it could be just like old times. Remember how much fun we’ve had in this car?” Louis tempts alluringly, pressing Harry’s back against the siding of the car as he continues to grope his husband’s bum, fingers dancing along his waistband. “You know you want to…”

Harry doesn’t respond at first, lulling his head to the side to give Louis slightly better access to the underside of his neck. His eyes flutter closed as Louis goes to work nipping at his skin, sucking a bright new love bite just above his collar.

“I can feel how much you want to…” Louis groans heavily, hips aligned together as Harry rubs up against him creating a teasing friction between their bodies.

“I…uh…mmm—Louis…” Harry gasps out his name when Louis puts pressure on a sweet spot just beneath his ear, back arching a bit as Louis rocks slowly against him.

“Harry… god—I want you so bad…” Louis exhales in utter desperation as he blindly reaches for Harry’s belt buckle next. “Dinner can wait…I—”

“Shit, dinner!” Harry remembers suddenly, eyes snapping open. He uses all the resolve he possesses
in order to put both hands on Louis’ shoulders and purposely push him back, putting a good amount of distance between them. “No, no, no. You almost had me, you really, really did…but no…We can’t.” Harry straightens himself out, adjusting himself in his pants. “We’ll be late and it’s—we can’t miss it. No.”

“Whyyyy baby…” Louis whines in frustration, pouting and still attempting to grope Harry’s ass as he dodges out of reach. “I don’t want food, I want you…”

“No, Lou! We can’t! It'll ruin everything—I mean…umm…” Harry chews on his inner cheek, backtracking. “I’m uh super hungry…so yeah…”

“No, you aren’t.” Louis argues, not trusting Harry’s weak lies for a minute.

“Yes, yes I am.” Harry tries again, obviously hiding something. “You aren’t me. You don’t know. I’m hungry, ok. Very, very, hungry.”

“No, I’m not you, but it’s fair to say that I know you pretty damn well at this point and I know you’re lying.” Louis contends, not at all willing to let this go.

“I’m not lying!” Harry insists, opening the passenger door for Louis. “Just get in the car…”

Louis frowns, eyeing Harry suspiciously with unimpressed pursed lips. He knows perfectly well how much his spouse cares about upholding traditions and honoring plans, but this is ridiculous, even for him. He is totally hiding something and badly.

“Please get in the car, baby.” Harry asks nicely, tilting his head and blinking his very cute, very sweet, very manipulative doe eyes at Louis. “Pleaaase, it’s important to me.”

“Fineee.” Louis sighs unnecessarily loud, throwing his head back like he’s agreeing to the worst punishment of them all. Dinner with Harry is fun or whatever, spending time with him is everything, Louis would never deny that. But he’d rather spend their time in different, more productive ways right now. Like taking his time teasing Harry apart and watching him come completely undone under the calculated touch of his fingers or the practiced flick of his tongue. But again, whatever.

They settle into the car, Louis immediately kicking his shined Italian leather shoes onto the dashboard as Harry drives. Louis rests his hand lightly on Harry’s thigh, an unconscious habit of his.

“Babe, you know what’s weird?” Louis questions, turning to face Harry with a contemplative frown as he remembers something odd from earlier.

“What’s weird?” Harry wonders curiously, hands on the wheel.

“I couldn’t find my family.” Louis tells him in confusion.

“Hmm?” Harry blinks, his voice sounding just a touch higher than usual.

“After the game, I couldn’t find them which is weird because they always wait off to the side for me. Do you think they’re ok, Haz? They would have told me if something serious was wrong…”

“Um…well…I think you worry too much…” Harry shrugs off easily. “They’re fine, they were sat with me the whole time.”

“But what about after?” Louis asks next.

“What about after?” Harry echoes, playing dumb.
Louis narrows his eyes at Harry, growing more suspicious. “…Where did they go?”

“Home.” Harry answers briefly, skirting around the topic. “They were uh really tired and so yeah. They went home.”

“That doesn’t sound like them at all. They would have definitely come round to find me before they left.” Louis insists, pulling out his iPhone from his suit pocket. “Maybe I should call—”

“No!” Harry instantly slaps the phone out of Louis’ grasp, letting it fall under the car seat.

“Aha!” Louis jumps, waving an accusatory finger in Harry’s face as he narrows his eyes to practically slits. “You know something Harry E. Styles! And I’m on to you…”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Harry denies with a little shake of his head. “I just think that it’s a waste of time for you to call them because I know that they’re fine. I just told you they were with me. I’m sure they’ll call later or stop by to congratulate you or something…”

“Sure…” Louis nods skeptically, tone dripping with suspicious sarcasm. “Mhmm sure.”

“You don’t trust me? That hurts, babe.” Harry feigns betrayal, but Louis is hardly buying it in the slightest. “I trust you with my everything. I’m telling the truth.”

Louis shakes his head, suppressing a grin, but laughing fondly anyways. “Harry, I’m pretty sure I witnessed your very first poorly told lie as a little kid. And your face is still exactly the same. I know you are lying to me right now.”

Harry gasps in appalled shock, dropping his jaw. “I can’t believe you would treat me like this. All I’m trying to do is provide a very true, very honest account of my side of the story and you are sitting there profiling me like a criminal.”

“Alright, tell me again then.” Louis encourages, sitting back in his seat with his arms crossed as he watches Harry.

“Tell you what!?" Harry fights back a smile.

“Tell me what happened!” Louis presses, knowing Harry is going to slip up and that’s when he’ll catch him. “From the beginning, please.”

“Look. For the last time, I was with our entire family for the duration of the entire game—and there is video proof of that for the record. When the game ended and you won, I told them I was going to go find you, which I did, and that’s when I jumped into your interview. We made out on the field—super sexy, super hot…” Harry recounts, sighing to himself wistfully. “But then Liam stole you away from me for your press conference and so I went back to our family and uh…you know…the twins were really, really sleepy…everyone was so exhausted and so yeah. They went home. And so I changed into this little number.” He gestures proudly down to his fancy suit. “And then I uh waited for you… right there…in the parking lot…the whole time. You came out looking like an angelic model and gave me your ring, which I’ll probably cry about later and then you pressed me up against this car—once again super sexy, super hot. And now here we are on our way to our lovely, quiet dinner reservation. The end.”

“I don’t buy it.” Louis decides instantly. “There are so many holes in that story, I don’t even know where to begin. You’re a liar, love. A bitch ass liar.”

“Ok well…fuck you too.” Harry slaps Louis’ knee playfully and Louis bursts into uncontrollable laughter, cackling as Harry continues to try and defend himself. “If you won’t believe the god honest
truth, then I can’t help you.”

Louis bends over and tries to find his phone, lost somewhere on the car’s floor. “If you hadn’t lobbed my phone under the seat to fuck only knows where, I would call my mum myself and fact check you and your bullshit story right now.”

“Oh, that’s too bad.” Harry shrugs unapologetically. “She would have told you the exact same thing—minus the super sexy, super hot parts.”

“Oh, right, of course she would have.” Louis nods sarcastically. “Or maybe I could just use your phone to call her.”

“It’s dead.”

“You were just using it and even if it was dead there’s a charger right he—”

“Oh hey so anyway uh…guess who texted me on your behalf to tell you congratulations?” Harry questions, purposely interrupting Louis mid-sentence and changing the conversation topic.

“Well, no…there’s so much wrong with what you are trying to do.” Louis starts, not going to let Harry get away with this. “First of all—”

“Beckham.” Harry interrupts again with a shit eating smug grin on his face.

“What!? No!” Louis gasps, falling for Harry’s bait. He wouldn’t normally buy into a conversation switch when he knows he has Harry cornered but this is about The David Beckham and choices have to be made. “Why does he keep doing that!? Why won’t he just tell me directly!?”

“Because, like me, he finds it absolutely hilarious how irrationally upset it makes you when we hang out or talk without you.” Harry laughs to himself, sounding way too amused for his own good.

“He was my friend first, Harry.” Louis reminds, sitting up in his seat defensively. “You may have done photoshoots with him before or whatever the fuck, but he was my friend first.”

“Mhmm.” Harry doesn’t even try to hide his amusement, pressing his lips together.

“We played on the same team for years! He is my mentor! My idol! He’s like a brother to me! I love him and he loves me! We have moments, Harry! Moments! And memories! And I can’t believe you have corrupted my David Beckham and turned him against me!” Louis looks Harry up and down, expression riddled with overdramatic betrayal. “He was so pure before he met you…”

“Ok, next time we go for dinner at his house, I’ll tell him to stop.” Harry offers kindly.

“Aww really, babe?” Louis smiles appreciatively, lightening his voice. “Thank you, I love you.”

“No.” Harry snickers, utterly entertained by solely himself.

“You’re a monster and I hate you.” Louis amends flatly, glaring at Harry.

“So Becks thinks—”

“Oh no. No. You do not get to call him ‘Becks’. That’s a privilege reserved for real friends. He. Was. My. Friend. First.” Louis enunciates every word specifically, leaning over the center console of the car to get in Harry’s face.

Harry bites back a laugh as he continues to drive. “Louis—”
“Hewasmyfriendfirst!” Louis rushes out bitterly in one breath, before settling himself back down properly in his seat, taking one deep, long calming inhale. “Ok. You know what? No. I’m sorry—I’m an adult, this is fine—I’m cool, I’m cool. We can all be friends. Yes. Great.”

Harry waits for a moment, glancing over at his husband, trying to keep a straight face. “Are you good now?”

“Mhmm mhmm.” Louis holds his blink for an unnecessarily long time as he nods his head. “Fantastic. Just positively peachy.”

Harry still looks like he is on the verge of cracking up completely, dimples digging at his cheeks. “Good, I’m glad that—”

“No, actually no! I’m still irrationally irritated!” Louis decides, interrupting Harry and crossing his arms over chest. “Just give me another minute.”

“Ok, whatever you need, babe.”

Louis flicks on all the overhead lights in the car, twisting around in his seat to bend over and get a better look on the floor. He reaches blindly in between the tight spaces until he finds just what he is looking for.

Harry glances over at him every so often while driving. “What are you doing now?”

Louis holds up a finger to Harry as he continues to tap out a message on his phone in silence. He curls into the corner of the car in order to insure that Harry can’t see his phone screen and when he finishes, Louis takes an exaggerated content sigh. “Ahh wow. I feel sooo much better now.”

“What was that?” Harry questions, looking between Louis and his phone curiously. “What did you do?”

“Oh nothing, I just…invited a dear friend over for tea next week.” Louis shrugs evasively. “But it doesn’t really concern you because you’ll be in London that day for work…so…”

“…Ok…but who is the friend?”

Louis shrugs again, looking out of the car window. “Oh, you know…I have many friends so…”

“Ok, that’s great…but who did you invite over to our home?” Harry asks again apprehensively and Louis just knows that he knows.

“Oh no one you’re familiar with…just Sam…Sam Smith? Maybe you’ve heard of them? Maybe not? Voice of an angel…” Louis shrugs again nonchalantly. “Maybe they’ll sing for me. Ooh or maybe we’ll sing together. I do dabble in musical pursuits sometimes…”

“Ohhh…” Harry blows out a long stream of air, shaking his head. “You went there.”

“Oh no, you went there, babe. I was just forced to join you.” Louis corrects pointedly. “Don’t play with fire, my love. You will get burned.”

“You know I’m obsessed with them. You know I think they’re amazing and yet…” Harry continues shaking his head slowly, licking his lips. “Wow wow wow wow…”

“Yes, yes. Meditate on that for a bit. Let it affect you…” Louis encourages, happily watching Harry fall from grace and power. His mischievous husband, whom Louis loves ever so dearly, is always
taunting him with this and perhaps Harry’s day of reckoning is finally upon him.

“Louis…it’s Sam!” Harry emphasizes with wide eyes. “A nonbinary talent filled wonder…blessed with the voice of an actual fucking angel! How could you?”


“Lou, I’m sorry—”

“I’m sure you are…” Louis dismisses, going back to looking out of the car window.

“Don’t do this. I love you, I’ll tell David to stop teasing you, I promise.” Harry tries, probably ready to say just about anything now that Louis has his attention. “Just please let me come to tea with you.”

“Mmm…I’ll consider it.” Louis contemplates slowly. “We’ll see how I feel next week.”

“That’s all I ask.” Harry smiles, sweetly taking Louis’ closest hand and holding it to his lips.

“Wait…why are we at Lucille’s?” Louis asks as he instantly recognizes the view from outside the car window. He takes his hand back and turns back towards Harry in question. “Is this—are you…what is going on? Is this a thing?”

“Um…define a ‘thing’? I’m not quite sure what that means…” Harry frowns, pursing his lips and once again playing dumb.

“A thing, Harry! A thing!” Louis repeats redundantly without explanation, but he knows Harry gets exactly what he means.

“You’re going to have to be more specific if you want a real answer, babe.” Harry smirks knowingly. “But I truly don’t know what you’re going on about.”

“Oh really Harold, then why are we here?” Louis asks pointing out the window towards the restaurant they practically grew up inside of. “Lucille’s is our thing and you know it! Be honest with me and just admit that you’re doing a thing!”

“I will admit to nothing but I will say that—I dunno, Lou…I just thought it felt right, you know? You’re right, coming here has always been our thing and I wanted to take you somewhere special where we can just be ourselves for the night, without the fanfare of it all. Just you and me.” Harry answers, sounding honest and genuine this time. “But if you don’t want to be here, I’m sure I can get us reservations to a really fancy and posh restaurant somewhere.”

“Aww love, you’re so sweet and sentimental. You could have just said that from the beginning.” Louis smiles warmly, giving Harry’s thigh a gentle, loving squeeze. “Of course, I want to be here. Lucille’s is always perfect, I love coming here. And I’ll be honest with you, I wasn’t really in the mood for fancy anyways.”

“Good.” Harry smiles back happily. “I’ll take that apology now.”

“You’re still a liar. But I suppose…I can…perhaps…maybe…apologize for interrogating you.” Louis drags out, facial features all scrunched up as he begrudgingly says it. “After all, you were just trying to make me happy.”

“Exactly. That’s all I’m ever trying to do.” Harry defends as shifts the car into park.
“And you succeed every time, love. Every time.” Louis smiles brightly, leaning in to press a kiss to Harry’s temple. “I do feel a bit overdressed though.”

“What ever do you mean, Lou?” Harry shrugs, holding his chin up. “Armani shoes and Gucci suits go perfectly with grease stains and milkshake splotches?”

“You do have a point.” Louis laughs warmly.

Harry hops out rounding the car to the passenger side to open the door for Louis. He holds his arm out to him properly, offering a dazzling smile. “Shall we, my dear?”

Louis happily loops his arm together with his best friend’s, beaming up at him. “Oh, we shall, my love.”

They walk with linked arms towards the entrance to the diner, huddled close together just like all the times they’ve walked through these very same swing doors. But when they go inside this time, it doesn’t feel quite like it normally does and it doesn’t quite look like it either.

Louis’ face morphs into a frown. “Why is it so dark in here and where—”

“Surprise!” A whole restaurant filled with people erupts loudly as the lights flicker on.

“Oh my—fuck!” Louis curses uncontrollably, jumping a bit as he clutches his heart in genuine surprise. To his left, Harry is bent over his knees laughing, obviously finding Louis’ shocked face hilarious.

“Yeah…so…about the thing I swore I wasn’t doing…” Harry continues to laugh, shrugging at Louis innocently. “I did it.”

“Oh, I soo should have seen this coming.” Louis shakes his head, lips spreading out into a smile as he thinks back on how weird Harry was acting in the car. “I knew it! You’re a horrible liar! I should have trusted my instincts!”

Harry grins, wrapping both his arms over the tops of Louis’ shoulders. “I know you kept saying that you didn’t really want to plan anything big if you were to win, but I always knew you were going to win and it’s a pretty big fucking deal so…surprise, baby.” He dips down to press a gentle kiss to his cheek.

“Oh, I really hate you now.” Louis swats Harry lightly as he smiles. “You know how I feel about surprises.”

“And you know how I feel about surprising and embarrassing you.” Harry counters teasingly. He leans in to nibble softly on Louis’ ear. “Did you really think I would willingly turn down car sex for a stupid dinner reservation? Me? Really?”

Louis drops his head down to Harry’s shoulder and laughs. “That’s what I’m saying! I knew it didn’t make sense.”

Harry smirks, infinitely proud of himself as he continues holding Louis close. “I love you, Lou and everyone here loves you and they all jumped at the chance to throw you a surprise party. It was going to be a small family thing but…there are so many people who wanted to celebrate with you and show you just how much you mean to them.”

Louis lifts his head from Harry’s shoulder and turns to look out over the sea of familiar faces surrounding him, all smiling and waving excitedly. Everyone who ever mattered is here for him,
everyone Louis holds dear to his heart. There is not a single person missing, from his adored family to his closest friends, his loyal teammates along with the many people he works with from day to day, even some of his favorite little kids from his charity. All of these lovely people are so incredibly special to him.

They could have gone anywhere, after all there are countless after parties and events going on throughout the city, but yet everyone willingly chose to be here and celebrate with him instead. And Louis couldn’t possibly feel more touched and honored.

When Louis looks at his life now, he can’t be anything but grateful. So overwhelmingly grateful. He’s never properly spoken of his thirteen-year-old adventure with anyone, not even Harry, but he certainly will never forget it as long as he lives.

Sometimes Louis finds himself thinking about it again and he can almost convince himself that it really was just a nightmare or maybe a horribly twisted dream or better yet some kind of hallucination. But deep down he knows that can’t very well be true, because despite how improbable it may seem, all of his favorite people still ended up in his life as though they were always destined to play a part in it in some way. Almost like some kind of opportune fate. But it definitely didn’t stop Louis from freaking out a little bit when another person from his alternate life somehow found themselves back into his current life.

During his first few seasons as a Rover, the team manager had been an older guy. He was nice and supportive but Louis never really cared for him in an extreme way, remaining neutral for the most part. But then one day the team announced that the former manager would be retiring and a new, younger one would be brought in his place. Louis had stupidly joked to himself, laughing at the small likelihood of his new manager perhaps being none other than Liam Payne. Of course, Louis wasn’t at all serious, just having a good laugh with himself.

But to his complete and utter surprise, Liam walked right into their team meeting the next day, eagerly introducing himself to all the players. And Louis nearly lost his damn mind, taking his new manager by the shoulders just to make sure he was really a real life living person.

Liam may be his manager once again, but he is far more of a friend than anything else this time. Louis can come to Liam with just about anything and know that he has always got his back. And Louis hates to admit it but those nasty tonics he makes so well have saved him many a time after irresponsibly getting shitface drunk with Harry on several occasions.

And as for Niall Horan, Louis kind of has to confess that he sought him out purposely. Of course he did not go on a door to door manhunt to find the Irish lad, but when he did set out to hire a personal assistant, Louis flat out refused to hire anyone that wasn’t Niall. He went through dozens of different applications, turning them all down instantly. Harry was so confused, wondering how Louis could know they weren’t the person for the job without even meeting them, and why he was being so oddly specific about something as rudimentary as an assistant. But Louis kept saying that he knew exactly what he wanted and he was certain that if he kept waiting it would all be worth it.

It may have taken several months, but when Louis received an application from a Mr. Horan, he nearly fell down and cried, hiring Niall on the spot without even bothering with an interview.

Niall may still be his assistant, but in reality he is more of a brother and Louis literally trusts him with his entire life. They are as close as brothers in every sense. Every single day Louis still tells Niall that he would be lost without him.

And Louis’ favorite part of all this, which he finds exceedingly funny, is that Niall and Liam are a thing. It was actually Louis who decided to brilliantly play matchmaker and set them up on a whim,
making it up in his mind that they would be super compatible. Well, to be completely fair, it was initially Harry’s idea, but Louis is the one who made it happen so in his book, he gets the credit.

Even though Liam and Niall were always flirting with each other, sharing private smiles and inside jokes, neither one of them would actually take the first step and ask each other out. Naturally, it bugged the living shit out of Louis, so he tricked them into a first date with each other to get the ball rolling. He invited them both to dinner individually, claiming that he just wanted to take each of them out on a nice dinner because of how much he appreciates them. But of course Louis never showed up, instead leaving a note on the table attached to an expensive bottle of wine, “You left me no choice. I can only take so much sexual tension. Order whatever you like, it's all on me, but don’t leave this fucking table until you’ve properly acknowledged your feelings for each other. P.S. if this works, you’re welcome. If not, you can blame Harry. Love you both, have fun! ;)”

It did in fact work, although Niall and Liam racked up a £15K bill at the elegant restaurant Louis picked for them, and Louis is certain they did it on purpose just to tease him. But Louis didn’t even care because Niall and Liam officially started dating the next week so all of his efforts were proven to be worth it. They quickly become inseparable, seeming to spend every free moment with each other. Unfortunately, Harry and Louis have walked in on them accidentally several times, having seen far, far too much of how inseparable they really are. But even still, it warms Louis’ heart to see that they can’t get enough of each other.

But what almost caused Louis to full on shit his pants was when Harry came home one day and was overly excited about who his latest model was for his new shoot. None other than French actor, Raphael Moreau.

Harry invited him over for dinner one night after Louis practically begged him repeatedly to do so. Raphael happily agreed to the invitation because he’d easily become good friends with Harry while working together and he also was apparently a huge fan of Louis.

So he came over arm in arm with his fiancé, Zayn—another what the actual fuck moment, and when Harry properly introduced them for the “first time” Louis smiled really wide and he didn’t hesitate to pull Raphael right into the biggest hug he could manage. It definitely crept Raphael out at first, catching him completely by surprise, but Louis just told him that for some reason he felt like he already knew him. And when Louis continued on to ask if it’d be alright if he called him Raphy, Raphael laughed and said no one had ever called him that before, but he really liked it.

They all hit it off right away, of course; easily becoming really good friends. So much so that Raphy and Zayn started coming over all the time to hang out, along with Liam and Niall. Sometimes for dinners or movie marathons, and other times Harry and Louis will host a massive game night that has now become a bit of a monthly tradition among the six of them.

Harry and Louis essentially share a brain, especially when it comes to games so they dominate the game scoreboards. They’re The Dream Team, or so they call themselves; completely owning Pictionary and charades without even needing to try, Harry barely moving his body a centimeter before Louis guesses it correctly. Liam and Niall call it cheating and Zayn swears it’s some kind of sorcerous mind reading, while Raphy just thinks it’s beautiful.

And when they play a teamed up version of Monopoly, they end up running the entire board, somehow owning every vital property and eventually possessing more Monopoly money than the bank. Plus, they are ridiculously over competitive and utterly obnoxious when it comes to winning, trash talking everyone and not giving a single fuck. One time they even wore matching outfits, with The Dream Team embroidered on the back. They’re the worst and they know it. Two people can’t be best friends their whole entire lives and now goal worthy husbands and not brag about it.
Constantly.

But Raphy and Zayn are pretty bad too, always displaying some form of unwarranted PDA that no one asked for. Also they speak almost exclusively in French to each other, talking about art and shit while giggling into each others mouths and it’s sickening, a cute kind of sickening, but still. Louis thinks they’re absolutely perfect for each other and he’s so happy to be able to witness all his closest friends happily in love no matter how disgusting it may be at times.

So when Louis looks at his life now, filled with love, surrounded by all the people he cares so deeply for, saying he’s grateful almost feels like an understatement.

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“Well, well, well, you actually got him here without giving the whole thing away.” Liam applauds teasingly as Harry and Louis approach. “Harry, I have to say I’m impressed.”

“I’d like to put it on record that I always knew you could do it.” Niall commends, letting go of Liam’s hand momentarily to clap Harry on the back.

“I didn’t.” Raphael shakes his head, giving Harry an apologetic smile. “Honestly, my money was on Louis figuring it out.”

“It was not easy.” Harry sighs heavily, glancing at Louis next to him. “I almost gave in. He is a human lie detector—well at least with my lies, he is. I can’t have secrets, he knows too much.”

Louis giggles, arms hooked around Harry’s waist. “No, Harry is just very obvious and extra about it.”

“But when is Harry not extra in anything he does?” Zayn wonders.

“This is very true.” Raphael agrees with his fiancé, tucked to his side. “You all saw him from the sidelines today, yes?”

“A better question would be, who didn’t see him?” Liam teases, grinning. “That was quite show Styles, quite a show.”

“Watch it, that’s my baby you’re talking about.” Louis defends from under his husband’s wing. Only he is allowed the privilege of shamelessly teasing Harry. No one else. Well, except maybe Gemma. But that’s it.

Liam nods obviously, having heard this before in the past. “Yes, yes I know, Louis. I wouldn’t dare.”

“None of us would dare. We know better by now.” Niall continues in agreement.

“Well, I admire his dedication.” Raphael decides, applauding Harry.

Louis grins up at Harry warmly, holding him close. “Me too.”

“Me three.” Harry stupidly grins, laughing lightly at himself.

“While we were waiting for you to get here, we watched the highlights of your little stint on BBC.”
Liam says, already starting to chuckle a bit. “Did you know there’s a hashtag going around on Twitter guessing what you whispered to Louis?”

“Oh, of course there is.” Louis sighs, knowing this was bound to happen.

Harry wiggles his eyebrows smugly, overly pleased with himself. “Sounds like a successful news day in my book.”

“So what’d you say?” Niall wonders, leaning in a little closer. “I’m slightly curious.”

Harry shrugs as though he has no recollection at all and Louis’ face remains completely blank alongside his husband’s.

“Come on lads, we’re all friends here.” Liam goads encouragingly. But to no avail, as Louis and Harry remain unresponsive on the topic.

“I bet we could probably guess.” Zayn grins, eyeing them both suspiciously. “Only certain things can get Louis to blush like that.”

“Ok, let me be clear.” Harry finally speaks up with a slight smirk to his lips. “I could whisper a fucking Dr. Seuss poem in Louis’ ear and he would blush instantly so…the jokes on you guys. You’ll never guess what I said to him.”

“No, it was definitely something fucking nasty knowing you.” Zayn argues confidently.

Niall nods his head as he agrees with Zayn. “Yeah, Louis made The Face and everything. Only unfortunate people, such as ourselves, who have personally witnessed you two going at it would recognize that face.”

“And it also probably doesn’t help your story that there are a million pictures from a million angles of you guys snogging in the middle of the pitch after the interview.” Liam pulls out his phone and it doesn’t take long for him to find an example picture. He flips the screen around and shows them a steamy picture of Louis hoisted up in Harry’s arms, legs locked around his back as Harry lifts his head up to passionately make out with his husband.

“Oh god…” Louis sighs again, leaning in to get a better look at the photo. “Oh wait but—we look hot. Really fucking hot.”

“You’re welcome world.” Harry tips his imaginary hat, smiling proudly. “Next time it won’t be free.”

“Hey babe, we should totally get that picture blown up and framed in our house.” Louis suggests eagerly to Harry.

“You always have such good ideas baby, I love you.” Harry drops a quick kiss to Louis’ lips. “Oh, you know what? I know just where we can put it and—”

“Unbelievable!” Liam bursts incredulously, pocketing his phone. “They have absolutely no shame!”

“What is shame?” Harry frowns dramatically, sounding like he genuinely has never heard the word before. “Lou, do you know what that means?”

“Um…it’s, like, a thing…people get sometimes? When? They aren’t us? I think? I can’t really know for sure…” Louis tries, smiling up at his lifelong love. “It’s beyond my understanding, I’ve never experienced it.”
“Mmm how sad for everyone who isn’t us.” Harry empathizes genuinely, bowing his head a bit.

“Exactly.” Louis raises his hand for a high five. “Here’s to being us.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Harry cheers, slapping Louis’ hand triumphantly. “Never a loss for The Dream Team.”

“They’re the most obnoxious couple I’ve ever met in my life and what’s worse is that they’re even more obnoxiously proud of it.” Zayn comments next as he watches them.

“I think it’s inspiring how strong they love. They should be proud.” Raphael commends once again. “To love boldly is to love beautifully. L’amour est magnifique.”

Zayn sighs, shaking his head. “No, Raph, babe we’re meant to be teasing them about it, not giving real compliments.”

“Oh...” Raphael frowns in confusion. “But I’m genuinely happy for them. I can’t mock true love. I’m a romantic, that’s essentially blasphemy.”

“Thank you, Raphy.” Louis smiles appreciatively. His French friend doesn’t have a mean bone in his body, even if only teasing and Louis loves him for it. “If your fiancé wasn’t being so rude right now, I’d gladly say the same about your relationship.”

“Harry, is that a fucking hickey on your neck?” Niall asks, looking at Harry’s collar. “What are you teenagers?”

“Maybe.” Louis shrugs, unbothered. He has half a mind to put another one on Harry right now and make it a set.

“Believe it or not, it’s unrelated—sorta.” Harry explains, touching a hand to the purpling love bite Zayn left on his neck in the stadium parking lot.

“Sure it is.” Zayn sarcastically comments.

“We don’t have to defend ourselves to you. We’re in love, deal with it. And none of you should even be opening your mouths right now, because we all know you two are disgusting. You know why.” Harry points at Niall and Liam, expression conveying all that he has bore witness to. “And as for you two, I’ve seen far more of you than I ever bargained for in my lifetime.” He narrows his eyes at Zayn and Raphy next, looking them up and down while shaking his head.

“Tell ‘em, baby.” Louis encourages, nodding along under Harry’s arm. “We don’t have to stand for this.”

“No, we don’t.” Harry pompously lifts his head and Louis mirrors him at his side. “In fact, we won’t. Let’s go husband, you have other guests to see.”

“Did Harry really just call Louis husband? As if that’s his actual, god-given name?” Niall bursts into laughter. “I hate them.”
Louis goes around with Harry at his side, making sure to personally greet and hug every single person who came to support him. They spend a bit of time with their sisters, joking around with Daisy and Phoebe after chatting with Lottie, Fizzy and Gemma.

Louis and Harry even stop to play around with their nephews, Gemma’s three rambunctious boys, as well as Doris and Ernest. Despite the mass amount of people filling the space, they play a game of hide and seek, eagerly chasing each other around the diner and making a right mess. Gemma, of course, scolds them—not her children, no, but the main culprits, Harry and Louis; telling them that they are worse than her own sons. But they pay her absolutely no mind because the twins adore their big brothers and the boys love their fun uncles.

But Harry ends up getting dragged off by Lucille requesting his help in the kitchen, so Louis continues on by himself, meeting up with all his other guests. And he is happily surprised for the second time this evening when a late guest walks though the door.

“Becks!” Louis greets cheerfully, a little ways from the door.

“Tommo!” David smiles warmly, bringing him in for a big hug. “I’m sorry I’m late mate and I wish I could stay, but I’ve got to be on a plane in two hours. But I wanted to stop by and congratulate you.”

As usual, he ruffs up Louis’ hair, tousling it about affectionately.

Louis laughs, held under what could be identified as a headlock by David’s bicep. “Thanks, mate, I’m happy you came.”

“Oh course, you know I’d do anything for Harry.” David explains obviously with a grin. “I’m so in love with your husband.”

Louis’ entire face morphs into instant betrayal, just as it had earlier in the car. “What the—”

“I’m kidding! Louis! I’m totally kidding, mate!” David cackles, loosening his arm over Louis’ shoulder. “Man, that never gets old. Harry would die if he saw your face just now. Ahh, priceless.”

“You both are heartless individuals and I don’t know why I put up with you.” Louis sulks to himself.

“Alright, alright in all seriousness, you know I’m here for you, yeah?” David squeezes his arm around Louis again, nuzzling him close. “You’re like my little brother. I’m really proud of you, mate. There is nothing like your first Premier. If anyone deserves it, it’s you. I’m sure you’ll see a few more rings in your career.”

“You really think so?” Louis looks up at him.

“No doubt, little bro.” David smiles genuinely, ruffling his hair one more time. “You’re the real deal.”

There is truly no higher praise than that from the lips of his all time hero turned mentor. “Thanks, mate.” Louis beams with appreciation. “One day when they write a biography about me and my footie legacy, they’ll quote me saying ‘Beckham taught me everything I know about the game’.” He teases, partially joking but also partially serious. “That’s going to be the very first line.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” David laughs, pulling Louis in for another full hug. “Right so, I’ve gotta run. Always good to see you, bud. Toss one back for me, yeah? Oh and tell Harry I’ll text him when I’m back in London so we can do lunch.”

“Yes to the first thing and unfortunately I lost the ability to hear after that so...” Louis shrugs unapologetically. “That’s awkward...”
“Don’t fight it, just let it happen.” David grins, walking backwards towards the door. “We’re in love.”

Louis flips him off with both hands, nodding towards the door. “Get out. Go catch your flight, I don’t want you here anymore.”

David only laughs warmly as he heads out the swinging door. “Love you too. See ya around, little brother. Enjoy your win.”

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“Hello mums.” Louis greets affectionately, kissing both Anne and Jay’s cheeks before squeezing himself in between them to wrap his arms around each of their shoulders. He’s chatted with just about everyone in the restaurant, so now he only wants to sit back with his favorite ladies. “How are my beautiful mothers doing?”

Anne hugs Louis snugly by the waist, resting her head down to his shoulder. “Very well thanks, sweet pea. Don’t you smell nice.”

“He does, doesn’t he?” Jay agrees, mirroring Anne’s position on Louis’ other side.

“Aww, thanks mums.” Louis smiles at them both. “Harry bought it for me, yeah.”

“Where is Harry anyway?” Jay wonders, sounding surprised they aren’t hand in hand right now.


Jay and Anne each laugh knowingly, comfortably snuggled as close to Louis as possible.

“Oh we’re both just so proud of you, Louis.” Jay gushes, looking up at her son.

“Mhmm we really are.” Anne continues on. Her and Jay talk like they have one steady stream of consciousness sometimes, always finishing each others thoughts. “And not just because of your big win today.”

“Right, because Anne and I were just talking about how we can’t wait to meet our new grandbaby.” Jay beams excitedly. “We know you and Harry are going to make such wonderful parents.”

“Aww yes.” Anne smiles warmly. “You boys bring so much joy to our hearts and we know you’re going to bring so much joy to that little one on the way.”

Louis hugs them both tighter, feeling impossibly heart-warmed by their words. They are the most inspirational parents he’s ever known and Louis knows that if he and Harry can be even half as good of parents as his mothers are, their baby will never be without love and support.

“Well look at that, my favorite mums and my favorite husband.” Harry smiles, making his usual entrance with the unexpected flash of his camera. “That’s what I call picture perfect.”

“We weren’t even ready, at least give us a little warning, babe.” Louis frowns, looking to Jay and Anne apologetically. “Luckily my gorgeous mothers don’t have a bad side.”
“Oh Louis, please.” Jay grins, tapping his chest lightly.

“Unprepared photos are the best kind, I tell you that all the time, Lou.” Harry smiles, lowering his camera and flipping it over to Louis to show him a preview of the photograph he just captured. “See, look.”

“Hmm…fine…” Louis dismisses slowly, noting that it’s actually an effortlessly natural picture and Harry is right as usual. “But you’re still intruding on our private conversation.”

Anne giggles, turning a bit to look at Harry. “We were only talking about—”

“Mum please, you don’t have to tell him.” Louis interrupts, hugging Anne close to his side. “Harry already knows I’m your favorite son.”

“Oh, that’s how it is now? Ok, that’s fine.” Harry shrugs, sliding up to Jay’s side and pulling her away from Louis. “Because I’m her favorite son.”

“Mmm I wouldn’t be so sure…” Louis continues, gently tugging Jay back over to his side again so that he is once again sandwiched between his two mothers. “When you’re not around, they can’t stop saying how I’m actually both of their favorites so…”

Harry narrows his eyes in challenge. “Oh, is that right, momma’s boy?”

“Yeah it is, momma-less boy.” Louis taunts back, raising an eyebrow.

“You boys are so silly.” Jay laughs, pulling Harry against her other side and kissing his cheek.

“We love you, Harry and we love you, Louis.” Jay and Anne say together warmly as they have so many countless times through the years, hugging their sons tightly.

“Um…why did you both say his name first?” Louis frowns in offense and Harry laughs. “Is there something you want to tell me, mums?”

Anne smiles widely, shaking her head. “Oh, what are we going to do with you?”

Louis and Harry are sitting curled up together in their favorite booth in the back of the diner. Their legs are tangled up under the table and Harry is one handedly scrolling through the playback screen of his camera, showing Louis all the pictures he took of his game while Louis is using both of his hands to mindlessly trace patterns into Harry’s palm. The party is still going on around them, people chatting and music playing, but they’re hopelessly lost in a world of their own.

Harry pauses, looking down at his hand held gently in Louis’. “Am I meant to be guessing what you’re doing?”

“No love, I just like holding your hand sometimes.” Louis admits softly, laying his head down on Harry’s shoulder and yawning. He lets his eyes fall closed as he exhales contently.

“Sleepy?”

“Mhmm…” Louis nods slowly against him before peeking up. “Is it bad that I want to leave my own
party and just go home with you?”

Harry presses a kiss to his temple. “Not at all.”

“Really?”

“Really.” Harry confirms straightaway. “It’s been a long and eventful day, let’s just go home.”

Louis rests his head back down against his husband’s shoulder, letting go of Harry’s hand in favor of wrapping his arms around his middle. “Thank you for tonight, Haz. It was really sweet of you to do all this for me.”

“Anything for my little champ.” Harry promises, adjusting his arm around Louis.

Louis pouts his lip out a little. “You love to call me little, but—”

“Yes, I know. You were taller than me when we were thirteen.” Harry repeats before Louis can. “I know, babe. You’ll never let me forget.”

“Well, you promised you wouldn’t.” Louis reminds.

“And I haven’t.” Harry smiles, holding him close.

“Yet.” Louis mumbles through a yawn.


They pull up to their beautifully lavish home, a custom estate that they personally designed together. It’s meant to be their family home and it’s filled with plenty of bedrooms to account for all their future children as their family grows. But in the meantime it’s the perfect place for the two of them to just be the two of them, in love and completely obsessed with each other.

And it’s for that reason that Harry likes to call their lovely home The Love Shack. Even after Louis repeatedly tells him that it’s the exact opposite of a shack and he needs to think of a better name for it. But Harry just laughs and keeps referring to their vast, Victorian home as a love shack. Most times he’ll even start singing Love Shack by The B-52’s in Louis’ ear, having a little too much fun when he sings the lyrics, “Bang, bang, bang on the door, baby”. Exaggeratedly rolling his hips against Louis’ with every sexually charged use of the word bang, which never fails to make Louis laugh or—sometimes…push Harry up against a door and bang him for real.

To say they’re a bit insatiable when it comes to each other, is definitely an understatement. Harry and Louis can never get enough of one other and they consider themselves lucky. It’s not everyday that two people can love as long as they have and still not have grown tired or bored. And that’s not to say that they haven’t gotten upset with each other over the years or had ridiculous fights here and there over big changes impending on their lives. But it has never once been malicious and everything they say or do for one another is always out of love. They know in the end that they’re always on the same team, only ever wanting what’s best for each other.

One of their biggest fights, that they laugh about now because it’s thankfully so far behind them,
started out with letter in the mail and led to a huge argument about marriage. Harry wanted to get married sooner, rather than later because he figured what was the point in waiting any longer? And Louis agreed, of course he agreed, there was no one in the world he’d ever want to live out his days with.

But they were only 21 at the time and the letter that came in the mail was an offer, a rare, incredible offer. Harry was presented with the chance to spend two years in Paris, shadowing and learning from the biggest names in the industry. He was young, but his work was already starting to be massively adored and he was chosen out of thousands of suitable candidates. It was a huge, monumental step that would give him all the connections to jumpstart his career and Louis could not allow Harry to miss out on his dream. Not again.

“Lou, we could just elope!” Harry had said urgently as he paced the floor, breathing heavily with the letter still clutched in his grasp. “We could drop everything and run away and get married right now! Why are we waiting? We don’t need to wait!”

“What? Haz, I’m not just going to run off and marry you.” Louis answered back in exasperation, watching Harry wear a clear path into the living room carpet of their spacious flat. “Calm down and —”

“No, I will not calm down, Louis! Not until you tell me why! Why the hell won’t you marry me?!”

Harry stopped pacing and turned around in a panic to face his boyfriend. “I love you and you love me! Right? You love me? You love me—so just fucking marry me already!” He begged in urgency, frantic and nearly hysterical. “Please, baby, please!”

“Yes, of course I love you, Harry. With everything, I do.” Louis promised honestly, tentatively stepping closer, trying to be the calm one in this sudden blown up argument. Louis didn’t understand Harry’s frenzied desperation to be married, he didn’t understand where all this was coming from.

“I’m not marrying you right now, because of how much I love you.”

“How does that make any fucking sense, Louis!? How!?” Harry yelled back, turning away from him as he threw his letter angrily to the floor, growing more frustrated by the minute. “How can you stand there and claim that you love me, when you refuse make the actual commitment and marry me!?”

“Because I…I don’t want you to throw your dreams away, ok!” Louis tried to explain, finally raising his voice to match Harry’s, unable to contain his tongue anymore. “I don’t want you to take a fucking shit on everything you’ve worked for!”

“Ugh god—I’m not fucking throwing my dreams away!” Harry groaned loudly, going back to heavily pacing the floor.

“Oh, ok. Brilliant. So...you’re going to marry me and then what?” Louis questioned harshly, crossing his arms over his chest as he looked at Harry with narrowed eyes. “Follow me around like a fucking trophy wife!”

“No! No—I dunno—I’ll figure it out!” Harry stumbled, scraping a hand through his already disheveled hair. “I’ll still do photography or something…just maybe not fashion photography...”

“But that’s your dream, Harry!” Louis reminded, letting his frustration billow out of him. “It’s all you talk about, it’s what you’ve worked so hard for! And god—you’re so fucking good at it! So good! Everyone loves you and adores your work! That’s how you got this offer in the first fucking place! And now it’s here—your dream is right here, staring you in the bloody face and you’re acting like you don’t want it! But this is your dream, it’s your fucking dream!”
“But you’re my dream too!” Harry shouted back, the words ripping from his heaving chest as he tried to get Louis to understand.

Louis stood staring at him in the moment of silence, momentarily taken aback as the echo of Harry’s words still seemed to ring in his ears.

“You’re my dream too…” Harry’s voice fell to a hushed whisper as he lowered his head in defeat, breathing hallowed and ragged. He let his arms drop limply to his sides as though he just didn’t know what to do, beautiful features breaking.

“Oh Harry…” Louis’ whole face softened instantly as he realized what Harry meant. He didn’t hesitate to rush over and encircle his arms around his boyfriend, allowing Harry to crash and crumble against him. Louis pulled him down to the couch, holding Harry’s head against his chest as they nestled together. “I know, love…I know. You have me, you’ll always have me. I’m not going anywhere, you know that. Why is it so urgent that we run away right now?”

Harry remained quiet as Louis stroked his hair gently. “Because I’m scared…” He mumbled into Louis’ shirt, eyes squeezed shut against his own fears. “…I’m scared to go that far for so long…away from home…away from you. I’m scared that…things will change between us somehow. It’s always been you and me, Lou…always, in everything…and I dunno—it just feels like so much time apart and…so much can change—too much can change and I just…I dunno…as stupid as it sounds, I keep thinking that maybe if we get married…maybe nothing will change…”

“Harry, my love, I want nothing more than to be your husband. It’s all I want, I promise it is.” Louis professed to the crown of Harry’s head, lightly kissing his hair. “But we’re only 21, we’re still so young and we have time, so much time. Change doesn’t necessarily have to be bad thing. There’s going to be changes as we get older, but I promise that my love for you will never, ever change. Married or not, I’m yours.”

Harry slowly lifted his head to meet Louis’ eyes. “But what if...what if we—Louis, long distance kills relationships…it happens all the time. People drift and fall apart and I…I can’t…” His eyes dropped back down, sentence left open ended as that same panicked defeat rose up in him.

“Harry, look at me, babe.” Louis gently tilted Harry’s chin back up, waiting until Harry finally met his gaze. “Do you want this? Don’t think about me or us—just be a little selfish, just for a minute, and answer me honestly. Do you want this? Do you want to be a fashion photographer?”

Harry searched Louis’ wondering eyes for several drawn out moments, before admitting the truth in a quiet whisper. “…Yes, I do.”

“Then you have to go for it.” Louis told him seriously, voice unwavering. “You have to go, H.”

Harry began to shake his head again, biting down on hard on his lower lip. He looked so conflicted, hopelessly torn, and the rims of his impassioned eyes started to fill with unshed tears.

Louis slid both his hands up to tenderly hold Harry’s cheeks. “Love, if I said I was going to quit playing footie right now—that I was going to break my contract with The Rovers and quit playing for good, would you let me?”

“No, of course not, Louis.” Harry answered without needing to think about it. “That’s ridiculous. You’ve been playing since we were kids…you love football. I would never let you quit something you love.”

“Oh baby, I feel the same about you and photography. You love it, and it would break my heart to
see you give up on something you love that much.” Louis tilted his head gently as he gazed at the love of his life. “Haz, I wouldn’t be a Rover right now if it wasn’t for you. I wouldn’t be starting my pro career if it wasn’t for you always pushing me and supporting me. You’re my biggest fan, you helped me get where I am.”

Harry held his hands over Louis’ hands, still cupped lovingly to his cheeks, listening to him breathlessly.

“I just told you to be a little selfish, right? Well now I’m going to be a little selfish and say that I want you to do this. If you can’t go for yourself, go for me, love. I want this for you. I love you so much Hazza, so very much and I want you to achieve all your goals. I want you to have everything you’ve ever dreamed of because you deserve it. And I know you can do it, you’re so incredibly talented, it’s all so natural for you. It suits you, it’s like it’s your calling, you know? You’re amazing…” Louis awed, eyes shining as he gave Harry a watery smile. “God, you make me so proud—everyday, I swear you make me so proud.”

Harry took in a shaky breath as a tear fell from his eye, entire face cracking a bit more and Louis only held him tighter.

“You can do this. I have every faith in you, baby.” Louis whispered with every assurance he could muster. “I know you don’t want to be away from me, no more than I want to be away from you… and it’ll be hard, god it’ll be so fucking hard. But Harry, long distance doesn’t have shit on our relationship. Two years is nothing; we could do that in our sleep. We are so much stronger than that. We’ve been in each other’s lives for 16 years now and we have so many more to look forward to, I promise.”

“I love you.” Harry sniffled softly, burying himself in Louis’ chest again as he hugged him tightly. It seemed to be all he could say, but Louis knew that as hard as it was to accept, Harry understood.

“Besides we deserve to have a real fucking wedding. The one we’ve been dreaming of since the start of it all. And there’s no way in hell I’m throwing our beautiful wedding down the drain for some lame courthouse appointment.” Louis scoffed, absolutely disgusted by even the concept. “You have got to be fucking kidding with that bullshit. I know my self worth.”

Harry laughed a bit, a wet, congested little laugh as he desperately squeezed his Louis tighter. “I promise we’ll have the most beautiful wedding someday. And I promise we’ll have forever after that.”

“I know we will.” Louis nodded without a doubt in his mind. He reached to pull Harry fully onto his lap, wrapping both his arms around his waist properly

Harry sat up, forehead resting against Louis’ with his knees straddled around his hips. His wet eyes closed as he seemed to accept all that stood before them, putting aside any unwarranted guilty feelings he felt before. “We can do this…”

“We can do this.” Louis confirmed with a fierce kiss to Harry’s lips, encouraging him as best he could, while also encouraging himself.

And Louis was right, it was hard. Really fucking hard. Especially with Louis’ hectic football schedule, playing for both England and Doncaster. But you do ridiculously fucking hard things for the people you love most in this life and somehow they made a way through the longest two years of their lives.

Every night Harry slept in jerseys that were a touch too small and Louis slept in fluffy oversized
jumpers that smelled of a boy he was so dreadfully homesick for. There were nights Louis didn’t sleep at all because he spent the night traveling just to spend a free weekend with Harry. And while most of his teammates would go out and party at the hottest clubs and coolest events, Louis would be at home checking up on his boyfriend, spending hours on the phone laughing and catching up with each other. Harry would surprise Louis and come to every game he possibly could, always bending over backwards to support his best friend. And for all the games he missed in person, he would always watch on telly, diligently calling Louis afterwards to relay all his favorite parts.

They would constantly send each other random things in the mail, just little things to hopefully make each other smile despite the physical distance between them. It started when Harry sent Louis a popsicle stick with a lame joke on it, just because he thought it was way too funny not to show his boyfriend.

After that Louis bought Harry a journal to write down all the things in his day he’d want to share with Louis before he forgot. And when Harry mailed the journal back, it was full of beautiful polaroid pictures and detailed notes and pressed flowers tucked in the creases. There were cute little doodles along the borders of every page and coffee rings stained to the crisp sheets along with a few droplet sized watermarks that Louis knows were from the fallen tears of Harry dreadfully missing him. And Louis never put that journal down, keeping it with him always as though it was Harry himself.

Louis made Harry a series of actual mixtapes, compiling several volumes of all of their many favorite songs together. He titled the tapes as “H&L’s Ultimate Fucking Hits Mix Volumes 1-17”, one for every year they’ve known each other. As well as a special volume he labeled “H&L’s Ultimate Fucking, Fucking Hits Mix: Makin’ Nasty Edition, containing all their favorite songs to mess around to. But Harry said that one is not at all fun to listen to by himself for obvious reasons.

And Louis remembers one time, Harry sent him his half of a FunDip packet, the Red Cherry and exactly half of the Blue Raspberry and there was a note attached that said, “I was having a really strong food mood, but it didn’t feel right to have this all to myself. By the time you get this, I’ve probably just finished eating my Lik-A-Stix. And yes, I can feel you judging me from all the way in Paris. Miss you, sunshine. Always miss you.” And although it was such a simple gesture, it still made Louis cry a little bit.

Once Harry was having a horribly bad day, the kind of day that makes a person lose sight of why they’re doing all this in the first place. That depressing, hopeless kind of miserable day that made him want to scream fuck it and leave Paris and never come back. Louis was in Barcelona for a tournament and couldn’t get to him for several more days so he overnighted something very close to his heart in his place. “I may be a grown man now, but when I’m really sad you know I love to have my Ducky with me. So have a piece of me and know that I wish I was with you, my love. It’s all going to be ok. My thoughts are with you always, I love you.” And Harry called in tears when he got his boyfriend’s favorite little keepsake plushy, telling Louis that nothing had ever made him feel better and more at home.

Even though long distance for two whole years while building their careers, the slowest, most trying years of all time, they never lost touch or drifted. Instead they put in the work for each other because they both knew just how worth it their relationship was. They sacrificed, they survived, and it didn’t break them, it actually only made their relationship that much stronger.

And after it was all said and done, at 24-years-old, Harry and Louis finally married each other. They came back home, to the very start of everything, to the place where a little curly headed boy had accidentally knocked an eager blue-eyed boy’s crackers to the pavement, completely unaware of all he would someday mean to him. Those two boys came right back home and had a private wedding
in their memory-filled backyards just like they’d always envisioned it.

The decorum of it all was truly breathtaking; a simple, yet spectacular sight. Everything was crisp and bright, graceful and so filled with elegance while still capturing that warm feeling of home. There were gorgeous flowers bourgeoning as far as the eye could see, cream colored roses paired with pearl toned peonies and light hued lilies, all sprinkled with accents of shimmering gold.

As the sun set beautifully in the horizon, dozens of warm lanterns were lit, strung up with twinkling lights above their heads, competing against the glow of the rising stars. And an orchestra of immensely talented instrumentalists resounded in a symphony of live music, bringing their ceremony to life in perfect harmony.

The ceremony was deeply personal and intimate, completely out of the public spotlight. A truly beautiful ceremony filled with such abounding, overwhelming love, but based on unbreakable friendship above all else. The vows they shared were verbal affirmations of how they have always treated each other, pouring out promises of undying support, assurances of unrelenting devotion, continually uplifted by zealous, unfailing loyalty.

Absolutely nothing felt better than to finally profess the promises that have been convicted in their hearts since the very start. There were tears, so many happy, heartfelt tears. Not even just of their own, but of the many people who have repeatedly affirmed and fostered their unique relationship from the beginning. It was a day unlike any other in their lives thus far, a day neither one of them would ever forget as long as they lived.

Later that night they slow danced under the branches of their favorite oak tree bathed in the cool radiance of the moon and the fully illuminated summer stars. They held each other close, swaying softly as one beneath the same memorable tree that over the years has remained as rooted and steadfast as their love for each other.

And now she stands in the very heart of Harry and Louis’ garden at their home. A few years back, when they were just finalizing the plans for their new house, their parents had told them that their cherished tree had grown far too big for her original spot, branches scraping the sides of their childhood bedrooms. So instead of having Martha completely demolished, Harry and Louis spared no expense to have her carefully uprooted and replanted in the center of their lovely gardens. It was fitting that the first roots they put down on the large plot of land they bought for their dream home, were dear old Martha Greene’s. A little piece of their original home to carry on to their new one. She’s always been apart of them, and as sentimental as it sounds, seeing her go would be far too painful. As Harry always says, “When it comes to that tree we are nothing, but saps. Pun 100% intended.”

Despite its generous size, their expansive estate is not just a nice place to live, or simply a house to call theirs. It’s a home. Never empty or lonely or cold. Harry and Louis have put so many treasured, personal pieces of themselves into their home, already filling it up to the brim with warm, loving memories of married bliss.

And as Harry drives Olive past the surrounding gates and up the long paved driveway, Louis couldn’t be any more happy to be home. Home in this life and home with his boy.

“Here we are, home sweet home again at The Love Shack.” Harry announces, putting the car into park.

“You need to stop.” Louis fights the sleepy grin tugging at his lips, the car ride having nearly put him to sleep. “I don’t know how many times I have to tell you, but I will not have you referring to our beautiful, family home as a shack.”
“Even when we have a huge family to fill up our huge house, it’ll still always be The Love Shack to me.” Harry sighs sentimentally.

“Oh my god.” Louis rolls his eyes—well sort of, they’re mostly closed as he leans his head against the car window.

Harry slides out of the Range Rover, rounding the front to Louis’ side. He opens the door and fondly smiles down at a half asleep Louis. “Do you want me to carry you, sunshine?”

“Mmm no…I’m ok…” Louis shakes himself out, climbing out of the car and immediately suctioning his body to Harry’s side. Harry guides him up the steps to the front door, briefly loosening his hold on Louis to unlock the door with his keys.

“So…as your husband, I think it’s only my conjugal duty to ask you this…even though I can tell by the exhausted look on your face what your answer will be. But nonetheless…” Harry clears his throat properly, bowing his head down a bit. “Lou, my dear and darling husband, can I interest you in a mind-blowing, out of this world, earth-shattering, record breaking, celebratory fuck?”

Louis nearly chokes as he bursts instantly into surprised laughter, holding his silly Harry tighter around his waist as they walk into their home. “Oh, I would very much love a celebratory fuck, but…” His laugh morphs into more of a yawn, exhaustion falling over him. “I’d love it even more if it happened in the morning instead, yeah? I hope that’s alright, babe…I’m just proper knackered. And I think I’d kinda like to be awake for something that good, ya know what I mean?”

“Of course it’s alright, baby. I thought you’d say that.” Harry smiles, running his hand up and down Louis’ shoulder soothingly. “So as a consolation prize, how about a celebratory cuppa instead?”

“I love you, that sounds amazing, Haz.” Louis curls in closer. “You know, I feel a bit lame turning down sex for tea.”

Harry laughs, pressing his lips to Louis’ forehead. “You just played a huge championship game and won. I think you have a valid reason to be tired. My little champ, I’m so proud of you. Have I told you how proud I am of you yet? Because I’m so fucking proud. I could fill up a hot air balloon of solely my pride for you and it would sail for eternity.”

“Yes, Harry…” Louis nods sleepily against his husband’s chest as Harry showers him in even more praise. “Thank you, my love.”

While the pot is boiling on the stove, they strip out of their expensive suits, cozying up to something a bit comfier. Despite the numerous options available, they basically end up splitting an outfit meant for one person. Harry wearing just a pair of joggers and Louis stealing the jumper that matches it, even though it’s several sizes too big. But he likes how cozy it feels, all lose and baggy over his smaller frame and more importantly he loves that it smells just like Harry.

Harry prepares a perfect mug of hot tea just the way he knows his best friend likes it and Louis takes the steaming mug gratefully with sweaterpawed hands. He snuggles up against Harry’s shirtless chest, tucking himself once again in his favorite spot under his husband’s wing, because personal space will never be a thing for them.

Harry slings his arm over Louis’ shoulder as they walk towards the grand staircase to get to their bedroom. “So Lou, I was thinking and…hypothetically speaking—”

“Oh here we go. I love your late night hypotheticals.” Louis grins happily against the rim of his warm mug, peeking up at Harry. “They’re always so wild.”
Harry grins knowingly. “This is a heavy one though. I don’t know if you’re awake enough for it actually.”

“Hazza nooo.” Louis pouts, fighting another sleepy yawn. “Please, I’m up for it, love.”

“Are you sure?” Harry questions, leading Louis into their master bedroom. “We can just go to bed. I’ll ask you later.”

“No, baby please, I wanna know. I’m wide awake.” Louis tries, widening his eyes as much as he possibly can to hopefully prove his point.

Harry smirks and Louis can practically feel what his stupid next words will be before Harry’s even spoken them aloud. “Wide awake enough for an extraordinary, triple X-rated, life altering, totally bananas, momentous, victorious, orgasmic, celebratory fuck?”

“You can’t say anything normally can you?” Louis laughs fondly as Harry plucks Louis’ mug from his hands, setting it down on the bedside table.

“I wanna sex you up.” Harry sings the catchphrase lyric from Color Me Badd’s 1991 raunchy love ballad, which happens to be a favorite song on their Makin’ Nasty mixtape. He goofily rocks his hips as he sings it, making a show of pushing Louis down on the bed just to crawl over his body.

Louis’ whole face breaks into a smile instantly, enraptured by the ridiculous man hovering over him. “Oh, I’m so in love with you, Harry Styles.”

Harry hums contentedly, kissing on Louis’ neck before popping his head up suddenly. “Oh hang on, wait—I’ve got a better one.”

“Why do I know exactly where this is going?”

Harry grins, clearing his throat before serenading Louis again. This time with the most classic and recognizable ‘90s love song of them all, *I’ll Make Love to You* by Boyz II Men.

“Close your eyes, make a wish and blow out the candlelight. For tonight is just your night, we’re gonna celebrate all through the night.” Harry sings, affording all the necessary drama and emphasis to his vocals as he rubs his whole body over Louis’ ridiculously. “Pour the wine, light the fire, your wish is my command. I submit to your demands, I will do anything, you need only ask…”

Louis can’t help but giggle because his spouse is such an endearing idiot. As Harry sings the lyrics, he continues drowning Louis in kisses, caressing Louis’ entire body and seeming to be everywhere at once. “I’m pretty sure that song is about birthday sex not championship winning celebration sex, but I’ll allow it.”

“Same difference.” Harry shrugs indifferently before proceeding to belt out the main chorus, taking in a huge, unnecessary breath before he starts. “I’ll make love to you, like you want me to and I’ll hold you tight, baby all through the night…” He squeezes his arms around his husband’s body, exaggeratedly rocking his hips against Louis in slow, purposeful thrusts. “I’ll make love to you, when you want me to and I will not let go till you tell me to…”

“You’re too much.” Louis cracks up completely, fingers tangled up in Harry’s hair as he laughs. “I mean we can try if you really want to, but if I fall asleep on you, don’t get mad at me. You were warned.”

“I’m totally kidding, we both know that’s a dead dream tonight. But starting tomorrow morning though…” A slow cheeky smile spreads over Harry’s face as he wiggles his eyebrows. “Ooh, it’s
on. My schedule is completely clear, we are going to stay in this bed all goddamn day long and tear
each other apart. I’m gonna knock your socks off. I’m gonna make you feel so good you might
actually combust. You can take that promise to the motherfucking bank and cash it.”

“God, you’re such a dork.” Louis grins fondly, still giggling.

“I just want you to be mentally prepared is all.” Harry explains, going back to sucking just beneath
Louis’ jaw. “There’s something special about morning sex in itself. You know what I mean? It’s
like? I dunno? Better? Cuz it feels like no one else is having it? It’s personal to me and only me.”

Louis hums contemplatively. “So if I heard correctly, you’re saying you like your sex time all to
yourself?”

“No. I like to share it with you obviously.” Harry gropes Louis’ nearly bare ass, giving him a wink.

“Cheeky boy.” Louis mumbles, dropping several kisses behind Harry’s ear. “Hmm I can’t wait for
you to rock my world from morning till night.”

“Now who’s the dork. That’s the cheesiest line I’ve ever heard in my entire life. How gross.
Consider my mood effectively killed.” Harry rolls over and props himself up against the headboard.
He reaches over and dutifully hands Louis his tea back.

“Oh shut up and give me my hypothetical already so I can go to sleep.” Louis says snuggled up in
bed with his steaming mug held with both his hands once again.

“Right, Right. Ok.” Harry claps his hands, shaking himself out as though he needs to put himself in
the right mindset. “Are you ready for this?”

“Yes, love, I’m ready.” Louis nods repeatedly.

“Are you sure? Really, really sure?” Harry teases, with a raised eyebrow.

Louis nudges his shoulder impatiently. “Oh my god, Harry!”

Harry inhales deeply several times, dragging this out for no reason and Louis has the urge to shove
him off the bed to get him to hurry up. But then Harry twists onto his side to face Louis and begins,
voice changing to serious. “So hypothetically speaking, if you were dying—”

“Dying how?” Louis questions instantly with a frown.

“I’m getting to it, calm down, Lou. Can I just set the scene please? Geez. Some people, not gonna
name any names…” Harry clears his throat theatrically and it sounds a lot like Louis. “…Can be
sooo impatient.”

“You’re not at all subtle.” Louis comments, sipping his tea.

“Who said I was trying to be subtle?” Harry counters with a teasing grin.

Louis grins back around the rim of his mug, lightly slapping Harry’s naked stomach. “Oh, get on
with it, before I fall asleep!”

“Alright, alright! Damn…” Harry holds up his hands in defeat before starting up his hypothetical
again. “So let’s say we’ve been kidnapped—”

“Oh god, why’ve we been kidnapped?” Louis pipes up again. He can’t honestly help it, he has a
very active, inquiring brain and questions just come naturally to him.
“Love, it doesn’t matter why.” Harry stops to explain, shaking his head. “Anyway—”

“Um sorry, no but it does matter, Harold.” Louis argues with a frown, sitting up a bit. “If we are going to do this I need to fully understand the severity of the situation.”

“Ok, uh…I dunno? Money?” Harry tries with a little shrug. “Who cares, that’s not what this is about.”

“How much money though, because—”

“Lou, baby, honey, please!” Harry whines shutting his husband up with the kiss of his lips. “You know I love you, but seriously shut your cute little mouth the fuck up.”

“Ok, ok, I’m sorry.” Louis huffs, sitting back again. “Please go on.”

“We’ve been kidnapped and you’re being held at gunpoint.”

“Wow, you really went there…”

“Yes, it’s gonna get heavy, I told you.” Harry reminds, taking a breath and starting again. “There’s a gun being held to your head. The stress is unbearable—we’re both weak and a bit battered. You know because we’ve been held captive for days on end. And we’re so tired and hungry, but also so scared because we have no idea what’s going to happen—bottomline, we are barely holding on as it is. But anyway, the barrel of the gun is pushed to your already bleeding temple. It’s loaded and ready to go.”

“This is…a lot…” Louis blinks slowly. “Fuck, maybe I am too tired for this…”

“They’re about to pull the trigger and end your life right in front of me. And I’m screaming and crying for you while being tied up on the floor. I’m in absolute hysterics, ok?” Harry explains, making his voice sound a touch panicked just so Louis gets the idea. “I’m losing my mind and I’m pouring my whole heart out, yelling about how much I desperately need you and how much I love you.”

“Jesus, baby I love you too.” Louis gasps softly with wide eyes, putting himself right in the moment. He cups his palm to the side of Harry’s face.

“I can’t bear to watch you die, I can’t lose you. It’s too much, it’s all too much. Then…” Harry pauses dramatically, voice lowering with pure dread. “The kidnapper makes an ultimatum…”

“Shit, of course.” Louis shakes his head, hand over his mouth, fully engrossed in Harry’s imaginary situation.

“They’ll let you live on one condition…” Harry utters gravely, staring right into Louis’ eyes as he maintains the suspense. “I have to do the unthinkable…”

“…Which is?” Louis asks after Harry purposely leaves his statement unfinished.

Harry shakes his head gravely, sighing to himself. “I…have…to…”

“Harry!” Louis urges, shaking him impatiently by his bare shoulders. “Don’t do this to me! I can’t deal with the suspense right now! I’m too tired!”

Harry smirks, toying with Louis emotions purposely, deep dimples lining his grin. “Oh my god, it’s gonna make you so mad when I say it, but I think it’s a healthy discussion for us to have…so…”
“Why are you the way that you are?” Louis sighs after Harry takes another unnaturally long pause.

Harry continues on with his preamble anyway because he wouldn’t be Harry if he didn’t. “A bit of stimulating conversation, if you will.”

“Harry! Goddamn you! Just say it!”

“In order to save your life, your very precious—sacred life…” Harry emphasizes, still speaking leisurely. “I would have to sleep with our captors. And you’re right there, the whole time. The question is, would you, my dear husband, let me do it?” Harry leans in and watches Louis closely.

Louis frowns somewhere in between completely confused and totally disgusted. “Oh bloody hell, Harry. Where the fuck do you come up with these things? I’m seriously asking.”

“Answer the question, babe.” Harry continues to stare with narrowed eyes at his spouse for a response, categorizing his every reaction. “Honest answer. Go.”

“Bitch, the fuck! No!” Louis bursts as though it’s more than obvious, which it is. As if he would ever consent to sacrificing Harry’s body or wellbeing in order to save himself. “Over my dead body! No one is getting that dick, but me! And then I’m supposed to just sit back and watch it happen in front of me!? Oh fuck that, give me the bullet, pull the trigger! I’m dying today.”

“You’d let me watch you die? When I could have saved you?” Harry sighs dramatically, hanging his head. “Wow… and here I am thinking I’d do absolutely anything to keep you alive. Even for just one more day…”

“Wow, ok. This was a trap, obviously. Cuz now that I’m thinking about it, I feel like either way I answered, you were going to come for me. If I said, ‘Yeah, baby do it, save my life. Take one for the team’. You would have said something like, ‘Ohh, so you don’t care who I fuck now? Don’t you love me? You’d let me prostitute myself and sell my body right in front of your very eyes, I see how it is’.” Louis imitates Harry’s voice, making him sound more bitter than necessary.

Harry smirks a little bit, not saying that his husband is necessarily wrong or right, more so being a little shit as usual. “No, I just… wow. I actually can’t believe you’d let me become a widower with my last memory of you being killed right in front of my very eyes. I’ll never move on from that, it’s far too traumatic. Especially with the knowledge that I had the power to save you. My very best friend in the entire world and the love and light of my life, my everything, my forever, my life, my joy, my sunshine, my partner in crime, my soulmate—fucking murdered and taken from me so harshly.” He sniffles theatrically, closing his eyes with a hand touched over his mouth. “How am I supposed to survive that?”

“I would never want to leave you like that, love. Of course not, that’s horrifying. But the alternative is…” Louis shakes his head gravely. “I couldn’t live with myself if I allowed that to happen to you just to save me. The guilt alone would drive me utterly mad.”

“At least you’d be living.” Harry reminds bitterly.

Louis rolls his eyes and sighs heavily. “Oh, for fucks sake Harry, if it was reversed and I had to have sex with a kidnapper to save you, would you let me?”

“No.” Harry answers instantly, flat out without a moment’s thought. “No. Kill me, I don’t care. Fuck no.”

“Oh, interesting…” Louis nods slowly with his eyes narrowed. “Interesting, interesting, interesting. How the bloody tables have turned. You’re something else, you know that? Giving me shit for my
answer when you were going to say the exact same thing.”

“The answer is no.” Harry says again stubbornly.

“Alright, what if I begged you to let me do it?” Louis asks next, narrowing his eyes at Harry. “I’m pleading and crying and screaming—I’m telling you that I can’t live without you and I don’t care what I have to do to keep you with me. What then?”

Harry shakes his head immediately. “No, Louis. I would never let you do that.”

“Ok and if I said, ‘Fuck you, Harry I’m gonna save your life whether you like it or not!’ What would you do then?” Louis wonders, watching his spouse closely.

“I’d kill you myself.” Harry answers flatly, not willing to budge on the issue.

A proud grin spreads its way across Louis’ face. “Bit possessive of me aren’t you?”

“Oh, don’t act like you aren’t just as possessive over me.” Harry answers back knowingly, taking Louis’ free hand. “Baby, I’ve never ever had to share you with anyone else in my life and I’m sure as hell not gonna start now. I’d literally rather die a thousand deaths than watch someone who is not me touch you. You’re mine and only mine and I’d sooner shoot my own damn self, than let you do something like that to save me.”

“And leave me?” Louis pouts melodramatically, testing Harry one more time for fun even though he absolutely agrees with him on this. “All alone in the cruel, cruel world? How will I go on without you? There would be no point to anything anymore.”

“Well at least we stayed faithful to each other and only each other till death did we part. Until the next life, baby.” Harry gives Louis a proper salute. “It’s been real…it’s been fun…it’s been real fun…”

Louis chuckles a bit at Harry’s stupid play on words. “You know what we should really do?”

“Never get kidnapped.” Harry suggests.

“No—well yes, obviously.” Louis agrees. “But if on the horrible off chance that we actually find ourselves in this exact situation, I think we should just go out Noah and Allie style.”

“Oh, I like that, yeah.” Harry nods agreeably. “We both die?”

“Yeah, that’s the only logically choice at this point.” Louis explains with a shrug. “We can’t watch each other fuck someone else and we can’t watch each other die while one of us lives either, so we both die. Easy. Cheat the system.”

“You already know I’m ready to die by your side. I was born ready. It’d be my life’s honor.” Harry smiles, giving Louis’ hand a squeeze. “What would your last words to me be?”

Louis sets down his empty mug on the bedside table before twisting around to face Harry. “Ok so, I’d turn to you and cup your face like this and then look deeply into your eyes and say, ‘Darling...’”

He utters dramatically, pausing deeply for effect. “‘Don’t forget to always bite the stick when you eat a FunDip’.”

“Louis, what the fuck.” Harry cackles, face splitting in half as he laughs. “Seriously? If I’m dying too, when am I going to ever eat a FunDip again? When?”
“Hmm. I do see your point. Ok, redo—let me reset the scene.” Louis sits up and rolls his shoulders in a stretch, cracking his knuckles to wake himself up a bit. “Sit up, we’re going to do this right.”

Harry continues laughing, but sits up as requested, repositioning himself until he and his best friend are sitting knee to knee on the bed.

“So, I would once again hold your face between my hands like this and we are just gazing at each other, right?” Louis starts, doing just as he described. “And there’s a few tears falling from my eyes already, but I’m trying to be strong for you. I don’t want you to be scared. But you’re sobbing…” He looks to Harry expectantly, waiting for him to catch up. “I said, you’re sobbing…”

“Oh, ok. Right.” Harry nods before he begins to fake cry dramatically, shoulders shaking in all.

“Perfect, very convincing, love. All we need now is the tragic piano music playing in the background. But anyway, I’d start by wiping your tears away and I’d look deeply into your eyes and say something like…” Louis’ face falls somber, clearing his throat as he prepares to give his final heartfelt monologue. “‘Harry, my sweet, sweet prince, I’ve loved you since we were only five-years-old. You are my first and only love. A lifetime loving you isn’t nearly long enough and even though our time together has been cut short, you’ve made my reality better than my wildest dreams and I’ve had the best time of my life with you beside me’.”

“Aww Lou, you’re going to make me really cry.” Harry pouts emotionally, tilting his head.

“And then I’d stroke your cheek like this and memorize all the things I love about your beautiful face.” Louis does as he just described, caressing his spouse’s cheek tenderly. “Then I’d say, ‘We’ve done everything together up until now, so I think it’s only right that we should die together. But whether dead or alive just know that my soul adores you, my body worships you, and my heart only knows your name. I love you more than life itself, forever and always, my beautiful love’.”

“Baby, that’s so…” Harry whispers breathlessly, eyes shining in speechless awe.

“And then I’d kiss you passionately, yet softly like this…” Louis leans in slowly, pulling Harry’s face to his to give him a long, slow drawn-out kiss. He tilts Harry’s jaw, adding a little tongue to the kiss and Harry automatically moans into it.

Louis pulls back, still holding Harry’s face in his hands. “Did that feel heavy? Like, did you feel the weight of my grief in that kiss? Cuz babe, I really put myself into a zone just now. I’m channeling some real things into this moment.”

“I felt it, yeah…” Harry nods slowly as if in a daze. “Really good job, baby. You’re unreal.”

“I do try sometimes.” Louis grins slowly, tracing Harry’s face.

“Ok, so now it’s your turn to start crying.” Harry tells him, snapping back into it. “Bring on the waterworks, Lou.”

Louis face instantaneously breaks into what looks just like a real, genuine cry. His body slumps over and he covers his face in his hands as he expressively weeps.

“Great. Love that. You’re doing amazing, babe.” Harry praises, kissing Louis’ cheek just because, before he gets back into it. “Alright, so I would start by wrapping you up in my arms like this, because you’d need comforting and whenever you’re sad, you like for me to hold you.”

Still sobbing heavily, Louis clings to his husband like his life depends on it, sitting in his lap with his legs wrapped around Harry’s hips, arms circled around his neck. Louis buries his head to Harry’s
chest while Harry pets his hair gently, just holding him against his body for a few minutes.

“Then I’d take a deep breath and whisper in your ear, something like, ‘Oh Lou, you’re always so strong for me, baby. Even when I’m not, you are. You’re my rock. You’re my everything, the mirror to my soul. My lover and best friend. You taught me what it means to love someone unconditionally and you made me into the man I am today.’” Harry whispers softly, voice filled with honesty. “The best day of my life was when you became my husband. You make life worth living and I’m so grateful for the past 25 years worth of memories we share. A life spent loving you was all I could ever dream of. Our love is stronger than any one life and even if my body is gone, my soul will go on loving you until the stars go out and the tides no longer turn.’”

“Ooh I felt that.” Louis sniffles, nodding his head fervently with his arms still around Harry’s neck. “I have chills, babe. Chills.”

“And then I would pull back just enough to kiss you—but, like, one of those really desperate choppy kisses, you know what I mean? With my trembling hands holding your face to mine cuz we can barely stop crying like this…” Harry cups Louis’ cheeks with both hands before pressing a series of broken, desperate kisses to his mouth, purposely sporadic and messy.

“God, I don’t know if I’m just tired, but I’m getting really emotional.” Louis mumbles against his lips. “These very well could be real tears.”

“‘Baby, I love you, I love you, I love you so much Louis, I love you, I love you’, I would say in between all our frantic kisses.” And Harry does just that, desperately kissing Louis as though his life is rooted on it. “I’d keep saying it, of course, and you’d start saying it back through your tears.”

“Uh huh…” Louis nods, Harry’s hands holding his head steady. “I love you, I love you, fuck, I love you…”

Harry keeps kissing his face, never letting go. “I want all of you, forever. You and me… everyday…”

Louis fights not to smile against Harry’s lips. “Don’t quote The Notebook at me. I’m trying really hard to stay in character and be sad and you know how much it turns me on when you quote movies.”

Harry doesn’t even try to hide his own smile. “I know, I’m sorry. It was too easy.”

“Mmm Harry…” Louis whines in exhaustion. “Go back to saying you love me over and over again so we can end this and go to sleep. I’m not a quitter, I have to see it through to our death.”

“Oh, you’re right, let’s do this.” Harry starts peppering Louis’ entire face with tiny kisses, not missing a spot as he travels up the side of his face and down his nose all the while professing his unending love. “I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you.”

“I love you too, I do, I love you. I’ll love you forever but I—I’m so scared, Haz…” Louis sobs dramatically with his eyes closed as Harry continues to assault his face. “The only thing I’ve ever been afraid of is losing you, my love.”

“You have me, baby. You’ll always have me, I’ll never leave you. Don’t be scared, sunshine. I’m right here, focus on me. I love you, I love you, I—” Harry stops suddenly, eyes wide. “And then we get shot.”

“Separately? Or together?” Louis pauses his crying, peeking one eye open curiously.
“Together, obviously. Same bullet. To the head. Painless. One and done. Afterlife here we come.” Harry holds up a peace sign as his final farewell gesture and Louis falls backwards theatrically on their wide bed as though he’s just been shot and killed. Harry tumbles the opposite way right after him, landing partially on top of his spouse’s “dead” body.

Louis lifts up a little, propped up by his elbows as he frowns down at Harry’s position. “Harold, how the fuck did you end up dead with your face on my dick?”

“You can’t help how you die, ok? So I fell over and died protecting what's mine.” Harry explains, contently nuzzling his face against Louis’ crotch.

“Poetic justice, nice touch.” Louis nods his approval.

“Thank you, just a little improv, you know, whatever. If this whole fashion photography thing doesn’t work out, I might get into acting on the side. It’s nothing too serious.” Harry jokes stupidly, shrugging a little as he sits up.

“I support you.” Louis promises with a growing grin. “I’ll be your number one fan.”

“Good, because I do it all for my fans.”

“I'm glad we got that sorted, yeah? It’s good to know for future reference.”

“Just in case, right? That’s what I thought.” Harry nods seriously with widened eyes. “You never know these days. We could easily be kidnapped and not have a plan. Gotta be ready.”

Louis laughs, shaking his head. “We’re very dramatic, I think.”

“Ehh, maybe a little bit.” Harry grins, shrugging noncommittally.

Louis snuggles himself against the pillows, pulling the duvet back. “We can’t be this selfish as parents.”

“No, of course not.” Harry agrees, crawling up on all fours to the top of the bed to get settled in. “Obviously one or both of us would have to suck it up and live for the sake of our baby.”

“Mmm our baby…” Louis smiles fondly settling back against Harry’s bare chest, both of them comfortably tucked into the soft silken sheets. “Know what’s sad, H?”

“Hmm?” Harry hums, cheek resting against the top of Louis’ head.

“Our baby doesn’t have a neighbor.” Louis tells him gravely.

Harry sighs, lifting his head. “We just built this whole house and now you’re telling me we have to move.”

“No, I didn’t say we have to move. I just think it’s a sad, yeah?” Louis explains, playing with Harry’s hands that are secured around him. “My neighbor turned out to be kinda important to me.”

“Kinda?” Harry instantly scoffs in offense.

“Yeah, maybe. I might have married him, I dunno?” Louis shrugs obliviously in teasing. “Or something like that, I’m tired and it’s hard to remember…”

“Very funny. You’re such a comedian. Aha ha.” Harry chuckles sarcastically.
“Well. We all have our gifts.” Louis smiles dumbly to himself.

Harry rolls his eyes, reaching up to slap Louis’ chest. “Anyway, we didn’t meet right at birth, so I think we have a few years before we need to think about finding our baby a neighbor soulmate.”

“I just feel like we had an unfair advantage in life and I wanna give our kid all the same advantages.” Louis defends, letting his eyes flutter shut.

“All of them?” Harry whispers, ducking his head down to nibble on Louis’ ear from behind.

“Mhmm…” Louis hums softly, eyes closed with his head tilted back against Harry.

“We did some pretty inappropriate things with those advantages.” Harry reminds as pecks gently along Louis’ neck.

“Did we?” Louis wonders, eyebrow raised even though his eyes are still closed.

“Yes, we definitely did and I personally don’t want some horny teenager crawling through the window of my house in the middle of the night.”

Louis smiles fully in amusement, eyelids shut. “That sounds a little familiar, yeah? Is that about you? Or our kid?”

“I’m serious, Louis.” Harry lifts his head, pulling back from where it was nuzzled in the crook of Louis’ neck. “I’d never sleep again. I’d never know peace. The thought of my innocent teenage baby being deflowered in my own home…”

“Mmm, a love shack, indeed.” Louis teases further.

“Oh god…” Harry’s face pales completely at the concept. “I’d have so many midlife crises. I’ll be fully greyed by 45!”

“You’d be really hot silver fox, so I’m totally down for that.” Louis encourages, giggling a little to himself.

“This isn’t a joke, babe. I’m not joking. See this face.” Harry points to himself, even though Louis hasn’t bothered to open his eyes. “It’s not joking.”

Louis smiles, finally opening his eyes again as he turns over in Harry’s arms to fully face him. “Remember when I went to offsite training and you went to Milan for an internship? We were around 18, I think…and it was the longest we’d ever spent away from each other at that time. Which was only, like, one month—a joke compared to our two years of long distance later on.” Louis laughs a little bit at their naivety. “But still…we both almost died in that short little month, and when I finally came home to our parents house for the holidays you were already naked in my little twin size bed waiting for me.”

“I never did that.” Harry denies instantly, shaking his head. “Absolutely no recollection.”

“And there were rose petals everywhere and candles and music.” Louis recounts happily, twisting Harry’s wedding band around absently. “Soo cliché and sooo cheesy, but it was everything and you set the whole thing up just to surprise me. And we were trying so hard to take things slow physically before that—I don’t even remember why, come to think of it.” He thinks back in confusion. “But it definitely didn’t work, because being away from each other made us lose all the control we pretended to have.”
“Nope, I don’t know.” Harry refutes again, somehow managing a blank face. “I was a saintly virgin until my wedding night, just like my child will be.”

Louis continues on anyway. “We made love all night long and you were so goddamn loud…”

“Uh no…” Harry shakes his head. “Nope. Not ringing any bells.”

“You were moaning, like, obscenely and I was sure we were going to get caught by my mum or something. You’ve always been so fucking loud. God…and what comes out of your mouth is filthy.” Louis smirks knowingly. “You’re a very dirty boy, Curly.”

“Whoa there, no. I am the cleanest—better yet, the squeaky cleanest boy on the block.” Harry argues in his weak defense. “Besides there was nothing to catch, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Louis doesn’t even pay his husband’s obvious lies any mind, continuing on with his memory. “But you were so, so gentle with me, Harry.” He smiles softly, a fond tilt to his features. “You were so sweet and careful and you looked at me with so much love in your eyes, I knew I would do anything you asked of me.”

“I never even looked at a man in a lustful way until I was 35.” Harry flat out lies.

“You’re not even 35 yet, you’re only 30.” Louis responds flatly.

“Exactly. That’s just how pure I am.” Harry foolishly boasts. “I’m setting a good example for my unborn child to follow.”

“Ok. Well, I’ve had enough so I’m calling bullshit. For obvious reasons.”

Harry narrows his eyes at Louis in challenge, leaning in. “You have no evidence…”

“Oh no?” Louis raises an eyebrow, blinking back at Harry in all his ridiculousness. “Because not even thirty minutes ago you promised me—I believe your words were somewhere along the lines of ‘I’m going to make you feel so good you might actually combust.’ And then you felt so confident in that statement that you told me to take your motherfucking promise to the bank and cash it as if sexual favors from you are England’s newest form of currency.”

“Oh, but to be fair—”

“Oh!” Louis interrupts him instantly with a finger held to Harry’s lips. “But it doesn’t even stop there because that little outburst was only preceded by you boldly serenading me with songs literally titled I’ll Make Love To You and I Wanna Sex You Up. And you know what? That’s not even the worst of your offenses for today alone. I may be half asleep, but I could keep going if you want to keep playing dumb with your retroactive vow of celibacy.”

Harry pries Louis’ hand away from his mouth. “Um don’t judge me, I’m—”

“Wait! Oh my god! This isn’t about your blatant lies—I just remembered that you wrote me a poem that night!” Louis gasps fondly, interrupting Harry yet again as he rests his hand over his heart.

“Aww baby, I loved that. It was beautiful.”

“Stooop.” Harry whines, pouting a little as his cheeks blush red.

“And then you cried when you read it out loud to me and you told me how much you love me and it was the very first time you told me that you wanted to marry me someday.” Louis smiles, biting his lip. “You said how you always knew you wanted to be my husband even when we were little kids
and you promised me forever. I think I fell more in love with you that night. And then we got our first tattoos together that weekend.”

Harry continues pouting as his face only grows more red and Louis pinches his cheeks.

“It was so romantic and sweet.” Louis whispers affectionately. “I’ll never forget it.”

“I missed you, ok? Don’t embarrass me like this, it’s rude.” Harry sulks adorably. “If I’m gonna be honest, I was corrupted by this little sex crazed terror that lived next door.”

“Aww Harry, baby, don’t be embarrassed.” Louis coos, still squeezing his cheeks together. “You were just a horny teenager.”

Harry sighs, nodding his head slowly in agreeably. “A horny teenager in love with another horny teenager.”

“You were so cute back then.” Louis fusses, still smushing Harry’s cheeks around.

Harry doesn’t stop Louis from assaulting his face, instead giggling a bit. “And I’m not cute now?”

“Oh, you’re the cutest now, Haz.” Louis slides down a bit to press severally adorning kisses to the center of Harry’s naked chest. “I have the cutest, horniest husband ever.”

Harry laughs, hands tangled up in Louis’ fringe. “What a coincidence, so do I.”

Louis grins, fingers tracing Harry’s face again. “And as much as it’ll definitely freak us out, our kid deserves their own horny teenage moment or…in our case, moments.”

“Not as long as I’m one of their fathers.” Harry starts up again.

“You’re impossible.” Louis rolls his eyes. “I’m obviously going to be the cool dad.”

“Um what? Why can’t we both be cool dads?”

“Because there is only one duh, Harry. Catch up on your basic parenting.” Louis scoffs. “You get to be the overprotective buzzkill dad. Congratulations.”

“Heeyyy.” Harry pouts, dragging the word out.

“Ok, I’m gonna be honest and say that I’m talking a lot of shit right now, but it’s probably gonna be me who is the overprotective buzzkill dad.” Louis admits with a heavy sigh.

Harry nods knowingly. “I was waiting for you to admit that on your own. I didn’t want to have to call you out. Especially with how you are with your little siblings and nephews.”

“Is it a crime to care?” Louis defends, knowing fully well how protective he is over his family.

“Of course not Lou, I love how caring you are. It’s one of my many favorite things about you.”

“Thank you, babe. I really appreciate that. And for the record you are the sweetest, most caring man I know.”

“You’ve told me before, but I’ll take it every time you say it.” Harry smiles appreciatively. “How about we share the burden of buzzkill dad then?”

“We just have to share everything don’t we?” Louis can’t help but laugh at how ridiculous they are.
“We can’t die alone, we can’t live alone…we are so hopelessly codependent. It’s disgusting.”

“Oh, sooo disgusting. We’re the worst.” Harry nods in agreement. “But I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Louis smiles, looking up at Harry seriously. “I do mean it though, you know.”

“What’s that?” Harry wonders, meeting Louis’ eyes.

“I love you more than anything, more than life itself.” Louis whispers genuinely. “You’re the best companion any man could ever wish for. Everyday I think about how lucky I am to be in love with my best friend.”

Harry beams, giving Louis a soft private smile. “Lou, you’re the best thing to ever happen to me.”

“Damn right I am. But to be fair, you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me too.” Louis admits, before frowning to himself. “Ugh, and there you go again making me get all sappy and shit.”

“What!? Louis, are you serious!?” Harry laughs as though it’s the most ridiculous thing he’s heard all day. “You got sappy first! All by yourself. You’re a sap, deal with it.”

“Nuh uh. I’m not a sap. Piss off.” Louis frowns petulantly, shoving Harry’s shoulder a bit.

“Yes you are, babe.” Harry defends with a wide knowing smile. “You’re actually sappier than me, I hope you know that.”

“Prove it.” Louis taunts.

“I don’t have to. You’re living proof enough.”

“That’s not good enough.” Louis refutes, holding his chin up defiantly. “I guess your argument is invalid. Case closed. I win.”

“Win what? When did this become a competition?”

“Just now and you’re losing.” Louis decides, shrugging unapologetically.

Harry shakes his head fondly. “You’re so ridiculous.”

“You wouldn’t love me if I wasn’t.” Louis answers back as usual.

“I’d love you anyway.” Harry promises without missing a single beat. “Always and forever.”

“See! Sappy!” Louis bursts, pointing an indicting finger at Harry. “That is prime sap right there.”

“Whatever. Ok, shh, shut up…I gotta go to sleep.” Harry flips over suddenly, tucking himself in for bed and closing his eyes. “I need to be proper rested up for tomorrow. Big day ahead.”

“Oh, you need to go to sleep?” Louis comments sarcastically while slowly nodding his head. “Interrupting your beauty rest, am I?”

“Yes, actually.” Harry half turns over, peeking one eye open. “And if I were you I’d sleep while I could. You have an insatiable husband who really wants to show you just how proud of you he is.”

“Aww babe, that’s so cute.” Louis leans in and kisses him on the nose before pressing one to his mouth. “You’re adorable.”
“And by that I explicitly mean we are gonna fuck all goddamn day long.” Harry adds in unneeded clarification,

“Yeah, I think I got that part.” Louis laughs, against his lips.

“Until neither one of us can walk or better yet, until neither one of us can move. I’m gonna fuck you like you’ve never been fucked before.”

“Mmm…yes babe…wreck me…” Louis mumbles absently through a yawn, eyes falling closed again.

“I promise you, nothing would make me happier right now. God, I can’t wait for tomorrow.” Harry sighs wistfully. “It’s been a while, you know.”

“Has it?” Louis wonders sleepily, cracking an eye open.

“Yes. Not that I’m keeping track or anything weird like that but um…it’s been 3 weeks, 4 days and uh…” Harry flips his wrist to look at watch. “5 hours since we last had sex for real. But who’s counting?”

Louis, of course, can only laugh at him. “Are you serious?”

Harry looks over his shoulder and gives Louis a look that says it all, confirming the truth with the pain in his eyes. “And I’m not sure if you’ve noticed or not, because you’ve been training and focusing on your team and everything, which I totally understood and support and I’m so proud of you. Did I say I’m proud of you? I’m proud of you, Lou…so so sooooo proud of you, but um…I’m a little uh…on edge.”

“A little?” Louis smirks, eyes closed again.

“Yes. A little.” Harry repeats defensively. “But I’ve kept myself together, I’ve channeled all my extra energy into my work, I’ve taken up gardening on the side. Oh and I’m doing a bit of hot yoga—love a good hot yoga.”

“And how did all that work out for you, because you have been talking about sex a lot lately. More than usual, I mean.”

“It didn’t work out for me! It’s not bloody working out for me, Louis!” Harry groans with built up frustration evident in his voice. “I might as well be that same horny teenager. I’m an utter mess! So in summary, I need to go to sleep so tomorrow can come faster.”

“Come faster.” Louis snickers immaturely, finding it absolutely hilarious.

“Ok, obviously you think this a game, but when I wake up it’s go time.” Harry strategizes in all seriousness. “Ready or not baby, I’m coming for you. This isn’t just a celebration of you anymore. I’m celebrating too. I get my husband all to myself again and that is more than cause for celebration.”

Louis still can’t stop laughing, cackling happily against his pillows. Everything is just sooo much funnier when he’s tired. “Coming for you.”

“Ok.” Harry nods down at Louis, who has still not gained control of his uncontrollable giggles. “So my pain is a joke to you. Ok. Nice. Laugh it up, get it all out now. I’ll remember this.”

“No Haz, my love, I’m sorry.” Louis tries through his continuing laughter. “I’m not laughing at you, I’m laughing with you.”
“I’m not laughing though.” Harry blinks back, completely unamused.

“Well you should be.” Louis cackles hysterically, eyes squeezed closed.

“I’m going to sleep, asshole.” Harry decides, flipping over dramatically again.

“Good, go to sleep.” Louis encourages, biting back another amused laugh.

“I will!” Harry huffs, melodramatically fluffing out one of his pillows.

“Good!” Louis replies, purposely loud in Harry’s ear.

“Great!” Harry says even louder, snuggling against his freshly fluffed pillow.

“Ok.” Louis shrugs, settling back.

“Ok.” Harry answers, back turned away.

Louis waits a beat or two, teasing smile on his lips. “Ok.”

“Ok.” Louis drags out, lips curling into an even bigger grin.

Harry remains quiet for an even longer moment, letting the silence settle between them and Louis wants to take it as a victory, but he’s known Harry long enough to know better than that.

“I wanna sex you up…” Harry sings softly, starting the song up again just to have the last word. And it instantly cracks Louis right up, bursting into another round of loud laughs.

“Oh my god! Would you stop! I hate you!” Louis giggles, playfully slapping Harry over the head with a pillow. “I don’t know what to do with you sometimes!”

“Excuse me?” Harry flips over, trying not to laugh, but failing for the most part. “How rude! I was only singing my favorite goodnight lullaby to myself, which is well within my rights. If you could just stick to your side of the bed that would be great, thanks.”

“We don’t have sides of the bed, you punk.” Louis grins warmly, eyes crinkled.

“If you could just spoon me lovingly that would be great, thanks.” Harry amends in the same sassy tone, trying to keep a straight face. “But not too tight cuz I’m really, really horny and if I feel your cock against my ass I might actually lose it, so let’s keep that in mind.”

“Oh, you’re too much.” Louis fondly hits his best friend over the head again, but then scoots closer to spoon him as requested. “Goodnight, Haz, my love.”

Harry continues giggling to himself, face pressed to the pillow as his body shakes with laughter, back snuggled up to his husband’s chest. “Goodnight, sunshine.”

There aren’t as many goodbyes as there once were anymore so their introductory phrase to each other, that morphed into a parting statement, now serves as their routine goodnight to each other. It’s not a goodbye, it’s not a farewell, and it’s not a see you soon. It’s not even solely a goodnight. It’s an I love you. *I’ll always love you.*

Harry curls up in Louis’ arms, playing absently with his hands for a few moments as their breathing
patterns begin to sync up. He lifts Louis’ hand to his lips, pressing severally tender kisses to the platinum band adorning his left ring finger. Then Harry opens Louis’ palm and lovingly writes the simple word Louis has tattooed forever on his skin and in his heart.

*Oops…*

Louis smiles, softly kissing the back of Harry’s neck as he feels the familiar press of his long fingers running across his palm. He snuggles closer against Harry, breathing in that calming, reassuring scent that never fails to ground him, serenity easing over him like a gentle blanket. And Louis feels just as in love with the man in his arms as he did when he was thirteen. It feels good to have his whole world, his *dream*, wrapped up in his arms.

Hands laced as one, feet tangled together, bodies warm against each other, Louis scribes his awaited answer back into cherished skin that still smells so sweetly of lavender and honey.

…*Hi.*

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